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

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SURVIVAL
MAINTAINING POWER, 2000–20

A luta continua became the rallying cry of FRELIMO during the Mozambican fight for independence, a slogan that was widely adopted among other liberation movements in the region. The idea that ‘the struggle continues’ can also be applied as a concept for contemporary Southern African politics. From the perspective of the liberation governments that are in power today, the struggle does continue – now with the aim to remain in power indefinitely. It is a desire that causes these once idealistic organisations to become increasingly authoritarian.⁷⁷⁶

The idea of a continued struggle is best observed in practice in Zimbabwe. In the nationalist myth-making of Zimbabwean liberation, the nineteenth-century revolt of indigenous peoples against British colonisation is known as the First *Chimurenga*, a Shona word that means uprising. In the twentieth century, ZANU and ZAPU nationalists framed their opposition against white minority rule as the Second *Chimurenga*. This was effectively the Rhodesian Bush War from 1967–79 that put Mugabe and his ZANU colleagues in power. But when their government came under internal and external pressure to leave office, ZANU officials framed their reforms as the Third *Chimurenga*: ‘the *Chimurenga* became a permanent institution’.⁷⁷⁷ In this sense, liberation discourse is recycled by political elites to fit contemporary political purposes.⁷⁷⁸

ZANU’s authoritarian turn is a sinister development that does not bode well for the future of Southern African politics.⁷⁷⁹ Across the region, the question of what will happen when liberation governments lose power is one with grave consequences. In Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and South Africa, the prevailing governments are gradually losing popular support in consecutive election cycles.⁷⁸⁰ How will these liberation governments respond when it appears that they will lose their parliamentary majority for the first time?

In their appetite to maintain power, African liberation governments again find a reliable partner in North Korea. While the previous phase of consolidating power (1980–2000) was marked by the protection of newly inaugurated African regimes, most prominently through presidential security, the current phase is defined by political survival. Southern African governments face unprecedented levels of opposition while North Korea becomes increasingly isolated.⁷⁸¹ Today, some African governments continue to rely on North Korean military expertise while the resulting hard foreign currency is a lifeline for the North Korean regime. ‘Although the precise income it earned from this trade is subject to debate’, observes the United Nations, ‘there is no question that it is one of the country’s most profitable revenue sources’.⁷⁸² Maintaining power thus has a double meaning: political survival is a motivation for both African states and North Korea.

This chapter considers African–North Korean military cooperation in the time of United Nations sanctions and consists of three sections. The first section illustrates how African states continue their military relationships with North Korea through a number of case studies. The second section offers an analysis of the North Korea’s sanctions evasion in the African continent. The third and final section considers the reasons for African states to trade with North Korea despite international condemnation.⁷⁸³

⁷⁷⁶ Melber 2002.

⁷⁷⁷ Melber 2010, p. 42.

⁷⁷⁸ Ranger 2004; Ndhlovu 2021.

⁷⁷⁹ Kriger 2005.

⁷⁸⁰ Blaauw and Zaire 2023.

⁷⁸¹ Blaauw and Zaire 2023, p. 3.

⁷⁸² UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁷⁸³ Parts of this chapter are based on Van der Hoog 2022b.

Sanctions Evasion

International pressure on North Korea's deviant behaviour, most notably the launch of a highly controversial nuclear programme, resulted in the most extensive sanctions regime in world history. In 2006, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1718, which condemned North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes and forbade the international community from dealing with North Korea's conventional weapons, missiles, and nuclear industries.

