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SINO-SOVIET RIVALRY THREATENS KOREAN TRUCE

INTRODUCTION

One of the world's perennial flash-points is the Korean peninsula. Over one million troops in high combat readiness are camped in an area smaller than the state of Minnesota. On one side are some 40,000 American troops and 600,000 South Korean troops. Facing them are 830,000 North Korean soldiers. Deployed in bordering Chinese and Soviet territories are several hundred thousand more troops which might be drawn into any future war on the Korean peninsula.

For the past three decades this military standoff has created a kind of stability on the peninsula. No major battle has been fought since the signing of the cease-fire agreement in Panmunjom in July 1953. In recent years, however, a number of developments have begun to threaten the precarious peace which exists between North and South Korea. Chief among these are the increased Soviet military involvement with Pyongyang and what might be called the "desperation factor"--North Korea's growing discomfort as Seoul outstrips its rival in terms of economic performance and international recognition.

Most ominous, however, is the growing Sino-Soviet competition for influence over Pyongyang. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is attempting to use the success of its open-door modernization policies to convince North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to pursue more moderate policies at home and abroad. Moscow wants North Korea to play a more cooperative role in Soviet strategic policy in East Asia, and is wooing Kim in this direction through the sale of advanced military weapons.

Kim Il Sung, in what by now has become a finely tuned instrument of North Korean foreign policy, is skillfully using Sino-Soviet competition to further his own ends. And from all indications this continues to be the subjugation, by force if necessary, of South Korea.

Recent political tensions within the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) and debate over U.S. policy toward the ROK have tended to overshadow the fact that the Korean peninsula remains a geostrategic tinderbox--and a major security concern of the U.S. Just last month, Washington reaffirmed to Seoul that the security of South Korea is "pivotal to the peace and stability of Northeast Asia" and "vital to the security of the U.S."¹ Stability on the Korean peninsula is also a matter of economic concern to the U.S. since the ROK is America's seventh largest trading partner.

The vital security interests of the U.S., the PRC, and Soviet Union converge on the Korea. None of these major powers could tolerate the peninsula's dominance by any of the others. The interests of the major powers and their security ties with the two Koreas mean that an outbreak of hostilities in Korea could lead to a superpower confrontation.

The next two years are likely to be crucial to ROK security and to regional peace and stability. The South's symbolic victory over the North will be apparent during the opening ceremonies of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The pending international recognition which the Games will bring to Seoul has raised concerns that, out of desperation, the North may move militarily before 1988 to blunt the success of its rival.

During this period of increased probability of a North Korean attack against the South, the United States must exercise careful diplomacy and extreme vigilance. Diplomatically, Washington should encourage Beijing to continue its efforts to moderate Pyongyang's policies. To the extent possible, the U.S. should also urge Moscow to understand the dangers of increasing North Korea's military capabilities at this time. Specifically, the U.S. should reaffirm in the strongest possible terms the American commitment to the defense of South Korea. The Soviets should understand that they sail in dangerous waters by taking actions which might destabilize the Korean peninsula.

At the same time that these diplomatic steps are being taken, the U.S. should work with Seoul to improve its combat readiness and force modernization programs. If necessary, Washington should increase the

1. U.S.-ROK Joint Communique signed at the conclusion of the Annual Security Consultative Meeting in Seoul.

annual level of its military assistance to South Korea. Finally, periodic statements by American leaders specifically cautioning the North against disruption of the Seoul Olympics would be useful in the present environment.

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Sino-Soviet rivalry over the Korean peninsula has important historical roots. Chinese influence on the peninsula dates back thousands of years. Koreans are closely related to Chinese ethnically and both share basic cultural characteristics such as strong Buddhist and Confucian traditions. Because of this ancient association, China has left an indelible mark on both North and South Korean societies.

The Soviet Union is a comparative newcomer. When Japan surrendered to allied forces in August 1945, Soviet troops occupied the northern part of the Korean peninsula. Fearing that the Soviets might attempt to move South, the U.S. proposed that Moscow accept the surrender of Japanese forces north of the 38th parallel, while U.S. forces accepted their surrender south of that. This was a military agreement, and never intended to divide Korea politically.

Moscow accepted the U.S. proposal, but moved quickly, as it did in Eastern Europe, to establish political control. It purged moderates and supported those who favored a communist government in Korea. When U.S.-Soviet negotiations on the future of Korea collapsed, the United Nations in August 1948 supervised elections in the South. This established the Republic of Korea under President Syngman Rhee. A month later the Soviets created the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North under the rule of Kim Il Sung, a Korean who had served as an officer in the Soviet Red Army. The capital was established at Pyongyang.

