

## **The Impact of the Korean War on the Political-Economic System of North Korea**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The impact of the Korean War on North Korean politics, economy, foreign policy, and relations with the United States has been significant. The unsuccessful conclusion of war brought about dramatic changes in North Korea's political economic system by ending direct Soviet control, providing a basis for the consolidation of Kim Il Sung's power within the Korean Workers' Party, and feeding a desire on the part of Kim Il Sung to impose political and economic control as the self-actualized "center." Kim Il Sung's ability to eliminate political rivals and establish and lead a totalitarian political system requiring loyalty to himself and his son, Kim Jong Il, the initial success of North Korea's centrally-planned economic system and mass mobilization policies that marked the height of North Korea's economic success in the 1950s and 1960s, a complex relationship between the Soviet Union and China that Kim Il Sung was able to manipulate to North Korea's advantage, and the enduring legacy of enmity between the United States and North Korea despite dramatic changes in the international system are factors that have clear influence on post-war North Korea. These influences persist today as dominant influences on North Korea's internal politics, economics, and foreign policy.

**Keywords:** North Korea, Korean War, Juche, Kim Il Sung, United States, Soviet Union, China, Chollima.

## Introduction

History reveals that the consequences of war are so momentous that they often mark the division between historical eras. The devastation of war also creates a need for rebuilding and establishment of new political systems designed to restore social stability and to recover lost prosperity. At the same time, war does not wipe everything away; social and political organizations are remade based on pre-war influences while adapting to a new social and political equilibrium. On the Korean peninsula, war ended in stalemate and the a continuation of a contest for legitimacy between North and South, abetted by the Cold War confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. As a result, the reconstruction of both Koreas was influenced by domestic and international circumstances, as well as by the imperative of continued competition with each other in a “war by other means.”

In terms of physical destruction, North Korea had to start from the ground up as a result of three years of the U.S. bombing attacks that had devastated the country’s physical infrastructure. North Korea also suffered a tremendous loss of human capital, losing almost 1 million or more than 10 percent of its people, either through war or exit by refugees who resettled in South Korea or outside the Korean peninsula. At the end of the war, the country’s industrial production was estimated at only 36 percent of the prewar level, and it produced one million kilowatts of electricity immediately following the war in contrast to its 1949 production of nearly six million kilowatts of electricity.<sup>1</sup> The war also had a significant impact on the North Korean political system and its place in international politics. The unsuccessful conclusion of the war brought about dramatic changes in North Korea’s political system by ending direct Soviet political control, providing a basis for the consolidation of Kim Il Sung’s power within the Korean Workers’ Party, and feeding a desire on the part of Kim Il Sung to impose political control as the self-actualized “center,” rather than as a peripheral power dependent on the decisions of others in the Communist bloc.

The North Korean system in the post-Korean War period evolved beyond the Stalinist organizational structures imposed and inherited from immediate post-war Soviet imprint. During this period, Kim Il Sung successfully consolidated political control and defeated his internal rivals for power. Kim’s vision of successful leadership involved political, economic, ideological, and cultural systems uniquely centralized on the leader, very much on the Japanese imperial model that Kim Il Sung both fought against and to a certain extent emulated. Charles Armstrong argues that North Korean system of control was greatly influenced by the Confucian traditions of Korea as well as by the Japanese imperial

system. This circumstance helps to explain the acceptance of the cult of leadership that developed around Kim Il Sung in North Korea. Armstrong argues that the long and difficult struggle that the guerillas waged against Japanese colonialism, with its intrusive system of secret police control, helped shape the nationwide system of political surveillance and repression of dissidence so characteristic of North Korean politics. Suzuki Masayuki sees the North Korean system of leader-centered politics, Suryong (Kim Il Sung) system, as “resonant” with the Japanese imperial political culture.<sup>2</sup> According to Suzuki, personalized rule, absolute loyalty of the masses, and filial devotion to Kim Il Sung are patterns of control and behavior deeply embedded in Korea’s Confucian tradition, filtered through the experience of Japanese colonialism and the anti-colonial resistance that shaped North Korea’s post-liberation leadership.<sup>3</sup> B.R. Meyers also focuses on the influence of Japan’s domestic and cultural propaganda methods on Kim Il Sung, who came of age while Korea was under Japanese colonial occupation.<sup>4</sup> He points that Kim Il Sung even had himself photographed astride a white stallion, copying Hirohito.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of the Japanese imperial system and the inheritance of a Soviet bureaucratic model for government organization are both clear influences shaping the political evolution of North Korea. The post-Korean War context provided an opportunity for Kim to build a socialist economy from the ground up based on state-led central planning, while at the same time establishing a post-Korean War framework for managing foreign relations on the basis of autonomy and relative isolation.

This article attempts to evaluate the major influences of the Korean War and its aftermath on the development and perpetuation of the “leader-centered” political-economic system of North Korea. The following sections of the article will survey and discuss four areas of the DPRK’s post-war systems that are particularly relevant to the structure of North Korea today. The first area involves the internal politics of North Korea during which Kim Il Sung consolidated power, effectively purging his opponents, and reorganizing the party around himself to secure his absolute rule. The reorganization of Korea Workers’ Party following the Korean War became a preventive measure by which Kim Il Sung sought to avoid possible civil uprisings or dissent against the government and the leader. The second section will examine North Korea’s post-war centrally-led efforts to mobilize for economic reconstruction. In retrospect, this period arguably represented the most successful period of North Korea’s economic growth, and appears to have become the model that North Korea’s current leadership is trying to recapture. This section

will review the immediate economic success of North Korea in the first decade after the war and evaluate the current government's efforts to reproduce the Chollima movement today.

