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North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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COMPETITION

KOREAN RIVALRY FOR RECOGNITION

The Korean War was a devastating event in history. Historians have described it as ‘quite possibly the most important event since World War II’ and ‘a defining moment of the Cold War’.¹³² The Korean peninsula had been an independent, unified state for five hundred years, before it was formally annexed by the Japanese Empire in 1910. The end of World War II liberated Korea from Japanese colonialism, but saw the peninsula immediately divided between Soviet and American occupation zones. The 1945 division was intended as a temporary solution, but in 1948 two separate governments were established in the northern and southern parts of Korea.¹³³

In 1950, North Korea launched a military incursion into South Korea to unify the Korean people. Despite an initially highly successful invasion, the North Korean army (supported by the Soviet Union and China) was ultimately repulsed by a United Nations coalition led by the United States. With an estimated three million casualties, the conflict was terribly destructive.¹³⁴ The Korean War ended, in 1953, in a stalemate that simply reinforced the original division along the 38th parallel, which subsequently became the most heavily militarised border in the world.¹³⁵ Formally, both states are still at war and the memories of the violence continue to haunt Korean relations.¹³⁶

Following the war, both Koreas sought international recognition as the legitimate government of the entire peninsula.¹³⁷ The UN General Assembly became a key battleground for recognition.¹³⁸ South Korea became a permanent observer at the UNGA in 1948, North Korea followed a few years later, in 1973.¹³⁹ Yet, the question of who could become a full member was heavily contested. The British Foreign Office summarised this rivalry by observing that ‘the North Koreans were to a large extent preoccupied with spitting in the eye of South Korea, and vice versa’.¹⁴⁰

The African continent turned out to be crucial for UN debates about Korea.¹⁴¹ At the start of the inter-Korean diplomatic rivalry in the 1950s, South Korea enjoyed a solid position within the UN. But in the early 1960s, the South Korean observer to the UN detected a ‘change in atmosphere’ in the UN General Assembly, which organised an annual debate about Korea. During the second half of the twentieth century, the UN membership doubled in size and many new members were recently liberated African countries.¹⁴² There were only four African UN members in 1945 but this number had increased to 29 members by 1961: a staggering seven-fold increase.¹⁴³ In 1960 alone, 17 African states gained independence – a moment that became known as the ‘Year of Africa’. African member states often supported North Korea instead of South Korea, a phenomenon that American diplomats called the ‘African shift’.¹⁴⁴ Since the

¹³² Stueck 2002, p. 1.

¹³³ Stueck 2002.

¹³⁴ Wada 2013.

¹³⁵ Oberdorfer and Carlin 2013.

¹³⁶ Jager 2013.

¹³⁷ Clough 1987, p. 274.

¹³⁸ United Nations 1950; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1971; The Institute for East Asian Studies, 1974.

¹³⁹ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 50.

¹⁴⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/2319: Wenban-Smith to Elliot, 29 October 1982.

¹⁴¹ Pak 2000.

¹⁴² Lee 2010, p. 3.

¹⁴³ Owuoye 1991, p. 632.

¹⁴⁴ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# A1 1613-A, Box# 3964, POL 17 Korea -- POL Kuwait: New York to Seoul, 14 September 1963.

1960s, Pyongyang ‘embarked on a hard-sell diplomatic campaign in Africa’ and made several ‘summer tours’ or ‘good-will missions’ to African capitals to drum up support in the UN.¹⁴⁵

The British Foreign Office noted in 1965 that North Korea’s diplomatic gains may allow the country to ‘ride into the UN on Africa’s back’.¹⁴⁶ A year later, American diplomats railed against ‘the confusion in the minds of many newer nations’ and instructed all of its diplomatic missions in Africa to educate the locals on the virtues of South Korea.¹⁴⁷ But North Korea received more support from the continent in 1975, at a UN General Assembly vote on a resolution that was co-sponsored by several Africa states.¹⁴⁸ Pyongyang celebrated this as ‘a great turning-point in the history of the United Nations’.¹⁴⁹ Jide Owoeye noted that ‘Africans began to turn the table on the Korean question’ – and the continent became the most important theatre for inter-Korean competition.¹⁵⁰

This chapter investigates how both Koreas competed for African support in the diplomatic arena. The first part is dedicated to strategy and analyses the diverging foreign policy approaches of Seoul and Pyongyang. The second part focuses on multilateral diplomacy, especially the Afro-Asian solidarity fora that were established in the wake of the Bandung Conference. It argues that the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation and the Non-Aligned Movement were new channels for engagement between African states and the Korean peninsula. The third part is a case study of the 1987 Pyongyang Conference, a story that encapsulates Korean competition for African support.

Korean Competition

The political scientist Park Sang-Seek argues that ‘it was the Koreans who took the initiative’ in the formation of African–Korean relations. Yet, both Koreas adopted different ‘diplomatic styles’ in their efforts to charm African nations: Pyongyang focused primarily on cultural diplomacy, whereas South Korea depended upon trade diplomacy.¹⁵¹ This rivalry reached a peak in the 1970s.¹⁵²

In an effort to influence African governments, foreign states were obsessed with tabulating allegiances to determine whether African states were pro-North Korea or pro-South Korea. Endless lists and tables with the results of UN votes would circulate across the African Desks or East Asian Desks of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in London, Washington D. C., and other places. This approach was adopted by scholars interested in Korean foreign policy. However, their focus on the *delivery* of Korean foreign policy in Africa overlooks the question of how African states *received* such policy.¹⁵³

Bean counting does not capture the complex dynamics of diplomatic competition. The fact that, in 1977, South Korea had diplomatic ties with 27 African countries while North Korea had relations with 42 African countries is interesting, but largely useless.¹⁵⁴ Diplomatic relations are not static and seldom reflect a dichotomous reading of politics. Most importantly,

¹⁴⁵ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2261, POL 32-4 KOR/UN -- POL KOR N: Department of State Intelligence Note, 26 June 1969; [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2420, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 16 KOR N: Ouagadougou to Washington DC, 2 March 1973.