During the next two years, Moscow sponsored a massive arms buildup in the North. And in June 1950, North Korean forces invaded the South. Significantly, when the tide of battle turned against the North late that year it was the PRC, not the Soviet Union, that committed over 500,000 troops to stop the U.N. advance. North Koreans today remain grateful for China's assistance, calling their relationship a "bond sealed in blood."

The PRC and the Soviet Union have remained Pyongyang's main trading partners and sources of economic and military assistance. Over the past three decades, Kim Il Sung usually has attempted to follow a path of "equidistance" between his two huge neighbors. This

reflects Kim's doctrine of Juche, which proclaims that Pyongyang will "neither obey nor strive to ingratiate (itself) with other powers."² Juche also serves as a propaganda weapon against Seoul, which the North calls "a stooge of imperialists" because of the continued presence of U.S. troops in South Korea.

Despite the ideal of equidistant relations with the Soviet Union and the PRC, North Korean political relations in fact have swung like a pendulum between the two. Ideological factors have heavily influenced Pyongyang's diplomatic shifts. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, Kim appeared to tilt more toward Beijing because of China's criticism of Soviet revisionism and de-Stalinization. In the 1970s, the PRC's rapprochement with the U.S. and Japan and its opposition to Soviet "hegemony" deeply disturbed the hard-line North Korean leadership. At the same time, however, Beijing did not diminish its support for Pyongyang's policies toward South Korea. Thus the events of the 1970s served to place North Korea's relations with the PRC and the Soviet Union more or less on even keel.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA TODAY

North Korean-PRC Relations

Profound changes in relations among the Koreans, the PRC, and the Soviet Union have occurred in the last few years. Of special significance has been the PRC's changed position on Korean unification. Pyongyang's formula for unification calls first for the establishment of the "Democratic Confederated Republic of Korea" encompassing North and South Korea as two autonomous states. Later, representatives from both sides would settle their complex economic, political, military, and cultural disagreements.

By contrast, South Korea wants these fundamental differences resolved prior to formation of a unified nation. Seoul maintains that the mutual hatred and suspicions of the last 40 years cannot be dispelled overnight. The South thus calls for negotiations without preconditions, while the North insists on a variety of prerequisites such as direct negotiations with the U.S., withdrawal of U.S. forces from the ROK, and the abolition of Seoul's anti-communist policies.

Until the early 1980s, Beijing gave blanket support to Pyongyang's unification proposals and refused to become involved in the debate between the North and South or with the superpowers on this issue. In a dramatic policy shift in 1983, however, the PRC began to

2. Interview with Kim Yong Nam, Journal of Northeast Asian Studies, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., Fall 1985, p. 66.

encourage negotiations between Seoul and Pyongyang and to urge the North to be more flexible in its bargaining positions. Beijing also now discusses Korean issues with the U.S. and Japan. While continuing to pay lip service to North Korea's harsh rhetoric, Chinese officials admit privately that peace on the peninsula is a very high priority for them.

A number of factors drive the new PRC policy. For one thing, because Beijing is concentrating on economic modernization, it has few resources to commit to the continuing North Korean military buildup. For another, an outbreak of hostilities on the peninsula might drag the PRC into the conflict and undermine Chinese economic development goals. Encouraged by the success of their own pragmatic economic reforms, the Chinese are prodding Pyongyang to open trade with the outside world and to attract foreign investment.

The turning point in China's new policy may have been Pyongyang's 1983 Rangoon bomb attack on Seoul's leaders. The PRC was deeply shocked by the incident because it reinforced Beijing's concerns about the North's aggressive and even unpredictable behavior. Moreover, the terrorist attack on South Korean officials embarrassed Chinese leaders who had been assuring the U.S. that Pyongyang's intentions were peaceful.

ROK-PRC Relations

Until the 1970s, the ROK had virtually no contact with either China or the Soviet Union. Then in 1972, Seoul announced its "open-door policy" calling for "partnership with all countries regardless of ideology and system." Still it took nearly a decade for Seoul to have substantive contacts with Beijing or Moscow.

What seems to have opened South Korea's door to Beijing, ironically, is an unusual series of events, which could be termed "hijack diplomacy." It began in 1983 when a Chinese commercial jetliner was hijacked to Seoul. Dealing with this led to the first direct contact ever between Seoul and Beijing. Significantly, during the negotiations, the Chinese for the first time referred to South Korea as the "Republic of Korea," a de facto recognition of legitimacy. In 1985, a PRC torpedo boat strayed into ROK waters, and a Chinese bomber pilot defected to South Korea. This prompted even more ROK-PRC government-to-government contact. In all these events, Seoul went out of its way to be cooperative and understanding of the PRC's potential embarrassment.

