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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Korean diplomacy in Africa: Three phases of Korea–Africa relations

Suweon Kim and Tycho van der Hoog

INTRODUCTION

Most people will have heard of Vasco da Gama's voyage to Africa in the late 1400s, an iconic moment in Europe–Africa relations. People with an interest in China–Africa relations may even know of Zheng He's travels to Africa in the early 1400s. However, not many people are aware that the oldest world map depicting the complete configuration of the African continent emanates from the Korean peninsula. The Kangnido map (short for *Honil gangni yeokdae gukdo jido*) was drawn up in 1402 during the Joseon Dynasty and even predates Zheng He's trip to Africa. What is even more interesting is that the map was not meant to be used for a cross-continental voyage. It was rather a symbolic gesture to legitimise the new kingdom of Korea by showcasing its cultural and scientific prowess and placing Korea on the world map (Oh 2016).

This chapter describes the lesser-known yet significant relations between the Korean peninsula and the African continent, with special attention given to the inter-Korean rivalry for diplomatic recognition that existed during the second half of the 20th century.

For over a thousand years, the Korean peninsula was a unified state.

Since the Silla state (57–939) formed the first unified kingdom in the 7th century on the Korean peninsula, two more Korean dynasties ruled the land before the imposition of Japanese colonial occupation: Goryeo (939–1392) and Joseon (1392–1910). Between 1910 and 1945, the Empire of Japan annexed the peninsula and implemented a brutal form of oppressive rule. The surrender of Japan at the end of World War II resulted in the end of Japanese rule in Korea, but this was immediately followed by the division of the peninsula. The United States (US) and the Soviet Union, the superpowers at the time, partitioned Korea into two spheres of influence. While the division was meant to be a temporary measure, two separate independent states were announced in 1948: the Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korea, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea. The Korean War (1950–1953), during which the DPRK invaded the ROK but was pushed back by a US-led coalition of United Nations (UN) forces, ended in a stalemate and thus reinforced the original division of a few years before.

Following the armistice of the Korean War, both sides of the peninsula competed with each other for international recognition as the one true Korea. Their primary goal was to gain legitimacy as a rightful government through admission into the UN as a full member. In order to achieve this, they were in need of allies. The decolonisation of the African continent in the second half of the 20th century led to a steady rise of the Africa bloc in the UN General Assembly. The DPRK and the ROK recognised that African countries could sway UN votes on a Korea-related resolution and therefore launched elaborate diplomatic campaigns on the continent to win over African governments.

Existing scholarship on Korea–Africa diplomacy is usually focused on either one of the two Koreas in relation to Africa. The recent increase in South Korean diplomacy in Africa has been followed by the development of African Studies as a full-fledged academic field in South Korea (Chang 2020). Over the years, several studies have probed South Korean activities in Africa. These studies include historical–political analyses of the progression of Seoul's Africa strategy (Cho 2018; Hwang 2008; Lee 2020), the impact of South Korean development aid and trade (Darracq and Neville 2014; Kim and Gray 2016), and the popularity of South Korean soft power across Africa (Kim 2021). In terms of North Korea–Africa relations, Ryu (2022) notes a similar upsurge in academic interest in recent years. Scholars have examined (Park 1978; Owwoye 1991; Young 2015) and honed in on specific bilateral

case studies, including Botswana, Zimbabwe and Egypt (Bergendorff 2023; Choi and Jeong 2017; Manatsha 2018).

In general terms, much attention is given to North Korean soft power in Africa, such as the dissemination of Juche ideology (Dobrzaniecki 2019; Van der Hoog 2022c), the construction of monuments (Che 2022; Kirkwood 2013; Van der Hoog 2019) and the provision of development aid (Van der Hoog 2022a). Comparatively little scholarship has been devoted to studying the interaction between both Koreas in Africa, with a few exceptions that focus on the Cold War era (Park 1978) and thus exclude contemporary developments.