The 2006 arms embargo was broadened in 2009 by UNSC resolution 1874, which included 'all arms and related materiel, as well as financial transactions, technical training, advice, services or assistance related to the provision, manufacture, maintenance or use of such arms or materiel'.⁷⁸⁴ Individual countries, such as the United States and Japan, but also the European Union, have implemented additional sanctions regimes.⁷⁸⁵

Despite these efforts, several Southern African countries continued to engage with North Korea. In 2008, two years after the first UN sanctions, the highest-ranking North Korean delegation in years travelled to Africa 'in an apparent bid to expand economic and trade cooperation as well as to break [the] country's diplomatic isolation'. Angola and Namibia were among the visited countries. The 23-member delegation, led by Kim Yong Nam (Kim Yǒng-nam), was met by the respective presidents (Eduardo dos Santos and Hifikepunye Pohamba) and agreements were signed, which were rumoured to contain pledges of arms export and manpower.⁷⁸⁶

The political scientist Bruce Bechtol concludes that 'when it comes to proliferation of arms to other nations, North Korea has turned this into an art form'.⁷⁸⁷ North Korea is an 'adaptable marketer' and uses a mixture of state-owned companies, high-level political visits, and locally based embassy staff to push its military exports in Africa.⁷⁸⁸ While North Korean military activities are generally secretive and difficult to track, they are not indecipherable. The internet offers access to many things, including English-language catalogues of North Korean arms companies.⁷⁸⁹

Especially the reports of the UN Panel of Experts are an underrated source for the study of African–North Korean ties. The Panel was established in 2009 to monitor the UN sanctions regime against North Korea and produces annual reports that include fascinating details about North Korea's criminal exploits. Ten years after the first UN sanctions against North Korea, the Panel noted that the country 'continues to exploit long-standing military relationships in Africa'.⁷⁹⁰ These relationships span the entire continent. This section illustrates the ongoing clandestine military alliance between Southern Africa and North Korea through case studies from Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola, and Namibia.

The UN has implicated Tanzania, the former Frontline State and key ally of Kim Il Sung in his diplomatic offensive in Southern Africa, in several North Korean arms deals. In 2013, it was discovered that 18 North Korean technicians resided at the Mwanza Air Force Base to lend their

⁷⁸⁴ UN PoE S/2010/571.

⁷⁸⁵ Berger 2016a; Ballbach 2022.

⁷⁸⁶ Kim Yong Nam was President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly and previously served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. [SNU] Vantage Point: Vol. 31, No. 4, April 2008.

⁷⁸⁷ Bechtol 2018.

⁷⁸⁸ Berger 2016a.

⁷⁸⁹ Berger 2016a.

⁷⁹⁰ UN PoE S/2016/157.

services to the Tanzanian People's Defence Force Air Wing.⁷⁹¹ North Korea was hired to refurbish several F-7 fighter jets. A few years later, in 2017, Tanzania reportedly made a deal with the North Korean Haegeumgang Trading Corporation for the repairing and upgrading of surface-to-air missile Pechora (S-125) systems and a P-12 air defence radar. This deal was valued at €10.49 million. Again, the North Korean advisors that were outsourced for this job resided at a Tanzanian military facility. Haegeumgang Trading Corporation was also active in neighbouring Mozambique, where it upgraded the same type of air defence systems.⁷⁹² As is common in many African countries, Tanzania failed to respond to critical enquiries from the United Nations.⁷⁹³

Mozambique acknowledged that, between 2012–17, six North Korean nationals travelled to 'remote civil-military airfields with nearby military bases'. The precise reason for their journey remains unclear, but is not unthinkable that they were selling their expertise. The North Koreans were working for two North Korean arms companies that were designated by the United Nations for breaking the sanctions regime. It was also discovered that a North Korean representative of Haegeumgang Trading Corporation, another sanctioned arms corporation, was stationed in Mozambique, although he was formally accredited to the North Korean embassy in South Africa.⁷⁹⁴

In 2018, the UN investigated a \$6 million contract between Haegeumgang Trading Corporation and the Mozambican company Monte Binga for 'surface-to-air missiles, P-12 air defence radar, tank refurbishment and man-portable air defence systems'.⁷⁹⁵ Although the UN is in the possession of the military contract and photographs of technicians of the Korean People's Army standing in front of refurbished tanks in Mozambique,⁷⁹⁶ Mozambique did not respond to a request for information from the UN in 2019.⁷⁹⁷