A variety of cultural, academic, and sports exchanges between Seoul and Beijing followed in the wake of these diplomatic contacts. The PRC has indicated that its athletes will participate in the Seoul Olympic Games, despite North Korea's threat to organize a communist bloc boycott of the 1988 Olympics. The PRC also plans to participate in the Asian Games to held in Seoul later this year. Trade between

the ROK and China, much of which takes place indirectly through Hong Kong, totals an estimated \$1 billion annually. Beijing now seems to regard South Korea's existence and legitimacy as "an established international fact that it no longer contests."³

North Korean-Soviet Relations

In contrast to the stabilizing influence of the PRC in Korean affairs, significantly upgraded political, economic, and military relations between North Korea and the Soviet Union have upset the balance of power on the peninsula. The shift was highlighted by the visit of Kim Il Sung to Moscow in May 1984, his first in 23 years. This trip initiated a series of subsequent high-level contacts. In April 1985, the first Pyongyang-Moscow joint communique in over a decade was signed, reaffirming the Soviet Union's defense commitment to Pyongyang. Last January, Eduard Shevardnadze became the first Soviet foreign minister ever to visit North Korea.

The two are drawing closer together economically as well. Last December, they agreed to increase trade and economic cooperation. Moscow has offered to assist North Korea's steel and coal industries. The Soviets also have promised to aid in the construction of North Korea's first nuclear power plant, a move that Seoul fears will "heighten Pyongyang's potential of producing nuclear weapons."⁴

North Korea's Military Buildup

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, improved North Korean-Soviet military cooperation represents the "most dramatic change in Pyongyang's foreign policy since the early 1970s."⁵ Most alarming is the Kremlin's willingness to provide North Korea with advanced weapons. Last year, Moscow began to supply the North with sophisticated Mig-23 fighters. Pyongyang already may have 30 of these advanced aircraft and will soon obtain 20 more. In addition, the Soviets are supplying the North Koreans with SCUD and SA-3 surface-to-air missiles. Moscow transfers a wide variety of other military equipment to Pyongyang, making the USSR "the source for nearly all significant weapons in the [North Korean] inventory."⁶

3. Jonathan Pollack, "U.S.-Korean Relations: The China Factor, Journal of Northeast Asian Studies, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., Fall 1985, p. 20.

4. Korea Herald, December 31, 1985, p. 2.

5. Soviet Military Power, U.S. Department of Defense, March 1986, p. 140.

6. Jane's Defense Weekly, March 29, 1986, p. 582.

These new weapons are no more sophisticated than comparable armaments in place in the South and thus do not necessarily give the North a clear qualitative edge. However, the new Soviet systems strengthen North Korea's existing quantitative advantage over the South.

In return for this military equipment, the Soviet Union has gained valuable strategic access to North Korean ports and airspace. Soviet warships are calling in increasing numbers on the North Korean ports of Najin and Wonsan. Pyongyang recently granted permission for Soviet aircraft to transit North Korean airspace for reconnaissance and to fly between bases in the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

These developments have enormous impact on the regional balance of power. Even the PRC feels more threatened by the increased Soviet military presence. While Beijing publicly says that it is "pleased to see the development of [North Korea's] relations with the Soviet Union,"⁷ it has privately expressed grave concern. Reconnaissance flights over North Korea give the Soviets easier access to sensitive PRC industrial areas in Manchuria as well as air strike capabilities against key shipping lanes in the Yellow Sea. Chinese F-7 fighters reportedly were scrambled in October 1985 when Soviet planes flew too close to the PRC-North Korean border.⁸

Soviet use of North Korean harbors is also of grave strategic concern to China and the U.S. In 1984, a Soviet military manual described the east coast port of Najin as "fully integrated into the Soviet [military] system," according to the Mid-Atlantic Research Associates.⁹ Soviet docking and refueling rights on North Korea's west coast "would allow the Soviet Pacific Fleet to outflank the Japan Straits and frustrate [efforts by the U.S. and Japan] to bottle it up in the Sea of Japan."¹⁰

ROK-Soviet Relations

In 1982, in the first official contact between Seoul and Moscow, a delegation from the Soviet news agency Tass visited South Korea. Although Seoul emphasized that it welcomed future communication and cooperation, hopes for this were dealt a severe blow in September 1983

7. Far Eastern Economic Review, September 25, 1985, p. 56.

8. Vantage Point (Seoul, Korea: Naewoe Press, November 1985), p. 14.

9. Early Warning, Mid-Atlantic Research Associates, Washington, D.C., June 1985, p. 10.

10. Far Eastern Economic Review, January 17, 1985, p. 26.

when the USSR shot down a Korean Airlines passenger jet with a loss of 269 people.

There was a slight thaw in relations last year, however, when Soviet athletes attended several sporting events in Seoul. Moscow also has hinted that it intends to participate in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Despite improved Soviet military relations with North Korea, Seoul continues to stick by its open-door policy as a means of reducing tensions on the peninsula. Still, in sharp contrast to its improved ties with the PRC, Seoul's relations with the Soviet Union remain essentially frozen.