The third section will analyze North Korea's external relations with China and the Soviet Union after the war and how the Kim Il Sung's management of those relationships influenced North Korea's policy making over time. Today, North Korea arguably still needs to find a foil against which to play off China; Kim Jong Il seems to feel that South Korea and/or the United States might represent a suitable counterweight to North Korea's dependence on China. Finally, the impact of the Korean War on the U.S.-DPRK relations will be examined as an influence on North Korea's foreign policy. The war has shaped the legacy of U.S.-DPRK non-relations, making mistrust between the two countries all the more difficult to overcome.

### **Internal Politics**

The Korean War and its aftermath were politically devastating to North Korea. The devastation of the war provided the context for Kim Il Sung's efforts to impose exclusive leadership and put into place a new system of internal solidarity. In other words, this was a period of political consolidation, through which Kim utilized national-level failures as a means by which to blame others while strengthening his direct political position and control.

Kim used the failures of the war as an opportunity to mobilize internal support during and after the war, eliminate the potential opponents to his vision for an authoritarian state, and to secure and strengthen his political influence and control within the party. Immediately following the armistice, Kim Il Sung made formidable efforts to remove all of his political rivals or potential dissidents in the party ranks in order to establish a centralized government under his rigid control, with his own developmental model for the country in mind. Although Kim Il Sung could not avoid wide criticisms on the misconduct of the war given that he was primarily responsible for conducting it, after the war, he was able to blame the unsuccessful outcomes of the war on his political rivals because he had been removed from the management of the war only after four months into war operations.<sup>6</sup> As advised by his political adviser, Major General Rebezev, Kim gave a speech in December 1953 condemning a few of the most powerful leaders of the Yanan and Soviet factions by stating, "Among the military commanders there is abundant evidence that a number of them have shown cowardice, and instead of saving their units have concentrated on egoism and their own individual lives. For example, such division commanders include

Kim Hang-chong and Choe Kwang, and these persons have already been removed from their posts.”<sup>7</sup>

Before the war began, there were four factions in the North Korean politics: the Domestic faction led by Park Hon-Yong, Yen-an faction led by Kim Tu-Bong, Soviet faction led by Ho Ka-I, and Guerrilla faction led by Kim Il-Sung.<sup>8</sup> Both during and after the war, Kim cautiously but skillfully eliminated leaders of rival factions until his own guerrilla faction held almost a complete monopoly of power over the country in the early 1960s.

Another tool that Kim Il Sung used to mobilize internal support during and after the war was the reorganization of the party structure in order to promote inclusive policies toward the peasants and working class citizens. As the first step in the reconstruction of the Korean Workers' Party, Kim eliminated the “impure elements” of the party and claimed: “Through this war it has been clearly revealed who is a true party member and who is false. The war caught and exposed ruthlessly the impure, the cowardly, and the opposing elements of the party membership. We must strengthen our party after cleaning out these elements from the party structure.”<sup>9</sup> After eliminating these “impure elements,” he argued for building a mass party that would consist of peasants and poor working class citizens, in sharp contrast to his most prominent political rival of the time, Ho Ka-I, who argued in favor of an elite community party of fewer than 60,000 members, consisting primarily of industrial workers.<sup>10</sup> After Ho Ka-I lost control over the party's recruitment policies as a result of Kim's criticism of Ho's bureaucratic and discriminatory recruitment systems in 1951, the KWP membership grew from about 750,000 at the end of the war, to 1,164,945 by January 1, 1956, and by April 1956, 56.8 percent of the party members were poor peasants and 3.7 percent middle-class peasants.<sup>11</sup> Kim, taking an advantage of their traditional desire for bureaucratic posts, directly channeled these peasants and workers into the bureaucracy and used this new peasant organizational base of party membership to strengthen his position at the Third Party Congress in 1956. To no one's surprise, he was re-elected party chairman.

Once Kim established himself firmly in power, he focused on rebuilding the nation. *Juche* was developed as an expression that supported his vision. During the North Korea's three-year “reconstruction period” following the armistice in 1953, North Korea was heavily dependent upon economic and technical assistance from other communist countries; foreign aid made up as much as 60 percent of its entire budget at that time.<sup>12</sup> Given this high level of dependency, Kim Il Sung wanted to minimize Soviet political influence over North Korea.

On December 28, 1955, Kim proclaimed his own ideology, which came to be known as Juche. Kim defined Juche as “the independent stance of rejecting dependence on others and of using one’s own powers, believing in one’s own strength and displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance.” He claimed, “Although some people say that the Soviet way is best or that the Chinese way is the best,” he added, “have we not now reached the point where we can construct our own way?”<sup>13</sup>

Discussion of Juche might be best viewed as part of Kim Il Sung’s personal aspiration to be a strong center figure and juche (subject), rather than gakche (object), of all actions in all areas of the North Korean affairs. In this respect, Juche ideology can be seen as a component of “Kimilsungism” with which Kim Il Sung could legitimize his autocratic governance and maintain his cult of personality, and this bigger concept of “Kimilsungism” is perhaps the fundamental basis of the North Korean regime and its systems. There has been an active debate among the Western scholars contesting the role of Juche theory in North Korea’s system and policy-making. While many agree that Juche is the guiding ideology of DPRK’s development in all aspects, a number of political analysts repudiate this view and report that Juche ideology has no bearing on DPRK’s policy-making or people’s lives. According to Charles Armstrong, Juche is the “overarching philosophical principle guiding all areas of life in North Korea.”<sup>14</sup> B.R. Myers, on the other hand, argues “Pyongyang’s policy-making bears no resemblance to Juche Thought, a sham ‘show-window’ doctrine.”<sup>15</sup> Myers attempts to contrast Juche with what he calls the dominant ideology of North Korea that “the Korean people are too pure blooded, and therefore too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great parental leader.”<sup>16</sup>