¹⁴⁶ [NAUK] FO 371/181117: North Korean advances in Africa, 2 March 1965.

¹⁴⁷ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2398, POL 27-14 Korea, N-UN -- POL 33-4 Korea, N-UN: Department of State to various diplomatic and consular posts, 8 September 1966.

¹⁴⁸ [NAUK] FCO 31/3922: Whitehead, Research Department Note 16/83, September 1983.

¹⁴⁹ Kim 1983, p. 72.

¹⁵⁰ Owoeye 1991, p. 632.

¹⁵¹ Park 1987, p. 79.

¹⁵² Park 1978, p. 76-77.

¹⁵³ Park 1978; Owoeye 1991.

¹⁵⁴ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 56.

bean counting fails to understand why African states operate the way they do. The next section reviews why African states tended to favour North Korea instead of South Korea.

African countries valued North Korea's apparent independent position in the world. Its membership of the Non-Aligned Movement made Pyongyang an appealing partner for African states that wanted to forge relations in spite of Western pressures.¹⁵⁵ In the 1980s, the United States tried to dissuade Mugabe from accepting North Korean military aid, but Zimbabwe dismissed American criticism by arguing that Zimbabwe did not take sides. From their perspective, 'North Korea was a genuine non-aligned country'.¹⁵⁶

The same trick also worked in Malawi. In the 1960s, South Korean diplomats visited the strongly anti-communist president Hastings Banda and were 'rewarded by unsolicited assurance' that Malawi would be happy to recognise Seoul. The Americans were delighted with this result.¹⁵⁷ In the following years, Malawi 'consistently supported' the American position on the Korean question in the UN and maintained ties with South Africa.¹⁵⁸ However, when the press reported in 1982 that Banda had befriended North Korea, the British Foreign Office assumed that the Malawi News Agency had reported 'the wrong Korea' as the prospect of Malawian-North Korean relations would be 'very unlikely'.¹⁵⁹ The Americans also confidently said that they did not 'anticipate a sharp change from pro-Western foreign policies'.¹⁶⁰ But the British and the Americans were wrong, as Malawi indeed recognised North Korea in 1982.¹⁶¹ Much to South Korea's regret, cordial ties between both states ensued.¹⁶² Banda's government defended its support for Pyongyang through its commitment to a non-aligned foreign policy – after all, North Korea was a non-aligned country.¹⁶³

Nevertheless, the West often assumes that North Korea was a satellite state of either China or the Soviet Union. Confusingly, a cursory reading of the diplomatic archives reveals that Western countries oftentimes labelled North Korea as both. In Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo), Americans believed that a North Korean training mission for the exiled Angolan liberation movement FNLA was a vehicle for Chinese aid.¹⁶⁴ In Zimbabwe, South Korean diplomats thought that North Korea acted as a representative of the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁵ In Zambia, the British government branded North Korea the 'the principal satellite of China'.¹⁶⁶ In Tanzania, however, British diplomats concluded that 'North Korea is reached via Moscow, not

¹⁵⁵ [SRA] MfS – HA II. Nr. 29133

¹⁵⁶ [DARK] 15765.

¹⁵⁷ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2406, POL 23-9 Korea, South -- POL 32-4 Korea, S-UN: Blantyre to Department of State, 10 March 1965.

¹⁵⁸ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2420, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 16 KOR N: Blantyre to Washington DC.

¹⁵⁹ [NAUK] FCO 105/828: Danson to M.J. Long, 12 February 1982; P.J. Sullivan, Lilongwe, 30 June 1982.

¹⁶⁰ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2420, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 16 KOR N: Blantyre to Washington DC.

¹⁶¹ [SRA] MfS – HA II. Nr. 29133.

¹⁶² [DARK] 25089.

¹⁶³ [NAUK] FCO 105/828: Danson to M.J. Long, 12 February 1982; P.J. Sullivan, Lilongwe, 30 June 1982.

¹⁶⁴ [NAI] PC Angola Military: Anable, 2 January 1976.

¹⁶⁵ [DARK] 15765.

¹⁶⁶ [NAUK] FO 371/181130: Commonwealth Relations Office to Lusaka, 15 January 1965.

via Peking'.¹⁶⁷ Meanwhile, in Lesotho, their Foreign Office colleagues believed that the North Koreans were 'closer to the Chinese than to the Russians'.¹⁶⁸

In practice, North Korea skilfully manoeuvred between both communist powers.¹⁶⁹ The Sino-Soviet split of 1961, when ideological differences caused a rift between the two giants, only strengthened North Korea's position in Africa as a safe alternative. Pyongyang executed a successful balancing act between Moscow and Beijing. Its independence from the Communist Bloc was emphasised through its adoption of Juche Thought as its guiding principle (an ideology that stressed self-reliance, further explained in Chapter 4).¹⁷⁰ Juche was 'an attractive concept for countries which are hostile to foreign investment'.¹⁷¹ North Korea was further seen as distinct from the Communist Bloc because it was a former colony, unlike China or the Soviet Union (arguably, South Korea enjoyed the same status, but in the eyes of North Korea and others Seoul remained occupied by American troops).¹⁷² North Korea's struggle credentials resonated with African countries that shared a similar experience of oppression. North Korea was therefore a welcome alternative for countries that were not keen on a large Chinese or Soviet presence, or wanted to stay out of the Sino-Soviet rivalry altogether.¹⁷³