In 2011, Angola was reported to have imported spare parts and equipment for submarines and military boats from the sanctioned North Korean company Green Pine Associated Corporation.⁷⁹⁸ An anonymised member state reported to the UN Panel of Experts that approximately eighty North Koreans were based in the country to train the presidential guard and other units. It was alleged that, in 2017, this group had travelled from Angola to an unknown destination to conduct a military advisory mission, but this has been denied by the Angolan government. Nevertheless, the UN confirmed the presence of Green Pine representatives in Angola.⁷⁹⁹ A North Korean diplomat accredited to Angola (who turned out to be working on behalf of Green Pine) was expelled from the country in 2017 following UN pressure.⁸⁰⁰ After

⁷⁹¹ UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁷⁹² While Tanzania reported that it had terminated their business relationship with Haegeumgang in 2014, it was alleged by the UN that the military cooperation was resumed in 2016. UN PoE S/2018/171.

⁷⁹³ UN PoE S/2019/171.

⁷⁹⁴ UN PoE S/2017/150; UN PoE S/2018/171; UN PoE S/2019/171.

⁷⁹⁵ UN PoE S/2018/171.

⁷⁹⁶ UN PoE S/2017/150.

⁷⁹⁷ UN PoE S/2019/171.

⁷⁹⁸ UN PoE S/2016/157.

⁷⁹⁹ It seems that Green Pine was using Angola as a base for international operations, as several North Korean diplomats in Angola travelled multiple times to Sri Lanka in order to discuss the building and sale of naval patrol vessels. UN PoE S/2017/150.

⁸⁰⁰ UN PoE S/2019/171.

much insistence, the Angolan government considered the presence of North Korean nationals in Luanda ‘to be in excessive numbers’ and vowed to gradually reduce it.⁸⁰¹

In recent years, Namibia has gained notoriety for hiring the North Korean art studio Mansudae Overseas Projects (MOP). Using North Korean forced labour, MOP has constructed several highly visible buildings in Windhoek, including the presidential palace and a history museum.⁸⁰² The UN revealed that the construction company was also active in military projects and was connected to KOMID, a sanctioned North Korean arms company. It turns out that MOP was also involved in the construction of the headquarters of the Namibian Ministry of Defence, a munitions factory in Windhoek (with the aim to produce small arms ammunitions of 7.62 mm calibre), the Military Academy, and military bases.⁸⁰³

Furthermore, KOMID exported pressure tanks and machinery to the Namibian Defence Force in 2012, material that ‘could be used for military explosives and production of propellants’.⁸⁰⁴ Two North Korean diplomats from the North Korean embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, were operating as KOMID representatives in Namibia. Although they were officially accredited in Pretoria as Second and Third Secretary of the embassy, travel records showed that they spent most of their time in Windhoek.⁸⁰⁵ Following international pressure, Namibia terminated the remaining construction contracts with MOP, sold their vehicles and equipment in an auction, and repatriated 242 North Korean nationals in 2017.⁸⁰⁶

Patterns

Many nodes in the North Korean illicit networks that span the globe are relatively overlooked, claims Bechtol, and ‘this is true nowhere more so than the continent of Africa’.⁸⁰⁷ One important aspect of this network is the North Korean embassies in the African continent. The North Korean companies that violate UN sanctions are often supported by North Korean diplomats, who can travel on diplomatic passports and are less likely to be checked at customs.