Myers also repudiates Bruce Cumings’ description of North Korean “corporatism,” which emphasizes organic social solidarity and hierarchical politics rather than a set of diverse groups and interests, in which North Korean political system is characterized as a centralized party-state with a single supreme leader at its apex. Cumings suggests that this tight unity of North Korea, centered on Kim Il Sung, has produced a remarkable organicism that is analogous to the corporatist themes of hierarchy, organic connection, and the family.<sup>17</sup> He explains that three corresponding images of traditional corporatism—the “Great Chain,” the body politic, and political fatherhood—have been present in the ideology of North Korea since the time the regime was established in the late 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever Kim’s intentions in establishing Juche as a guiding principle for his leadership of North Korea, the Juche idea provided justification for policies that served to isolate the regime politically,

further enhancing Kim's political control. Juche was officially declared as a fundamental principle of the North Korean regime, as included in Article 4 of the North Korean constitution.<sup>19</sup>

Kim Il Sung successfully used the failures of the war to blame his rivals and win the internal power struggle after the war. Ironically, Kim's most effective tools for maintaining political control lay in his utilization of Japanese colonial political control structures that Koreans had become accustomed to coping with. Kim's ability to adopt as his own an existing structure in which personality was idolized (Japanese imperial system) and his ability to marginalize his rivals allowed Kim to consolidate exclusive power. Kim's introduction of the Juche ideology during the country's reconstruction stage provided the basis for shaping the sentiments of the North Korean citizens by infusing the entire political, social, and educational system with a single political focus and purpose of serving the leader.

Political circumstances and the institutional structure in contemporary North Korea are different from the post-war period, although there may be many potential lessons an aspiring successor to Kim Jong Il might take from Kim Il Sung's successful consolidation of power and elimination of rivals following the end of the Korean War. Perhaps the primary attributes of the post-Korean War period that are most relevant, to the situation today are the use of xenophobia and "purity" as a prerequisite for legitimacy in North Korea and the effective use of a system of political and educational control that extends to the grassroots level. Whether these factors can be maintained and extended by Kim Jong Il's successors in a situation where the current North Korean system is penetrated to a much greater degree by external influences and sources of information remains to be seen.

### **Economic Policies**

Because of the level of physical destruction that took place in North Korea as a result of the Korean War, economic rebuilding became a primary task for North Korea's leadership in the immediate post-Korean War period. Economic damage to North Korea from the Korean War has been estimated to be as high as 420 billion won, which is roughly equivalent to four times North Korea's GNP in 1953.<sup>20</sup> More specifically, 8,700 factories and state enterprises, 600,000 housing units, 5,000 schools, and 370,000 hectares of rice paddies and fields are presumed destroyed during the war.<sup>21</sup> Immediately after the armistice, North Korea declared a Three-Year Post-War Reconstruction Plan which aimed to bring the country's production back to the prewar level. In order to carry out this plan however, the country became even more

dependent on foreign aid. With large amounts economic assistance from the Soviet Union, China, and East European countries, with some 75 percent of capital investment financed by grants from these governments, North Korea was highly dependent on external assistance as a primary source of support for its economic recovery.<sup>22</sup>

As this aid relationship placed the North into a subordinate position in the socialist bloc, Kim Il Sung wanted to follow the footsteps of Stalin's centralized command economy and aimed at establishing a solid basis for a socialist economy with the highest priority on the development of heavy industry. In the eyes of Kim Il Sung, Stalin's command economy, which had allowed for the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, was a suitable model that would enable North Korea to achieve rapid economic growth in the post-war period. The command economy, as practiced in the Soviet Union, emphasized investment and production over consumption, heavy over light industry, and any industry over agriculture.<sup>23</sup> During his effort to follow the footsteps of the Soviet-style economy, Kim was opposed by the Soviet and Yanan factions, which strongly opposed the undue emphasis on heavy industry and instead proposed placing more emphasis on light industry as well as the development of the agricultural sector of the economy in order to relieve the hardships of the people.<sup>24</sup> However, as Kim became the winner in the post-war power struggles, he won the right to set the North's post-war economic policies. Collectivization of agriculture and centralization of economic planning started immediately following the armistice and were completed by 1958. The government marshaled idle resources and labor and imposed a low rate of consumption, yielding relatively high growth and a high rate of capital formation.<sup>25</sup> The Three-Year Reconstruction Plan was reported to have had a phenomenal annual economic growth rate of 41.5 percent.

Regardless of whether or not this figure is accurate, the success of these economic policies was enough to provide a strong justification for Kim Il Sung's economic policies. Set by a centrally-developed series of five-year plans, North Korea's recovery was referred to as the Chollima (Flying Horses) Movement, which emphasized the achievement of productivity targets by heightening worker motivation campaigns reinforced by massive human mobilization. The movement emphasized such concepts as "Maximum Production with Evincing Thrift" or the "drink no soup" movement that encouraged workers to remain on the factory floor rather than go to the lavatory. By the late 1950s, Chollima had become the dominant method for mobilizing human resources. The rate of annual growth reportedly reached 36.6 percent at the end of the Five-Year Plan. This growth was attributed to the encouragement of a



Chollima Spirit,<sup>26</sup> and marked one of the most successful periods of economic growth in North Korea.