It is imperative to note that during the inception of African–North Korean relations, Kim Il Sung's country was commonly seen in an entirely different light than it is today. Presently, we view North Korea as a bleak dictatorship, devoid of any freedom or happiness. In the 1960s, however, North Korea carried the promise of anti-imperialist aspirations and outperformed its southern neighbour in terms of economic wealth and political prestige. For African states, non-alignment made North Korea acceptable despite Western opposition, while Juche made North Korea an alternative to communist conflict. It was a peculiar but highly effective strategy to win over African hearts and minds.

South Korea became equally determined to forge relations with non-aligned African states, in an attempt to 'secure a diplomatic edge over North Korea'.¹⁷⁴ However, several strategic handicaps diminished Seoul's appeal to African states. First, in the early years of its diplomatic campaign in Africa, South Korea adopted what was known as a Hallstein Doctrine.¹⁷⁵ A Hallstein Doctrine (named after Walter Hallstein from the Federal Republic of Germany) envisioned a zero-sum game of diplomatic recognition: one does not maintain relations with a state that recognises your enemy. This rigid approach was not always to the benefit of the ROK. For instance, when North Korea established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Congo, in 1965, South Korea was forced to break off its relations with Brazzaville.¹⁷⁶ In the 1970s, Seoul relinquished its Hallstein Doctrine and adopted a more flexible approach.¹⁷⁷

¹⁶⁷ [NAUK] FCO 31/948: Hart to Hall, 7 June 1971.

¹⁶⁸ [NAUK] FCO 105/1198: Varcoe to Clemens, 6 July 1983; FCO to Victoria, 18 May 1983; Smedley to Elliot, 28 July 1983; Thorpe to Leahy, 10 August 1983; Smedley to Dewberry, 1 September 1983; Smedley to Dewberry, 19 September 1983.

¹⁶⁹ Owoeye 1991, p. 631; Shen and Xia 2018, p. 12.

¹⁷⁰ [SRA] MfS – HA XXII. Nr. 1610/72

¹⁷¹ [NAUK] FCO 31/948: Hart to Hall, 7 June 1971.

¹⁷² [NAUK] FCO 31/948.

¹⁷³ [NAUK] FCO 21/3231: Giles, North Korean military assistance, 20 November 1984; [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2263, POL KOR N-AFR -- POL 31-1 KOR N-US: Department of State to Monrovia, 23 August 1967.

¹⁷⁴ [NAUK] FCO 21/2866: Goodworth to Currie, 27 September, 1984.

¹⁷⁵ Park 1978, p. 76; Owoeye 1991, p. 633.

¹⁷⁶ [NAUK] FO 371/181117: North Korean advances in Africa, 2 March 1965.

¹⁷⁷ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2423, POL KOR N-US -- POL 7 KOR S: Yaounde to Washington DC, 20 July 1971.

Second, South Korean diplomacy was dependent upon support from the United States and the United Kingdom. Both countries had a vested interest in helping their ally, but were despised by many African governments for their relations with apartheid South Africa and their colonial record.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, the presence of tens of thousands of American troops in Seoul raised African suspicion that South Korea was a ‘puppet’ of the US, as a Tanzanian diplomat professed to his American colleague in 1966.¹⁷⁹ In contrast, there were no Chinese or Soviet troops stationed permanently in North Korea.

Nevertheless, in a 1967 meeting between the South Korean and American officials, it became evident that ‘the ROK needed US advice and assistance in countering North Korean initiatives’.¹⁸⁰ Soon, it became formal American policy ‘to strengthen the international standing of the ROK ... and to prevent the DPRK from gaining diplomatic recognition’. The State Department urged its diplomatic posts around Africa ‘to use what influence they can to counter these North Korean efforts’.¹⁸¹ When the US was unable to help South Korea, they turned to the UK. A former British diplomat, who was stationed in Seoul during the Cold War, confirmed to me that the UK provided South Korea with intelligence, advice, and passed on messages to African governments.¹⁸²

Seoul lacked sufficient funding to sway African countries to their side of the aisle and requested Western money to finance their diplomatic efforts in Africa. When South Korea tried to persuade Malawi to establish relations in 1964, the Korean ambassador argued that they would ‘need US financial backing’ to pay for the technical assistance he wanted to offer to Malawi.¹⁸³ In 1966, a South Korean diplomat complained in Washington D. C. that their ambition to invite African leaders to Seoul did not materialise because of ‘a lack of funds’.¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Seoul recognised that its dependence on US support for its African missions ‘could backfire’ if it became public knowledge, on account of America’s controversial status in the continent.¹⁸⁵

Even though Western diplomats viewed North Korea as a Sino-Soviet satellite, Pyongyang was much better equipped to execute its own foreign policy when it came to African diplomacy. In fact, this book argues that, during the early Cold War, South Korea was closer to being a satellite state than North Korea.