In Southern Africa, the North Korean network of traditional embassies (which includes missions in South Africa and Tanzania), is supplemented by trade offices in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.⁸⁰⁸ Such hubs are not bound to servicing only a single country but perform transnational or even regional roles. There are hundreds of North Korean trade companies active in the world and many, if not all, depend on diplomatic support.⁸⁰⁹

An exiled North Korean diplomat with extensive working experience in Africa told me that the illicit activities of North Korean diplomats can be explained through the concept of self-help. His former colleagues in the North Korean diplomatic service know that earning hard foreign currency sustains the diplomatic post that they occupy. Moreover, generating money may result in medals or other favours back home in Pyongyang. If diplomats outperform their peers in terms of finding revenue, they may even be allowed to stay longer abroad than the usual three years. For many North Koreans, this is a desirable objective as the living conditions within their home country are dire.⁸¹⁰

⁸⁰¹ UN PoE S/2018/171.

⁸⁰² Van der Hoog 2019a.

⁸⁰³ UN PoE S/2016/157.

⁸⁰⁴ UN PoE S/2017/150.

⁸⁰⁵ UN PoE S/2016/157.

⁸⁰⁶ UN PoE S/2018/171; UN PoE S/2019/171.

⁸⁰⁷ Bechtold 2018.

⁸⁰⁸ UN PoE S/2013/337.

⁸⁰⁹ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

⁸¹⁰ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

This system of self-help was largely unnecessary during the Cold War, when the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs had enough cash to fund embassies across the African continent. However, since the disastrous years of the famine and economic collapse of the 1990s, this system has become crucial for maintaining the status quo of North Korea's diplomatic structures – and, of course, for stuffing the revolutionary coffers of the Kim family. For example, when Kim Jong Un came to power and ordered the construction of flats for 10,000 households, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pyongyang ordered all diplomatic posts to supply anything they could: cash, but also building materials. When Kim Jong Un wanted to expand the Pyongyang Zoo, the embassy in South Africa managed to obtain several lions. Those diplomats received a hero's welcome when they returned back home.⁸¹¹

North Korean diplomats 'continue to play key roles' in facilitating illegitimate activities in Africa.⁸¹² Among the standard tasks of North Korean embassies in Africa are accommodating trade companies from Pyongyang and maintaining ties with the domestic military industry.⁸¹³ The analyst Andrea Berger notes that 'embassy staff representatives have on many occasions been caught facilitating arms deals'.⁸¹⁴ In addition to brokering services, the UN observes that North Korean diplomats 'often serve as shipping companies' agents or cash carriers'.⁸¹⁵ Moreover, North Korean officials have also been accused of dealing in counterfeited US dollars, methamphetamine, and ivory (see Chapter 15 for more details).⁸¹⁶

UN reports show that North Korea is incredibly skilled in circumventing sanctions by using 'increasingly sophisticated and diversified techniques'.⁸¹⁷ Recurring patterns include the extensive use of shell companies and front companies, which makes it difficult to trace individual companies as these often comprise numerous local subsidiaries and carry different names. Furthermore, North Korean trade can be facilitated through the use of local banks and the endorsement of local political elites.

The majority of recorded illicit North Korean transport involves containerised cargo. North Korean merchant ships use flags or maritime mobile service identity numbers from African countries while carrying out illegal operations.⁸¹⁸ The transport of prohibited goods is also facilitated through regular cargo services or chartered cargo flights.⁸¹⁹ In 2009, Ethiopian Airlines transported five tonnes of North Korean arms material through regular passenger flights, including tank engines and armoured vehicles.⁸²⁰

There is a difference between North Korean brokers who reside long-term in Africa and outsourced laborers. The brokers – diplomats or businessmen – are locally grounded. They usually stay in one place or region for several years, speak the *lingua franca*, and they know how to navigate local politics, businesses, and other stakeholders.⁸²¹ This is further illustrated in Chapter 15, through a discussion of North Korean businessmen in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In contrast, the North Korean instructors, technicians, or other kinds of labourers who are exported for specific projects usually have much less space to move around. A UN investigation from 2014 showed that, in the Republic of Congo, two refurbishment teams were lodged in secret compounds to ensure confidentiality. The teams were 'self-sufficient in terms

⁸¹¹ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

⁸¹² UN PoE S/2015/131.