NORTH-SOUTH MILITARY BALANCE

The demilitarized zone (DMZ) girdling the 38th Parallel separating North and South Korea may well be the most heavily armed area in the world. Over one million troops stand combat ready in an area about the size of Minnesota. Despite the presence of 40,000 U.S. troops, the North enjoys a substantial military edge.

North Korea today spends over 20 percent of its Gross National Product (GNP) on the military, while the South spends about 6 percent. The North fields 829,000 troops compared to 600,000 for the South, and it has a 2 to 1 advantage in artillery guns, armored personnel carriers, combat aircraft, and tanks. The North also holds a 3 to 1 edge in surface ships and deploys 20 submarines. The South has no submarines.¹¹

North Korea maintains a well-trained commando force of about 100,000 troops, possibly the largest in the world. They are poised for rapid infiltration and trained to bypass the ROK's frontline defenses to strike at Seoul's command and supply infrastructure. Over the last few years, the North has redeployed large numbers of its combat troops nearer to the DMZ. Approximately 65 percent of North Korea's total combat forces are now in the frontline area.¹² Maintenance of a strong first-strike offensive capability seems to be Pyongyang's highest priority.

At the annual Security Consultative Meeting last month, the ROK and the U.S. took particular note of the increasing Soviet military assistance to North Korea. Given this growing military relationship and Pyongyang's concern over the economic and diplomatic successes of its rival to the south, North Korea may conclude that hostilities

11. International Defense Weekly, February 1986, p. 194.

12. Korea Herald, March 20, 1986, p. 1.

toward the ROK are both feasible and in North Korea's interest. Focusing on the upcoming 1986 Seoul Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics, U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger pledged at the April meeting to "support ROK steps to ensure security of these two events" and confirmed that any provocation against them would not be tolerated.¹³

At the annual security meeting, the U.S. also pledged to continue military assistance to Seoul in the form of loans. U.S. military assistance to South Korea over the last few years has represented only 5 percent of Seoul's annual defense budget. Furthermore, much of what the ROK pays for defense improvements is spent in the U.S. About \$500 million in South Korean defense expenditures above the level of U.S. loans will be spent in the U.S. over the next several years.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of relationships among North Korea, South Korea, the PRC, and the Soviet Union has altered the balance of power on the Korean peninsula. This presents new challenges for the U.S.-ROK alliance and for Japan. In particular, upgraded military ties between Pyongyang and Moscow pose a direct threat to stability in the region. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the ROK "is entering perhaps its most dangerous era in 30 years."¹⁴

Because of the upcoming Asian and Olympic Games, the next two or three years are extremely crucial. To meet the North's growing military threat, Seoul is continuing to modernize its own forces. Despite the current military imbalance on the peninsula, South Korea's force improvement program could close the gap by the early 1990s. If this goal is to be achieved, however, the U.S. must continue to provide the ROK with Foreign Military Sales (FMS) credits. These are loans and not outright aid. The Reagan Administration has requested \$230 million in FMS credits to South Korea for fiscal 1987. This full request should be fully funded by the U.S. Congress.

The increased Soviet military presence in North Korea is linked to the larger Soviet buildup in the Far East. Thus, the strategic implications of the increased North Korean threat and the expanded Soviet role in it extend beyond the peninsula and affect the stability of the entire region. The U.S. must work closely with South Korea, Japan, and other Asian allies to counter these developments. In

13. Korea Herald, April 7, 1985, p. 1.

14. Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary James A. Kelly, testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, March 12, 1986.

particular, the U.S. should offer more sophisticated radar systems to South Korea and upgrade its own electronic surveillance on and around the peninsula to counter increased Soviet activity. A reduction or ceiling on the Soviet buildup in Asia should be a high priority in the next U.S.-Soviet summit.

Although North and South Korea continue to negotiate on issues ranging from unification to the exchange of separated family members, little progress has been made. The U.S., nonetheless, should continue to support these bilateral talks and resist North Korean efforts to open direct talks with the U.S., as such efforts are aimed at relegating Seoul to a junior partner status. If real progress were made at the bilateral level, then the U.S. could consider talks with the North so long as they included equal participation by the ROK.

It is commendable that the PRC is playing a more active role in the North-South talks and urging the North Koreans to be more flexible in their bargaining positions. The Chinese also have made it clear that they will not support North Korean hostilities toward the ROK. While recent PRC policy shifts have displeased the North, Beijing-Pyongyang ties remain strong. The PRC thus remains the only major power able to deal effectively with both North and South Korea. The U.S., therefore, should continue to discuss Korean issues with the Chinese and to encourage PRC efforts to reduce tensions on the peninsula.

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