Despite the reportedly high growth rates during the post-war reconstruction period, this mass mobilization-based central-planning approach to economic policy had its clear limits. Managers and workers in collective farms and state-owned enterprises suffered exhaustion after dreadfully pushing themselves during the campaign. Central-planning soon reached the limits of its effectiveness and bottlenecks started to develop at the factory-floor level that central planners could address only if they knew about the local situation in detail. The economic system of North Korea started to show signs of stagnation. From the early 1960s, Pyongyang's economic growth slowed due to a series of bottlenecks, created by the lack of arable land, skilled labor, energy, transportation. Serious imbalances among the different economic sectors began to impede development. The result was chronic inefficiency, poor quality of products, limited product diversity, and underutilization of resources and facilities.

As signs of economic stagnation became apparent, Kim Il Sung introduced the Chongsan-ni Method of management in which high-ranking party officers, including Kim himself, visited workers in factories and farmers in cooperatives to provide "on-the-spot guidance" to the workers, to appeal to their nationalism and patriotism, and to encourage them to be competitive in surpassing the goals set by the party. Reinforcing the "one for all and all for one" principle, Kim urged the people to work hard for love of country and not in expectation of material reward.<sup>27</sup> "On-the-spot guidance" by high-ranking government officers became a leadership tool for mobilizing labor that continues to this day, despite the lagging effectiveness of these methods as a result of public fatigue with such campaigns. Despite mass mobilization efforts and without necessary inputs and rationalization of decision-making within the North Korean system, economic stagnation became inevitable.

In recent years, North Korean authorities have attempted to return to the glory days of the centrally-planned economy, backed by strong mass mobilization efforts, in an attempt to achieve its goal of becoming a strong and prosperous nation (Kangseongtaeguk) by 2012. Although the North Korean government announced major reform in its economic policy in the summer of 2002, which seemed to move the North Korean economy in the direction of marketization and decentralization, these policies appear to have been met with a backlash among the North Korean leadership. Rudiger Frank describes the new policies that have been adapted from around 2004-2005 as "socialist neoconservatism." These policies have emphasized classical socialism with a strong

nationalist component, including promotion of values such as collectivism and self-sacrifice, militarism, political repression, xenophobia and the prospect of a rosy future in exchange for enduring the temporary hardships of leading a front-life.<sup>28</sup>

In essence, it appears that the North Korean leadership is attempting to return to the methods that had led to post-war economic success in the 1950s, presumably in an effort to recover the main elements that had led to North Korea's initial economic success.<sup>29</sup> At the core of this "returning to orthodoxy" campaign is the revival of orthodox socialist economic policies such as the revival of the central planning mechanism, extensive labor utilization, emphasis on ideology, and the repressive system of the socialist state. North Korean propaganda has repeatedly referred to the 1950s and 1960 as their new point of reference.<sup>30</sup> In March 2008, Rodong Shinmun urged that all people should make a leaping advance in building a socialist economic power with the same vigor with which they brought about the "Great Chollima Upswing" in the 1950s.<sup>31</sup> In December same year, Rodong Shinmun again wrote that the current situation makes it imperative to stick to the socialist economic principles even harder.<sup>32</sup> In March 2009, Kim Jung Il also reportedly declared that officials should "energetically lead the masses by displaying the same work style as the officials did in the 50s and 60s."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the seeming attractiveness of the model of successful socialist economic planning in the 1950s in the minds of North Korean leaders, it is unlikely that the application of those methods can show success in North Korea's current context. First, the challenges of mass mobilization are more difficult as a result of the prolonged fatigue and exploitation of the Korean people. Having suffered through the famine of the 1990s and having developed their own self-help mechanisms for survival as a result of the failure of the North Korean public distribution system, the North Korean people have become exhausted and are increasingly skeptical about the government's policies. As Rudiger Frank notes, "tens of thousands of young North Korean women had a chance to experience, on a daily basis, the benefits of a hypermodern South Korean working environment at Kaesong, and we can only imagine how profoundly that changed their minds."<sup>34</sup> A significant societal transformation has been taking place in North Korea due to the monetization and partial marketization that took place after the 2002 reform. As a result, "work harder campaigns" such as Chollima will no longer yield positive results.

Second, the external economic situation has also changed in ways that are inhospitable to North Korea's efforts. Unlike fifty years ago,

North Korea can no longer enjoy external economic patronage within the socialist bloc. North Korea's last patron is China, but even China reportedly denied Kim Jung Il's request for "extraordinary" economic assistance during Kim's visit to Beijing in May 2010. Without economic and technological assistance from the outside world, the North's own efforts to promote economic growth will fall short without some form of external financial support.

### **Relations with the Soviet Union and China**

The availability of archival documents regarding the start of the Korean War has provided a useful corrective to dominant Western interpretations of the origins of the Korean War, in which the war was portrayed primarily through the lens of U.S.-Soviet confrontation, with Stalin masterminding efforts to extend communist domination while opening a second front for confrontation in Asia. However, the archives show that Kim Il Sung was the primary instigator of confrontation, and attempted to mobilize support from both Stalin and Mao for his aims. Neither Stalin nor Mao fully embraced Kim's plans and Stalin tried to push off Kim's requests onto Mao. Through this experience, Kim found that on the one hand he had room to exploit differences between Beijing and Moscow to gain support, engender competition, and achieve his own ends; on the other hand, Kim's failure to win full backing from either Stalin or Mao, their hesitation to fully back Kim, and the failure of Kim's effort to unify the Korean peninsula led Kim to develop a fundamental distrust of both Moscow and Beijing.