⁸¹³ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

⁸¹⁴ Berger 2016a.

⁸¹⁵ UN PoE S/2015/131.

⁸¹⁶ [SNU] Vantage Point: Vol. 23, No. 5, May 2000; Chestnut 2007.

⁸¹⁷ UN PoE S/2016/157.

⁸¹⁸ Bechtold 2019; UN PoE S/2021/211.

⁸¹⁹ UN PoE S/2013/337.

⁸²⁰ UN PoE S/2013/337.

⁸²¹ The Sentry 2020.

of food and medical care with embedded cooks, doctors, and interpreters and virtually all food and supplies' came from the DPRK. Personnel rarely left the compound and were not rotated for years at a time in order to reduce expenses and increase secrecy.⁸²²

The UN noted that non-military sources of income – such as construction projects or medical cooperation – could be used to disguise the earnings from military activities.⁸²³ While it is true that China is occasionally complicit in North Korean illegal ventures in Africa,⁸²⁴ North Korea oversees its own foreign policy.⁸²⁵ In that sense, the modus operandi remains the same as during the Cold War. North Korean activities in Africa no longer fit the description of 'two persons and a fax machine', observes the UN, but are part of a 'relatively mature, complex and international corporate ecosystem'.⁸²⁶

African Motives for Engagement

It is a safe assumption that the case studies that are covered at the start of this chapter – concerning Tanzanian F-7 fighter jets, Mozambican air defence systems, and Namibian munitions factories – only scratch the surface of North Korean military activities in Southern Africa. Future UN reports and media investigations will likely unearth new evidence of sanction-busting activities.

The United Nations Panel of Experts detected 'a general distaste for implementing sanctions regimes' in several countries.⁸²⁷ In the past decade, the majority of Southern African states (including Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) repeatedly failed to submit national implementation reports or did not respond to specific enquiries from the Panel.⁸²⁸ The UN noted that the proportion on non-reporting states is 'higher in regions with a long history of cooperation' with the DPRK, which aptly describes Southern Africa.⁸²⁹

It is significant that North Korea seems to favour locations with historic business and political connections, as is the case in Southern Africa.⁸³⁰ Shell companies often change and supply chains are thus complex,⁸³¹ but the 'trusted foreign parties' of North Korea remain the same for years.⁸³² Even though the United Nations estimates that its sanctions have cost North Korea 'hundreds of millions of dollars' in lost revenue, North Korea is largely immune to external pressure on its military programmes.⁸³³

It is therefore more effective, according to Berger, to concentrate on the demand-side, by making 'North Korea and its products less appealing from the perspective of potential consumers'.⁸³⁴ But why do African countries ignore UN sanctions against North Korea? This book offers three reasons why African countries continue to engage with North Korea: historical affinity (reciprocity), the practical issue of maintenance dependency (necessity), and the presence of weak enforcement regimes (opportunity).

⁸²² UN PoE S/2015/131. These findings concur with our recent investigations on North Korean forced labour around the world, see Breuker and Van Gardingen 2018.

⁸²³ [SNU] Vantage Point: Vol. 36, No. 4, April 2013; UN PoE S/2020/151.

⁸²⁴ Young 2021b.

⁸²⁵ Ko 2022.

⁸²⁶ UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁸²⁷ UN PoE S/2012/422.

⁸²⁸ Berger 2016a; Bechtol 2018; UN PoE S/2023/171.

⁸²⁹ UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁸³⁰ UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁸³¹ See for a comprehensive summary: UN PoE S/2010/571.

⁸³² UN PoE S/2015/131.

⁸³³ UN PoE S/2020/151

⁸³⁴ Berger 2016a.