Third, South Korea’s global image was also tainted by its tumultuous domestic affairs. For most of the Cold War, South Korea was governed by a right-wing dictatorship that received widespread criticism for its human rights abuses. While North Korea could hardly be called a democracy, its brand in Africa was noticeably better at that time. Moreover, African countries recognised that South Korea’s economy was stagnating, while North Korea developed rapidly – an appealing prospect for many young, postcolonial states.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁸ Owoeye 1991, p. 634.

¹⁷⁹ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2398, POL 27-14 Korea, N-UN -- POL 33-4 Korea, N-UN: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 16 June 1966.

¹⁸⁰ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2260, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 32-4 KOR/UN: Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation: 4 April 1967.

¹⁸¹ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2262, POL 7 KOR N -- POL 7 KOR N: Department of State, ‘North Korean Efforts’, 18 June 1968.

¹⁸² Interview with James E. Hoare, London, 28 August 2019.

¹⁸³ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2405, POL 15-2 Korea, South -- POL 23-8 Korea, South: Seoul to Department of State, 20 July 1964.

¹⁸⁴ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2397, POL 14 Korea, N -- POL 27-14 Korea, N-UN: Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 3 February 1966.

¹⁸⁵ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2261, POL 32-4 KOR/UN -- POL KOR N: Department of State to Seoul, 17 May 1968.

¹⁸⁶ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2398, POL 27-14 Korea, N-UN -- POL 33-4 Korea, N-UN: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 16 June 1966.

How did North Korea make sense of the messy, complicated situation in Southern Africa? Kim Il Sung publicly stated that he had ‘been deeply concerned about ... Southern Africa for a long time’, arguing that ‘the situation is as tense as in our country’.¹⁸⁷ A former North Korean diplomat who worked closely with Kim counselled me on Pyongyang’s Africa strategy. He explained that the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted extensive research on all liberation movements in Africa: screening; categorizing; and ranking them. The Ministry even had a special team dedicated to OAU affairs. The results were presented to Kim, who ultimately decided which movement to support. His personal ties to African leaders were an important dimension of North Korea’s Africa policy. Kim saw these relationships through a transactional lens: if he helped get these leaders into power, they should help him with his plan to unify the Korean peninsula.¹⁸⁸

Indeed, virtually all African anticolonial leaders who rose to power during the Cold War touted pro-North Korea lines in public fora. In a speech at the UN, Mozambique’s president Machel called for the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea.¹⁸⁹ On several other public occasions, Machel supported reunification of the Korean peninsula ‘on the basis of the various initiatives of the DPRK’.¹⁹⁰ At a conference of the Non-Aligned Movement, Zambia’s president, Kaunda, announced that ‘Zambia stands for reunification of Korea’ and demanded the ‘total and unconditional withdrawal’ of American troops from Seoul.¹⁹¹ Angolan president dos Santos similarly ‘expressed the Angolan’s people solidarity’ with North Korea’s proposal to reunify Korea in public speeches.¹⁹² Kim Il Sung’s policies were also endorsed by the leaders of Botswana, Namibia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, to name but a few.

The odd one out is South Africa. The ANC was the oldest and best-known liberation movement of the region; it faced the longest struggle of them all, but it seemed to have the fewest interactions with North Korea. Signs of a mutual friendship were revealed by Jacob Zuma, the ANC’s former intelligence chief and president of South Africa. In a meeting in 2005 with the North Korean prime minister Yang Hyong Sop (Yang Hyöngsöp), Zuma ‘highlighted the support the ANC had received during the anti-apartheid struggle’. The political scientist Don Geldenhuys suggests that the ANC therefore ‘had political debts to repay’.¹⁹³ In the ANC archives in Cape Town, I found several cases of correspondence between North Korean diplomats and the ANC.¹⁹⁴ North Korea evidently expressed solidarity with the South African struggle.¹⁹⁵

However, when I asked Ronnie Kasrils, the former intelligence chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe (the ANC’s armed wing) about ties to Pyongyang he curtly replied that at least MK ‘never had any ... relationship or assistance from North Korea’.¹⁹⁶ During my research in Seoul, an exiled North Korean diplomat told me that North Korean support for the ANC was mainly financial, material, and mostly political – but not military. North Korean assistance to the ANC was primarily channelled through SWAPO and ZANU, with whom the ANC cooperated.¹⁹⁷ I can only speculate about the reasons why their relations with the ANC appear to have been

¹⁸⁷ Kim 2022, p. 41.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

¹⁸⁹ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: Black Liberation Press, 1977.

¹⁹⁰ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: Frelimo Party, June 1983.

¹⁹¹ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, August 1976.

¹⁹² [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: MPLA, 14 January 1985.

¹⁹³ Geldenhuys 2005, p. 150-153.

¹⁹⁴ [UWC] ANC Lusaka Box 65: memorandum, 22 September 1986; letter, 25 May 1990; Sechaba, April 1972.

¹⁹⁵ [NAI] PC South Africa NLM ANC: statement, 26 June 1969.

¹⁹⁶ Personal correspondence with Ronnie Kasrils, 31 March 2022.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

weaker than elsewhere: perhaps the strong influence of the South African Communist Party (SACP) on the ANC resulted in less interest in North Korean aid.¹⁹⁸

Pragmatism was the commanding rationale behind North Korea's Africa strategy. Kim Il Sung was prepared to withdraw his support for certain liberation movements and endorse their rivals if he thought that he was backing a losing team.¹⁹⁹ The pragmatic motives behind North Korean–African ties are demonstrated in the cases of Angola and Zimbabwe.