Kim's efforts to mobilize Chinese and Soviet support for Korean reunification had complex reverberations on the Sino-Soviet relationship. Chen Jian's study on China's decision to enter the Korean War provides several important findings in the discussion of the influence of the Sino-Soviet alliance on their relations with North Korea. Chen argues that the Sino-Soviet alliance treaty, which came into being only four months prior to the outbreak of Korean War, had a close connection with China's attitude toward Korea. He stresses that 1) the Soviet and China, well aware of Kim Il Sung's plan of unifying Korea through military means, had consulted with one another regarding whether or not they should endorse Kim's plan; 2) Stalin's cautious attitude in the initial period of the war formed a restrictive for Mao to intervene in the war; 3) China entered into the war, after finally reaching a general understanding with the Soviet Union that if the Chinese forces intervened in the war the Soviet would provide an air umbrella for the Chinese troops,<sup>35</sup> only to realize that the Soviet backed out of its commitment; and 4) the future Sino-Soviet split had its roots in the process of China's intervention in

the Korean War.<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Weathersby notes that Stalin required Kim Il Sung to get Mao's approval before he could proceed with the plan to attack South and Mao also approved the plan only on the basis of Stalin's approval, explaining the reluctance of the two countries to take an active role in the North Korean revolution.<sup>37</sup> She states: "At every step in the process, the North Korean leadership was obliged to defer to their more powerful allies in making the decision that was of greatest importance to them."<sup>38</sup>

Before the war, Kim Il Sung seemed to regard such subordination to the Soviet Union, and also to China, as proper and necessary. Kim had reportedly even stated that he himself "cannot begin an attack, because he is a Communist, a disciplined person and for him the order of Comrade Stalin is the law."<sup>39</sup> During and after the war, however, a combination of events undermined Kim Il Sung's faith in both the Soviet and China and influenced North Korea's future relationship with its two patron countries. First, Soviet unwillingness to intervene in the war, even at the possible expense of surrendering North Korea to the American imperialists, shocked the North Korean leadership, whereas the Chinese intervention humiliated Kim Il Sung and forced him out of war-time control.<sup>40</sup> The lack of war support North Korea received from the Soviet Union during the war disappointed Kim Il Sung and made him suspicious of Moscow's true intentions in the war, especially with the Soviet's failure to use its veto to block the UN resolution to send its troops to Korea. Kim Il Sung's feelings of betrayal by the Russians, along with other factors such as the fierce fight with the pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions of the Korean Communist movement and Moscow's new line of de-Stalinization, prompted Kim Il Sung to develop *Juche* and to keep a political distance from Moscow while continuously depending on the influx of economic and military assistance from the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup>

Second, despite growing mistrust in and uneasiness with the Soviet and China, the armistice meant that Kim Il Sung would still need to maintain close relationships with the two countries to bolster the North's position vis-à-vis the United States and South Korea. North Korea strategically maintained seemingly good relations with the Soviet and China following the armistice, however, Soviet reforms in the wake of Stalin's death in 1953 and joint Soviet and Chinese support for an opposition movement in North Korea in 1956 further intensified North Korea's doubts about the willingness of its allies to ensure the security needs of North Korea.<sup>42</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, its relationship with the two allies became even more complex as the Sino-Soviet relationship became strained. Disagreeing with the Soviet's new policies of de-

Stalinization and peaceful coexistence, Kim initially aligned with China in the Sino-Soviet dispute. However, the Soviets continued to support North Korea with a great deal of aid and technology in order to avoid losing its influence over North Korea relative to China.<sup>43</sup> In response, Kim Il Sung used the Juche principle as an effective shield to avoid taking sides and to maintain balance between the two neighboring powers during this period of conflicts.

Third, the continued presence of U.S. troops in South after the war, though perceived as a serious obstacle to the North Korean regime, provided a justification for Kim to demand more military assistance from the two bigger communist powers. The Chinese forces also remained in North Korea until 1958 and had reportedly granted North Korea 8 trillion yuan between 1953 and 1958, and even more after the withdrawal of its forces. However, Pyongyang's extended military and economic dependence on its allies after the war also risked the political and ideological independence of North Korea, as it allowed the Soviet and China some degree of influence in the internal affairs of North Korea.

The period following the Korean War was chaotic for the international communist movement because of the unsuccessful conclusion of the war and the death of Stalin. For Kim Il Sung, the challenge was to reconstruct a relationship with China and the Soviet Union that would maximize his own autonomy and flexibility despite the manifest asymmetries that existed in North Korea's relations (and economic dependency upon) both major communist powers. This approach became easier for Kim to manage as a result of a rift that developed between China and the Soviet Union after Stalin's death over the leadership of the international communist movement. Although North Korea owed its survival largely to China and the Soviet Union for their massive economic, technological, and military assistance during the war, the post-war situation led Kim Il Sung to fear that his country might get embroiled in a confrontation between the North's two major patrons. While maintaining close relationships with the Soviet Union and China, Kim Il Sung struggled to avoid their political influences over North Korea and its affairs. Kim's primary goals were the preservation and strengthening of the regime and its internal autonomy, and management of foreign relations were treated as subsidiary to this larger objective. Kim managed to balance the Soviet and Chinese influences through the implementation of his Juche concept, by publicly stressing its independence from the Soviet Union and China and by acting as the subject in managing international relations to the extent possible, to the great frustration of Beijing and Moscow, which viewed relations with

North Korea as asymmetrical and saw North Korea as dependent on the larger powers.