The first reason is *reciprocity* and revolves around historical relationships. The North Korean assistance of the twentieth century is ingrained in the institutional memory of Southern African liberation movements. Chapter 3 of this book described how African leaders travelled to Pyongyang in search of support. Sam Nujoma thanked Kim Il Sung in 1986 for his ‘practical material assistance’, after which Kim assured him that North Korea ‘will firmly stand by you in the future too’.⁸³⁵ This is exactly what happened after Namibia became independent, as North Korea offered training services, military hardware, and construction expertise.

Nujoma’s words were far from uncommon across Southern Africa and beyond. Several contemporary African leaders justify contemporary military relations with North Korea by referring to the historical relations of the past. In 2014, the Ugandan president and dictator Yoweri Museveni praised North Korea’s assistance in the training of police officers. During a graduation ceremony of new recruits, Museveni said to the journalists in his audience: ‘The DPRK always gives us technical support – I do not see any problem with them’.⁸³⁶ Years earlier, in 1969, Museveni (then a guerrilla leader) received military training in Pyongyang, a milestone in his rise to the Ugandan presidency. ‘It was the first time I had ever handled a weapon’, Museveni recalled in his autobiography.⁸³⁷

The second reason is *necessity* and revolves around maintenance dependency. Contemporary African armies occasionally rely upon the repair services of North Korea, as they continue to use outdated military hardware from the Cold War era. The previous chapter highlighted how African liberation governments benefited from North Korean weapons and training during the Cold War, which was often provided for free or cheaply. As time moves on, this material is prone to wearing out and breaking down; and is therefore in need of repair or an upgrade. Who better to hire than North Korea?

Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has maintained a profitable niche in the global arms market through the ‘repair, servicing and provision of spare parts for ageing communist-bloc systems’.⁸³⁸ It has an important advantage because a dwindling number of competitors offer similar services when it comes to vintage equipment.⁸³⁹ In 2007, it was discovered that North Koreans were working in an Ethiopian arms factory that produced AK-47 rifles – the same factory had been set up by the North Koreans in the 1980s.⁸⁴⁰ Moreover, North Korea has a reputation for selling its services at very competitive prices. Berger quotes an Ethiopian minister who explained that North Korea priced its goods 50% cheaper than China.⁸⁴¹ This attracts African countries that consider buying brand-new weapon systems as ‘prohibitively costly’.⁸⁴²

The third reason is *opportunity* and revolves around weak enforcement regimes. North Korea is aided by African countries’ lax attitude vis-à-vis the United Nations.⁸⁴³ The UN argued that a ‘lack of awareness and understanding’ of the sanction regime allows North Korea to exploit its relationships ‘with African countries for arms-related services and training’.⁸⁴⁴

This was demonstrated in 2014 when the South African authorities intercepted a ship destined for the Republic of Congo.⁸⁴⁵ The cargo was labelled as ‘spare parts of bulldozers’ but

⁸³⁵ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 47-49.

⁸³⁶ Berger 2016b, p. 101.

⁸³⁷ Museveni 1997, p. 32.

⁸³⁸ Berger 2016b, p. 105.

⁸³⁹ UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁸⁴⁰ Berger 2016a, p. 46.

⁸⁴¹ Berger 2016b, p. 116.

⁸⁴² Berger 2016b, p. 120.

⁸⁴³ Mallory 2021.

⁸⁴⁴ UN PoE S/2015/131.

⁸⁴⁵ UN PoE S/2015/131.

in fact contained spare parts for T-54/T-55 military tanks.⁸⁴⁶ These so-called ‘knock-down kits’ are a tried and tested method of North Korea to conceal arms export.⁸⁴⁷ At least this ship was caught, but the UN identified at least three other previous deliveries, which illustrates that it was not an isolated incident.⁸⁴⁸

In many cases, local regulatory authorities in African countries – such as port officials, customs offices at airports, or bank regulators – are subject to underfunding or political pressure, and subsequently fail to consider North Korea as a high priority. But even in the rare cases when whistle-blowers expose criminal behaviour, the results are distressing. Two Congolese auditors revealed that a Congolese bank hosted the bank accounts of two North Korean businessmen but were punished for their bravery (this incident is explored in Chapter 15). In 2020, the High Court of Kinshasa sentenced them to death – both men had already fled the country and found refuge in exile, in Europe.⁸⁴⁹ This sets a chilling precedent throughout the African continent.