North Korea had been interested in the Angolan liberation struggle since the 1960s and a number of Angolan nationals from different organisations were invited to Pyongyang.²⁰⁰ Kim first decided to provide financial and military support to the FNLA, and, in 1971, a group of North Korean instructors provided military training for FNLA cadets in Congo.²⁰¹ Kinshasa served as transit place for FNLA members who were en route to Pyongyang for advanced military training. However, when the United States began supporting the FNLA and UNITA, while the MPLA was gaining the upper hand, North Korea switched its allegiance to the latter. In 1975, North Korea established formal relations with the MPLA.²⁰²

In the Zimbabwean case, where ZAPU and ZANU competed for recognition, North Korea was unsure which group had a stronghold and adopted an ambivalent stance.²⁰³ North Korea initially financed and trained ZAPU,²⁰⁴ but ultimately decided to throw its weight behind ZANU.²⁰⁵ The same occurred in other parts of Africa, for example in Congo or Uganda.²⁰⁶ North Korea was not the only actor to do so: SWAPO, for instance, also switched its support from UNITA to MPLA.²⁰⁷ Pragmatism reigned throughout Southern Africa.

Afro-Asian Solidarity

The division of the Korean peninsula coincided with the emergence of a new age of internationalism, which was turbocharged by the emergence of postcolonial states from dwindling empires. The formation of Afro-Asian political networks provided both Koreas with diplomatic opportunities beyond the realm of Western and Eastern power politics.²⁰⁸

Neither of the Koreas were present at the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (Indonesia), presumably because they were still reeling from the carnage of the Korean War – but they were quick to catch up. In the years following Bandung, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation and the Non-Aligned Movement were established as multilateral fora where Afro-Asian networks could be further developed. In 1965, Kim Il Sung travelled to Indonesia for the tenth anniversary of the Bandung Conference.²⁰⁹ According to Andrei Lankov, this was the first time Kim publicly launched Juche as 'a basic ideological principle of North Korean politics'.²¹⁰

With a stalemate in UN debates about the future of the Korean peninsula, Korean competition moved to these alternative international organisations. African participation in AAPSO and NAM promised opportunities for strengthening ties with anticolonial movements

¹⁹⁸ Lodge 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

²⁰⁰ [NAUK] FCO 45/1680.

²⁰¹ Temu and Temba 2014, p. 354-355 [Vol. 8].

²⁰² Bermudez 1990; [NAUK] FCO 21/3595.

²⁰³ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

²⁰⁴ [SADOD] CSI GP 3 Box 1091. I want to thank Brooks Marmon for generously sharing this file with me.

²⁰⁵ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZAPU: circular 3/1970, August/September; [NAI] PC Angola Military: Anable, 2 January 1976.

²⁰⁶ [NAUK] FO 371/154940: Cairo to London, 5 June 1961; [NAUK] FCO 31/1866: Priestley to Southworth, 10 April 1975.

²⁰⁷ Armstrong 1989, p. 102.

²⁰⁸ Lewis and Stolte 2019.

²⁰⁹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 139-140.

²¹⁰ Korea Times, 27 November 2007.

and getting the message out on Korean reunification. North Korea was manifestly much more successful in this regard than South Korea.

Founded in 1958, in Cairo (Egypt), the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation was designed as a 'broadening and deepening of the "Bandung Spirit"'. The organisation was dedicated to non-aligned solidarity and decolonisation: Kaunda once said that 'the history of AAPSO is the history of liberation in Asia and Africa'.²¹¹ The Permanent Secretariat included representatives of Egypt, India, Algeria, Russia, and China, while its membership – consisting of political parties, liberation movements, and solidarity committees – covered most of Africa and Asia.²¹² North Korea managed to become a member, South Korea did not.

North Korea turned its participation in AAPSO into a major foreign policy success. As most African liberation movements were members or participated in AAPSO events, the organisation became a platform for North Korea to make meaningful connections to African delegates.²¹³ AAPSO conferences, which were attended by North Korean delegates, were regularly hosted by African countries and there is a direct link between these meetings and North Korea's Africa strategy.²¹⁴ Upon visiting the AAPSO conference held in Moshi, Tanzania, in 1963, North Korean diplomats travelled to Dar es Salaam to request permission to establish a diplomatic mission.²¹⁵ Already in the 1960s, North Korea's AAPSO committee supported anticolonial events of liberation movements in Angola and Zimbabwe.²¹⁶ When Pyongyang hosted an AAPSO conference on peace and security issues in the Asia-Pacific Region, in 1987,²¹⁷ the conference was addressed by Zimbabwe's President Mugabe, who applauded North Korea's anti-American plans.²¹⁸

In its charm offensive aimed at African delegates, North Korea was helped by the fact that it received full backing from the AAPSO Permanent Secretariat. Official statements from the organisation heralded 'the amazing development in every field of North Korean life' and denounced 'the puppet government of South Korea'.²¹⁹ These statements found their way to African liberation movements and governments.²²⁰ Moreover, AAPSO regularly organised anti-South Korea events, such as the 'Day of Common Struggle for the Withdrawal of U. S. Forces from South Korea', or the 'Week of Common Struggle for the Withdrawal of American Aggressive Forces from South Korea', or the 'Month of Joint Struggle for the Withdrawal of the U. S. Imperialist Aggressive Troops from South Korea'.²²¹ The presidium demanded that 'the US and ROK accept the peaceful of the DPRK', which included the 'withdrawal of US troops'.²²² The removal of American forces from Seoul would have been a major foreign policy win for North Korea.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the North Korean state, AAPSO's secretary-general, Abdel Rahman El-Sharkawi, sent a telegram to Kim, celebrating 'his brilliant achievements' so

²¹¹ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard.