The Korean War and its aftermath provided a basis for North Korea's sense of vulnerability and hostility toward the outside world. But it also created "circumstances that enabled the Kim Il Sung government to maintain a posture of isolation and belligerence without risking loss of essential allied aid."<sup>44</sup> This approach to the management of larger powers has become North Korea's primary *modus operandi* in its foreign relations. As a result, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, one of the North's biggest challenges has been to find a counterweight to China through which the North might continue to seek subsidies from major outside supporters while fiercely protecting its own prerogatives and independence.

The ideal type structure for North Korea is the continued playing off of outside powers against each other strategically as a vehicle for securing continued economic and political benefits. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it appears that North Korea would like to play this game either between China and South Korea, as North Korea's two largest benefactors and trade partners, or between China and the United States. However, as North Korea's provocative actions bring external parties together in common cause to manage North Korea's provocations, it has become increasingly more difficult for the North to play off external parties against each other. At the same time, it has been difficult for all the parties to come together to work out a coordinated approach to North Korea on humanitarian or other issues.

### **U.S.-DPRK Relations**

Sixty years after the outbreak of the Korean War, the U.S.-DPRK relationship still faces the legacy of unresolved military confrontation. The legacy of the Korean War is reflected in the failure of the United States and North Korea to find a path to reconciliation despite the passage of three generations. As a result of the armistice and the unresolved conflict on the Korean peninsula, the impact of the war and the absence of diplomatic contacts persisted until almost the end of the cold war, despite relaxation of communications between the United States and most Soviet bloc countries during the course of the cold war. American diplomats around the world were instructed to avoid contacts with their North Korean counterparts in third countries until the late 1980s.<sup>45</sup> Although direct talks were authorized between the two countries in Beijing at the end of the Reagan administration in the late 1980s, initial contacts revealed the difficulties inherent in achieving the

conditions necessary for the United States and North Korea to establish meaningful channels for dialogue.

Although North Korea began to pursue a relationship with the United States from the early 1970s, the United States saw North Korean initiatives as primarily motivated by a desire to marginalize its South Korean allies, and routinely rebuffed direct contacts to avoid playing into the hands of North Korea's competition for legitimacy with the South. Concerns about marginalizing South Korean allies inhibited direct U.S. contact with North Korea despite U.S. policies of détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China. But those same circumstances catalyzed a shift in the Pyongyang's view of, and the policy towards, the United States from the 1970s. According to Byung Chul Koh, "although he promptly called Nixon's July 1971 announcement that he would visit Beijing a sign of capitulation, Kim appeared to look upon the development with a mixture of alarm and jealousy."<sup>46</sup>

President Nixon's triangular diplomacy of engaging both the Soviet Union and China in the 1970s had several important ramifications for North Korea and its foreign policy-making. First, the changed Sino-U.S. relations ignited North Korea's engagement with the South, and the historic North-South communique was signed in 1972. Second, North Korea was left alone in Asia, facing the might of U.S. forces, but with no assurance that it would have backing of its allies, which also had relations with the United States. Third, the changing conditions of the 1970s forced Kim Il Sung to compete heavily with South Korea to expand diplomatic relations with the Third World rapidly in order to win support in mounting a more effective campaign against both the United States and South Korea.<sup>47</sup>

North Korea's overtures toward the U.S. have been a constant feature of North Korean policy since the early 1970s, although its motives for seeking a relationship with the United States have shifted based on specific circumstances, and North Korea has been suspected of pursuing the objective of disadvantaging South Korea through the establishment of closer ties with the United States. In April 1973, North Korea sent an open letter to the U.S. Congress, pointing out that since the two Koreas were now conducting dialogue, the U.S. should stop supplying weapons to South Korea.<sup>48</sup> In 1975, Kim Il Sung reportedly asked visiting members of Japan's parliament to request the Americans to consider signing a peace treaty with Pyongyang. In 1976 and 1979, North Korean officials made two approaches, but the U.S., in both instances, declined to meet the North Koreans.<sup>49</sup> The first real opportunity for improvement in the U.S.-DPRK relationship came in the context of improved inter-Korean relations resulting from South Korean

President Roh Tae Woo's "Nordpolitik," the realization of the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges, and Cooperation between the two Koreas, and the development of the cross-recognition idea which envisioned China and the Soviet Union establishing relations with South Korea in return for the U.S. and Japan's diplomatic recognition of North Korea. During this time, Pyongyang became eager to move toward establishing relations with the U.S. and Japan to compensate for its flagging relations with China and the Soviet Union, but U.S. lack of interest, the dramatic system differences between the United States and North Korea, and the emergence of the nuclear issue put the brakes on prospects for diplomatic normalization.<sup>50</sup>

Ironically, the nuclear issue simultaneously became the North's most powerful tool by which to achieve its longstanding objective of a direct U.S.-DPRK dialogue and the central obstacle to the improvement of the U.S.-DPRK relationship. The nuclear issue also served to obscure the unresolved confrontation between the United States and North Korea that stemmed from the irresolution of past conflict signified by the Armistice. The North Korean nuclear program was the primary concern that led to the first high-level dialogue between the United States and North Korea in 1992 between Korean Workers' Party Secretary Kim Young Sun and Bush administration Undersecretary of State Arnold Kanter. Following North Korea's announcement of its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in March of 1993, the newly-established Clinton administration took the dramatic step of pursuing direct talks on the issue with North Korean counterparts in New York in June of that year. The negotiation of the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework was a product of direct U.S.-DPRK dialogue and offered the prospect of both the abandoning of North Korea's nuclear program and the opportunity to develop U.S.-DPRK relations. However, it became clear that the United States was focused on the nuclear side of the agreement, while the development of diplomatic relations languished.<sup>51</sup>