Conclusion

North Korea has mastered the art of survival, despite immense internal and external pressure. In that sense, it is an inspiration for African regimes that strive to do the same. This book seeks to lift the veil of the shadowy world of North Korean operations in Africa – not just by describing what happens, but *why* it happens. For this, the shared history of the liberation struggle is indispensable.

In 2002, the historian Stephen Ellis dared contemporary historians to think about the present character of Africa. He wrote that today is no longer the age of national liberation or national development, but concluded that ‘the discussion is open as to what sort of an age it really is’.⁸⁵⁰ I would argue that, in the case of Southern Africa, the start of the twenty-first century can be defined by the political survival of African liberation movements that have held on to power since independence.

Across the Southern African region, a party–military complex of liberation governments and the military defies the popular challenge to enduring rule by emphasising their heroic role in the struggle, a fight that, in a way, continues up until this day.⁸⁵¹ In 1972, Agostinho Neto urged his followers to continue the armed struggle ‘in the future, after political independence, in order to be completely free’. He not only desired political independence, but also economic and social independence. This ambition required a continuous revolution.⁸⁵²

African citizens sometimes loosely transliterate the famous rallying cry of the past, *A luta continua*, as *the looting continues*. It is a scathing critique on today’s political elites, who seem mainly interested in enriching themselves rather than the idealistic values of the past.

African authoritarian leaders consider North Korea as a suitable partner in crime, a state that is also led by political elites who favour survival above all else. It is my impression that, today, North Korean businessmen and diplomats in Africa are chasing ad hoc and relatively small-scale profits instead of large, long-term contracts. In short, the modus operandi of many North Korean operatives appears to be opportunistic trade that exploits historic relationships, maintenance dependency, and weak enforcement. Rather than a top-down approach directed from Pyongyang, it is more likely that we are witnessing a certain bottom-up approach to trade, one that is informed by local incentives.

⁸⁴⁶ UN PoE S/2010/571.

⁸⁴⁷ UN PoE S/2010/571.

⁸⁴⁸ UN PoE S/2012/422.

⁸⁴⁹ PPLAAF, available at: <https://www.pplaaf.org/whistleblowers/koko-malela.html#>.

⁸⁵⁰ Ellis 2002.

⁸⁵¹ Southall 2013.

⁸⁵² [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: speech Neto, December 1972.

The North Korean embassy system is a decentralised system of foreign missions that operate as companies and seek to earn money whenever the opportunity arises. The need for survival is also a motivating factor for traditional North Korean businesses, or even for the North Korean doctors who reside across the African continent, from Mali to Mozambique.⁸⁵³

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on African–North Korean networks is uncertain. Given the fact that North Korea sealed off its borders in an attempt to keep the virus out, it is conceivable that the distance between Pyongyang and North Korean nationals residing in Africa was widened considerably. This blockade prevented the repatriation of overseas workers, which may have been another incentive for North Korean operatives to find ways to earn cash, as the need for survival increased.⁸⁵⁴ In 2023, North Korea’s announcement that it would close several embassies, including in Angola, indicated economic trouble.⁸⁵⁵ Income from abroad is of vital importance for the North Korean regime and UN sanctions make this endeavour more difficult. Nevertheless, a UN report from 2024 predicts that ‘once the border reopens further, North Korea is expected to send a large number of additional workers overseas’.⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵³ NK News, 31 March 2022 (a).

⁸⁵⁴ UN PoE S/2022/132.

⁸⁵⁵ NK News, 1 November 2023.

⁸⁵⁶ UN PoE S/2024/215.