²¹² Abou-El-Fadl 2019, p. 157-158.

²¹³ Koh 1969, p. 175.

²¹⁴ Temu and Temba 2014, p. 354-348 [Vol. 8].

²¹⁵ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# A1 1613-A, Box# 4040, POL 26 South Korea -- POL S Korea-US: Dar es Salaam to Secretary of State, 8 May 1963.

²¹⁶ [NAUK] FCO 141/14087: Communist Activities in Africa, February 1964; Communist Activities in Africa, March 1964.

²¹⁷ [DARK] 25146.

²¹⁸ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO; [JSTOR] Zimbabwe News, 1987.

²¹⁹ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO.

²²⁰ [UNIP] EAP121/2/5/4/31.

²²¹ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO.

²²² [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 63: AAPSO 14th session.

far. ‘In the past Korea was a backward colonial society’, wrote El-Sharkawi, ‘but now it has become a dignified, independent and sovereign country in the international arena’. The secretary-general continued by saying that Kim ‘brought the status of the Korean people to a high standard by adopting the immortal Juche idea’.²²³ In the ears of African delegates, such praise was a clear endorsement of North Korea over South Korea.

Meanwhile, South Korea hit a brick wall in the arena of Afro-Asian diplomacy. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs used its network of African embassies to monitor North Korea’s successes in AAPSO. Diplomats in Africa were tasked with investigating the composition of North Korean delegations and obtaining draft resolutions and news reports.²²⁴ Nevertheless, the battle for AAPSO was a lost cause for Seoul – the presidium publicly backed Kim Il Sung’s proposals for reunification of the Korean peninsula.²²⁵

The Non-Aligned Movement offered another compelling opportunity for North Korea to influence the narrative on Korean affairs. Established in 1961, the NAM was ‘arguably the most important institution for the Global South during the Cold War’ and was envisaged as a practical outcome of the Bandung Conference.²²⁶ Both Koreas lobbied the NAM for membership, but only North Korea was accepted, joining the organisation in 1975. South Korea’s bid was denied because of the continued presence of American soldiers in Seoul.²²⁷

Again, North Korea benefited from a platform where it could connect with African states. Newly independent African countries often proclaimed themselves as proud members of the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet, non-alignment was ‘not a matter of neutrality’, said Tanzania’s President Nyerere at a NAM event in 1970: ‘By no-alignment we are saying to the Big Powers that we also belong on this planet. We are asserting the right of small nations to determine their own policies’.²²⁸

According to Nate Kerkhoff, North Korea envisioned two goals for its membership to the NAM: the hosting of summits where it could boost Kim Il Sung’s status as a postcolonial leader, and the rallying of support of NAM members in the UN General Assembly. Similar to AAPSO, Kim aimed to persuade the NAM leadership to adopt an anti-South Korea agenda. Initially, North Korea was quite successful in this regard and, in the 1970s, the NAM churned out strongly worded pro-DPRK resolutions.²²⁹ The support of African allies was indispensable. For instance, President Kaunda of Zambia, who sang at Kim’s birthday party, used a keynote speech at a 1976 NAM conference to call for the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea.²³⁰ Machel did the same at a NAM conference in 1986, concluding that ‘Mozambique agrees with the proposals of the DPRK’ regarding reunification.²³¹

An additional benefit of the NAM was that North Korea and African states could try out cooperation in different policy areas thus strengthening their mutual trust. In the 1980s as part of the NAM’s Action Program for Economic Cooperation, North Korea coordinated the domain of scientific and technological development together with Zaire, and coordinated the domain of fisheries together with Mauritania.²³²

²²³ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO: Respected and beloved leader, 7 September 1978.

²²⁴ [DARK] 1448.

²²⁵ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO.

²²⁶ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 41-43.

²²⁷ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 50-51.

²²⁸ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech Nyerere, 13-17 April 1970.

²²⁹ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 53-58.

²³⁰ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, August 1976.

²³¹ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 63: speech Machel, September 1986.

²³² [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation: conference New Delhi, 9-13 February 1981.

North Korea hosted several policy-specific summits for the NAM to which African countries were invited and which resulted in productive bilateral spin-offs. For instance, when a Tanzanian minister visited Pyongyang for a five-day NAM symposium on food and agriculture, he also signed a bilateral protocol for technical assistance between Tanzania and the DPRK.²³³ For Tanzania, North Korea's participation in the NAM was a key argument to support North Korea's reunification proposals and to hold off diplomatic ties with South Korea. British diplomats concluded that the NAM connection was 'a theme well exploited' by the North Korean embassy in Dar es Salaam.²³⁴

Nevertheless, as South Korea ramped up its efforts via economic diplomacy, North Korea slowly 'lost control of the narrative on the Korean question' in the NAM.²³⁵ From the end of the 1970s onwards, Seoul used its developing economy to lobby NAM members and halt Kim Il Sung's diplomatic progress. Kerkhoff thus concludes that North Korea's relevance within the NAM 'lasted only for a few short years'.²³⁶ Ultimately, North Korea failed to bend the NAM to its will.²³⁷ Even so, North Korea's initial success in the first years of the NAM allowed it to build up valuable political capital with African members.