The U.S. continued to loom large in North Korean strategies in the late 1990s and the 21st century, as a potential alternate security guarantor, economic lifeline, and benefactor. Some argue that Kim Il Sung had hoped that the U.S. might be a potential mediator or restraint against fears of absorption by the South. Although North Korea was driven by such strategic rationales, the American focus on North Korea's nuclear development and wide gaps in values and systems between the two countries made it difficult for the United States to appreciate or fully grasp North Korean objectives, which often seemed disconnected with political reality.<sup>52</sup>



Even during the Bush administration, North Korea's preoccupation with the need for the United States to pursue a "bold switchover" in its "hostile policy" toward North Korea suggested Pyongyang's desire to draw in the United States as a strategic counterweight to its continued dependency on China. Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan made some pointed public comments to that effect during bilateral meetings with the United States in New York in March of 2007. In fact, North Korea's entire strategy of pursuing bilateral dialogue with the United States as the driving force for progress in addressing the nuclear issue following the North's October 2006 nuclear test indirectly affirmed the North's continued focus on the establishment of a relationship with the United States as the main objective of North Korea's policy.

However, the North Korean policy toward the United States appears to have shifted during the transition to the Obama administration in early 2009. Rather than taking conciliatory measures as a means by which to open the way for a new relationship with the Obama administration, North Korea appears to have placed every possible obstacle in the way of renewed dialogue at the beginning of 2009, or at least to have taken measures that would push the Obama administration toward implicit recognition if not explicit acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state.

First, prior to President Obama's inauguration the DPRK Foreign Ministry explicitly stated that there is no linkage between normalization of U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations and North Korea's denuclearization.<sup>53</sup> Second, the North Koreans embarked on the launch of a multi-stage rocket under the rationale that North Korea has a right to pursue a peaceful satellite launch on April 5, 2009, only hours prior to a major speech by President Obama in Prague on the need for global nuclear arms reductions. North Korea's rationale for its test was rejected by the Obama administration and other parties, resulting in a UN Presidential Statement condemning the April 5, 2009 launch as a violation of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1718, which had imposed restrictions on North Korean missile launch capacities following North Korea's 2006 nuclear test.<sup>54</sup>

Third, North Korea responded with outrage to this condemnation, pledging to walk away from the Six Party Talks and threatening to conduct a second nuclear test, which it did on May 25, 2009.<sup>55</sup> From the North Korean perspective, despite offers to pursue dialogue with its adversaries during the election campaign, the Obama administration renewed existing sanctions against North Korea and implemented routine military exercises in March of 2009 that targeted North Korea, while Secretary of State Clinton referred to the DPRK government as a

“tyranny” during her confirmation hearing. The main DPRK critique of the Obama administration has been its role in mobilizing UN condemnation of North Korea’s multi-stage rocket launch through the UN Security Council.

These provocations posed a direct challenge to the credibility of the Obama administration and required a firm response, precluding prospects for early diplomatic engagement with North Korea. The Obama administration has worked energetically at the United Nations first to secure a UN Presidential Statement and subsequently to gain unanimous support for UNSC Resolution 1874 condemning North Korea’s nuclear test and has attempted to spearhead implementation of financial and shipping sanctions against North Korea following the test. North Korea’s provocations have underscored the need for international cooperation to respond to North Korea’s challenge to regional and global stability and have directly flouted the Six Party Talks as a venue for addressing North Korea’s nuclear program.

Although North Korea has proposed peace negotiations with the United States in early 2010, this proposal once again seems designed more to disadvantage South Korea and change the subject with the United States away from the North Korean nuclear program, creating prerequisites for North Korean performance on the core issues that the United States now sees as the key sticking points that an improvement in relations impossible. But according to North Korean logic, a change in the political relationship remains a prerequisite for full cooperation. At the same time, the North Koreans do not perceive the establishment of a relationship as part of a quid pro quo; in other words, North Korea rejects the premise that there is anything that they must do as a condition for improving the relationship with the United States. The inflexibility of the positions on each side suggests that the legacy of the Korean War, in the form of U.S.-DPRK enmity, remains intact. The “last glacier” of the Cold War is unlikely to melt anytime soon.

## **Conclusion**

The impact of the Korean War on North Korean politics, economy, foreign policy, and relations with the United States has been significant, if not profound. North Korea’s relative isolation and the relative continuity and stability of the political system established following the Korean War has demonstrative effects that can be traced in North Korea’s current political structure, economic policies, and approaches to foreign policy. Kim Il Sung’s ability to eliminate political rivals and establish and lead a totalitarian political system requiring loyalty to himself and his son, Kim Jong Il, the initial success of North Korea’s