The Pyongyang Conference

In 1987, the NAM met in Pyongyang to discuss the future of South–South cooperation. This Extraordinary Ministerial Conference ran for four days and became known as the Pyongyang Conference.²³⁸ It was a major diplomatic victory for Kim Il Sung, as it cast North Korea as a leading voice in the struggle to create a new world. In his opening speech, Kim gracefully expressed his 'deep gratitude' for Zimbabwe's help in organizing the conference.²³⁹

The Pyongyang Conference had a strong African connection and is a revealing case study of how African and North Korean political elites engaged in worldmaking. Getachew describes worldmaking as 'a project of reordering the world', which aimed to 'create a domination-free and egalitarian international order'. Anticolonial nationalism, as professed by Africans and North Koreans alike, was an ideal that went beyond political self-determination: it demanded the reinvention of the global order.²⁴⁰ African–North Korean cooperation was thus not only useful in the quest to obtain independence, but continued into the postcolonial era.

The decision to organise the NAM conference on South–South cooperation in Pyongyang was made a year earlier in Zimbabwe, at the 8th Non-Aligned Summit in Harare.²⁴¹ In fact, the Harare summit was the very first time that the NAM adopted the term 'South–South cooperation' into a final declaration.²⁴²

Any NAM summit was a site of contestation between the two Koreas. In preparation to push its anti-ROK agenda in Zimbabwe, North Korea extensively courted its African allies in advance. Kim Il Sung reportedly donated \$500,000 to Zimbabwe to support the summit preparations.²⁴³ A range of high-level African political leaders were invited to Pyongyang, in the hope that they would support North Korea at the Harare summit. Visitors included the

²³³ [NAUK] FCO 31/3263: Codrington to Cox, 9 November 1981.

²³⁴ [NAUK] FCO 31/3674: Codrington to Huckle, 2 November 1982.

²³⁵ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 65.

²³⁶ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 41.

²³⁷ [NAUK] FCO 21/2876: Elliot to Wilson, 20 November 1984.

²³⁸ See for extensive documentation of the conference the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea, which closely monitored North Korean activities during the Cold War: [DARK] 25166 (and the next 16 volumes).

²³⁹ Kim 1987, p. 1.

²⁴⁰ Getachew 2019, p. 2.

²⁴¹ [NUL] L968.91005 Z711 v.20: Zimbabwe News, 1989.

²⁴² Soulé-Kohndou 2013.

²⁴³ [NAUK] FCO 21/3602.

president of Tanzania, a Mali government delegation, and Robert Mugabe, the leader of Zimbabwe.²⁴⁴

In 1986, the North Koreans travelled to the NAM summit in Harare with three objectives: obtaining support to co-host the 1988 Olympics with South Korea; proposing Pyongyang as the location for the next foreign ministers meeting; and persuading the summit to adopt anti-ROK proposals in the final declaration. Even though South Korea was not present at the summit – it was not a member, after all – it worked with moderate countries within the NAM to counter these demands.²⁴⁵

North Korea deemed the first objective (co-hosting the Olympics with Seoul) the most important.²⁴⁶ To this end, North Korea pushed the NAM delegates in Harare to endorse a report from a NAM Sports Ministers meeting held earlier in Pyongyang, which recommended exactly this decision. The Zimbabwean hosts had drafted a final declaration urging the implementation of this recommendation but resistance from Egypt (a ROK ally²⁴⁷) ultimately toned down the language. The second objective (hosting the next NAM summit) was equally opposed by South Korean allies and the NAM chose Nicosia (Cyprus) as the next location. However, North Korea was compensated through the offer to organise a conference on South–South cooperation the next year. The third objective (including anti-South Korea clauses in the final summit declaration) was only mildly successful.²⁴⁸

Some historians allege that the outcome of the Harare summit can be interpreted as a prime example of North Korea's 'incompetence in diplomacy'.²⁴⁹ After all, most of its objectives were not met and South Korea was evidently satisfied with the proceedings.²⁵⁰ However, even though the Pyongyang Conference was not the desired summit that North Korea set out to host, it was another opportunity to realise Kim's vision of Pyongyang as the centre of the non-aligned world.²⁵¹ It gave Kim Il Sung a stage to highlight his vision on cooperation in the Global South, at a conference organised around the concept of self-reliance, a theme that was entirely on-brand with North Korea's Juche ideology. Moreover, it was another opportunity to engage with African allies. A consolation prize is still a prize.

Numerous African delegates at the Pyongyang Conference used this platform as a call for help. Kim's comrade Mugabe delivered a powerful statement in which he warned the audience that the situation in Southern Africa was deteriorating. Another speech was provided by Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, the secretary-general of SWAPO, who appealed to the Ministers of the NAM to 'do everything in their power to increase political, diplomatic and material assistance to the national liberation movements'. The United Nations Council for Namibia, represented by the Zambian Peter Zuze, also lobbied for this cause.²⁵²

The outcome of the Pyongyang Conference, the 'Pyongyang Declaration and Plan of Action on South-South Co-operation', was a 22-page blueprint for a new international economic order.²⁵³ The blueprint was centred around the idea of 'self-reliance', a popular term at the time in which we can hear echoes of North Korea's Juche Thought. Among other things,

²⁴⁴ [DARK] 23558.

²⁴⁵ [NAUK] FCO 21/3602: Goodworth to Bowie, 25 September 1986.

²⁴⁶ [SRA] MfS – HA II. Nr. 29133

²⁴⁷ During the establishment of the AAPSO, Egypt was ruled by the anti-imperialist icon Gamal Abdel Nasser. However, during the time of the Harare Summit Egypt was ruled by Hosni Mubarak, a staunch United States ally.

²⁴⁸ [NAUK] FCO 21/3602: Goodworth to Bowie, 25 September 1986.

²⁴⁹ Kerkhoff 2020, p. 65.

²⁵⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/3602: Goodworth to Bowie, 25 September 1986.

²⁵¹ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

²⁵² [UNAM] PA4/1/2/73/22.

²⁵³ [UNDL] A/42/411; [UNDL] TD/339.

the Declaration strongly condemned the apartheid regime in South Africa and repeatedly affirmed its support for SWAPO and the ANC.²⁵⁴

Conclusion

When a delegation of the Zimbabwean parliament visited Kim Il Sung in 1987, Kim emphasised the mutual friendship of their peoples, even though both nations were ‘far from each other geographically’.²⁵⁵ How is it possible that African freedom fighters and North Korean ideologues forged such close bonds, despite their obvious differences and the enormous geographical distance between them?

Ultimately, it was diplomatic competition for UN recognition that brought the inter-Korean rivalry to Africa. The *zeitgeist* mattered, as the revolutionary ferment in Africa, the rise of Afro-Asian solidarity, and non-aligned politics benefited Pyongyang. North Korea was no stranger to African liberation movements through international platforms such as AAPSO and NAM. African guerrilla fighters learned about the ins and outs of the Korean peninsula by virtue of extensive lobbying efforts from Pyongyang and Seoul. AAPSO bulletins and NAM conferences further defined the narrative on the Korean question – one that ostentatiously favoured North Korea.

As a result, the tensions of the Korean peninsula trickled down to Southern Africa and permeated the discourse of the liberation struggles that turned the politics in this region around. SWAPO declared its support for North Korea through resolutions at a party conference in exile.²⁵⁶ FRELIMO and MPLA did the same at their own party conferences.²⁵⁷ Korean reunification was debated in the Zambian parliament dominated by UNIP.²⁵⁸ Bulletins from UNITA and MPLA discussed the Pueblo incident of 1968, when North Korea captured an American navy ship.²⁵⁹ The magazine of MPLA’s army, *Angola in Arms*, proudly mentioned that the *Pyongyang Times* and *Corée Populaire* carried articles about the Angolan struggle.²⁶⁰ North Korea’s messages of support were published in the magazine of ZAPU-PF.²⁶¹ ZANU published photos of the North Korean army in its exile bulletins.²⁶²

Yet, it would go too far to say that the odds were always stacked in North Korea’s favour. In fact, the changing fortunes of both Koreas is a remarkable feature of their rivalry during the twentieth century. At the start, shortly after the Korean War, South Korea had everything going for itself: support from the United Nations; aid from the United States; and recognition from approximately fifty ‘Free World’ countries.²⁶³ North Korea was able to fight its way back from a highly disadvantaged position, despite charges of ‘clumsy and ill-conceived’ diplomacy from American diplomats.²⁶⁴ The key to Pyongyang’s success was Africa.

If we think of inter-Korean competition as a two-horse race, the outcome was never certain.²⁶⁵ The 1970s and 1980s were the high point of North Korea’s standing in Africa. But Kim Il Sung operated as a one-trick pony, who constantly battered on about his desire for

²⁵⁴ [UNAM] PA4/1/2/73/22; [UNDL] A/AC.131/260: 5 October 1987.

²⁵⁵ Kim 2022, p. 39.

²⁵⁶ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: Tanga consultative congress, 26 December 1969 – 2 January 1970.

²⁵⁷ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: Frelimo Party, June 1983; [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: president, 14 January 1985.

²⁵⁸ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, 7 January 1970.

²⁵⁹ [NAI] PC Angola NLM UNITA: Kwacha, January–February 1968.

²⁶⁰ [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: *Angola in Arms*, 15 April 1970.

²⁶¹ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZAPU: *The Zimbabwe People’s Voice*, 31 March 1979.

²⁶² [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: *Zimbabwe News*, ‘Ideological and Revolutionary Education’.

²⁶³ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# A1 1613-A, Box# 3999, POL 24 Nigeria -- POL North Korea-US: Department of State to Kampala, 18 March 1963.

²⁶⁴ [NARA] RG 59, INR, Entry# P 15, Box# 10, AFRICA MISCELLANEOUS: Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Report No. 489, 16 June 1976.

²⁶⁵ Koh 1984, 148-149.

reunification. It worked until it did not. South Korea, after it changed its tactics from a Hallstein Doctrine to a more flexible approach, offered African countries attractive commercial opportunities and skilfully countered North Korea's charm offensive.

The nature of inter-Korean competition changed soon thereafter. In 1991, both Koreas were simultaneously admitted to the United Nations as full members of the UN General Assembly – an achievement that set Korea apart from other divided countries that competed for international recognition during the Cold War, such as the two Chinas, the two Germanies, the two Vietnams, and the two Yemens. While the UN continues to be important for shaping inter-Korean rivalry, for example through the issuing of sanctions against North Korea, the AAPSO and NAM have lost their relevancy in global politics – even though these organisations still exist.

Much of this chapter focused on foreign policy in relation to multilateral fora. Nevertheless, it was ultimately bilateral statecraft that proved to be decisive for the future of the African–North Korean friendship. The following chapters therefore illuminate the three tools that brought Africans and North Koreans closer together – diplomatic travel, doctrine, and development aid.