centrally-planned economic system and mass mobilization policies that marked the height of North Korea's economic success in the 1950s and 1960s, a complex relationship between the Soviet Union and China that Kim Il Sung was able to manipulate to North Korea's advantage, and the enduring legacy of enmity between the United States and North Korea despite dramatic changes in the international system are factors that have clear influence on North Korea today. These influences persist today as dominant influences on North Korea's internal politics, economics, and foreign policy.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Bon-Hak Koo, *Political Economy of Self-Reliance: Juche and Economic development in North Korea, 1961-1990* (Korean Unification Studies Series 4, Research Center for Peace and Unification Korea 1992), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Charles K. Armstrong, "The Nature, Origins, and Development of the North Korean State," in Samuel S. Kim ed., *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Suzuki Masayuki, *Kita chosen shakaishugi to dento no kyomei [North Korean Socialism and the Resonance with Tradition]* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1993), as in *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> Melanie Kirkpatrick, "Looking North – In North Korea, an ideology of racial superiority and a grim daily existence," *Wall Street Journal*, January 28, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Dae-Sook Suh, "The Impact of the War on North Korea: the Internal Dimension," *The Historical Reillumination on the Korean War* (Seoul : Korean War Research Conference Committee, War Memorial Service-Korea, 1990), p. 381.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Il Sung, *Selected Works (Kim Il-song sonjip)*, vol. III (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971), pp. 137-140.

<sup>8</sup> Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: the Formation of North Korea 1945-1960* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Kim Il Sung, *Selected Works III*, p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> Suh, "The Impact of the War on North Korea: the Internal Dimension," p. 385.

<sup>11</sup> *Choson nodong-dang chaesamcha taehoe chuyo munhonhip*, pp. 71-84, in Jongwon Alexander Kim, *Divided Korea: the Politics of Development 1945-1972* (Cambridge, Mass.: Havard University Press, 1976), p. 184.

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- <sup>12</sup> Bon-Hak Koo, *Political Economy of Self-Reliance: Juche and Economic Development in North Korea, 1961-1990*, p. 69.
- <sup>13</sup> Kim Il Sung, *On Exterminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Independence in Ideological Work* (Pyongyang: KWP Press, 1960), p. 12.
- <sup>14</sup> Charles K. Armstrong, *The Koreas* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 66.
- <sup>15</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010), preface.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Bruce Cumings, "Corporatism and the Chuch'e Idea," in *North Korea: a Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1994), p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II: the Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), chapter 9, in Charles K. Armstrong, "The Nature, Origins, and Development of the North Korean State," p. 44. Armstrong, however, points that North Korea was not unique among socialist states in adopting corporatist themes during the Cold-War period and that the country was an example of corporatism growing out of, rather than substituting for, Stalinism.
- <sup>19</sup> Koo, *Political Economy of Self-Reliance*, p. 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Jong Won Lee, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Korean Economy," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, vol.5, No.1 (Spring/Summer, 2001), p. 103.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> B.K. Gills, *Korea versus Korea: a Case of Contested Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 57.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul French, *North Korea: the Paranoid Peninsula* (New York: Zed Books, 2007), p. 81.
- <sup>24</sup> Soon Sung Cho, "Political Development in North Korea: 1950-1966," in Andrew C. Nahmed, *Studies in the Developmental Aspects of Korea*, School of Graduate Studies and Institute of International and Area Studies of Western Michigan University 1969, p. 150.
- <sup>25</sup> Joseph S. Chung, "Economic Development and Structural Changes," in *North Korea: a Country Study*, p. 114.
- <sup>26</sup> Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: a Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2008), p. 45.
- <sup>27</sup> Dae-Sook Suh, "The Impact of the War on North Korea: the Internal Dimension," p. 396.

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<sup>28</sup> Rudiger Frank, "Socialist Neoconservatism and North Korean Foreign Policy,"

unpublished conference presentation, June 2009, Vancouver, University of British Columbia, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Rodong Shinmun*, March 24, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> *Rodong Shinmun*, December 2008, quoted in Frank, "Socialist Neoconservatism," p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Rodong Shinmun*, March 12, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Frank, "Socialist Neoconservatism," p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> To the surprise of Chinese, Stalin showed reluctance to dispatch its promised air forces into Korea. Stalin instead promised to provide military equipment for 20 divisions.

<sup>36</sup> Chen Jian, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry into the Korean War", working paper no.1, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, 1992.

<sup>37</sup> Kathryn Weathersby, "North Korean Foreign Relations: Historical Roots of Present Patterns."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kathryn Weathersby, "To Attack or Not to Attack?: Stalin, Kim Il Sung and the Prelude to War," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, vol. 5 (1995), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Kathryn Weathersby, "North Korean Foreign Relations."

<sup>41</sup> See Frank, "Socialist Neoconservatism," p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Kathryn Weathersby, "North Korean Foreign Relations."

<sup>43</sup> Ralph N. Clough, *Deterrence and Defense in Korea: the Role of U.S. Forces* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1976), p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glasses* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2000), p. 166.

<sup>46</sup> Byung Chul Koh, *The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 87.

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<sup>47</sup> Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung, the North Korean Leader* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 260.

<sup>48</sup> Oh and Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass*, p. 166.

<sup>49</sup> Manwoo Lee, "Pyongyang and Washington: Dynamics of Changing Relations," in *Asia Perspective* vol.19 (Fall & Winter 1995), 134-135, cited in Oh and Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass*, p. 166.

<sup>50</sup> Oh and Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass*, p. 167.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>52</sup> Robert A. Manning, "The United States in North Korean Foreign Policy," in Samuel S. Kim ed., *North Korean Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, pp. 141, 146, 147.

<sup>53</sup> "DPRK Foreign Ministry's Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion," KCNA, January 17, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> UNSC Presidential Statement (S/PRST/2009/7), full text, April 13, 2009, online at [www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9634.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9634.doc.htm)

<sup>55</sup> "DPRK Foreign Ministry Vehemently Refutes UNSC's "Presidential Statement," *Korean Central News Agency*, April 14, 2009.