We argue that Korean foreign policies towards Africa can best be understood by (1) studying how the agendas of the ROK and the DPRK interacted, and (2) embracing a longer-term perspective that appreciates the historical roots of modern forms of cooperation. The onset and demise of the Cold War played a critical role in the development of Korea–Africa relations. Today, the Korean peninsula remains highly visible in Africa. Giant heroic statues designed by North Korean art studios celebrate African independence in numerous capital cities across the continent. At the same time, African audiences are glued to television screens and mobile phones watching and listening to South Korean TV shows and music. Hence, we examine the broader regional and international political contexts to explain the changes in Korean foreign policies towards Africa over several decades.

In the mainstream – and increasingly outdated – conceptualisation of the Cold War as a bipolar struggle between the US and the Soviet Union, smaller states such as North Korea and South Korea are doomed to be regarded as proxies of the two hegemons. However, in recent years, a burgeoning literature on the ‘Global Cold War’ emphasises the agency of smaller actors and thus broadens our understanding of the second half of the 20th century (Westad 2005). In this chapter, we view the two Koreas not as pawns but as players in the Cold War which advanced their foreign policy agendas in Africa with the aim of advancing their own goals. We consider this form of South–South cooperation to be an important addition to the literature on African–Asian relations, a field that seems to be dominated by a focus on China.

This chapter follows the transformation of the Korean rivalry in Africa by periodising Korea–Africa relations into three significant phases. The first phase (1953–1972) was marked by North Korean success and South Korean isolation. Pyongyang’s message of anti-imperialist solidarity resonated with

several African states, whereas South Korea was limited by a restrictive foreign policy strategy. The second phase (1972–1990) was influenced by the Sino–American détente that caused South Korea to change its strategy and ramp up its diplomatic efforts in Africa. The third and current phase (1990–the present) is a reverse image of the first phase: while Seoul is an attractive partner for African governments on account of its economic prosperity and soft power, North Korea seems largely isolated or is engaged in illicit activities that are prohibited by UN sanctions.

PHASE ONE (1953–1972)

In the wake of the utter destruction wrought by the Korean War, the struggle between South Korea and North Korea continued through diplomatic means. As their rivalry moved from the battlefield to the corridors of the UN, both Koreas gradually realised that it was of paramount importance to find allies beyond their principal supporters (the US for South Korea, the Soviet Union and China for North Korea). At first, South Korea enjoyed a comfortable position in the UN, the world body that regularly discussed Korea-related matters (Park 1978). The UN had defended South Korea against North Korea during the Korean War and initially recognised it as the only legitimate state on the peninsula (Pak 2021). However, the wave of decolonisation that swept across the world dramatically altered the composition of the UN General Assembly as new members were added on a regular basis (Lee 2010). In particular, the African continent became an important focus area in the UN, which impacted discussions about the future of the Korean peninsula. As this section shows, both Koreas responded by deploying different foreign policy strategies towards Africa.

South Korea's initial attitude towards the African continent was dormant or passive. There were only a few African member countries in the UN in the 1950s, namely Ethiopia, Liberia, Egypt, South Africa, Libya, Sudan and Ghana. As most of them were considered pro-West, the South Korean government felt that it did not have sufficient reasons to engage with those African countries (Yoo and Seol 2015). North Korea, in contrast, was quick to recognise the diplomatic potential of the African continent as anti-colonial fervour promised the liberation of dozens of new states. As such, North Korea took the initiative in Africa and overwhelmingly outperformed South Korea in building diplomatic relations with newly independent states. Young states in Africa looked at North Korea with much interest as the country was placing itself at the forefront of anti-imperialist struggles.

Its colonial history and successful resistance against the US during the Korean War, together with a remarkable post-war economic recovery, made the DPRK both recognisable and appealing to African elites (Van der Hoog 2025).

Even though North Korea is often associated with the Soviet Union and China, it developed an independent foreign policy in Africa (Owoeye 1991). North Korea combined an ideological outlook to the world with strategic motives based on anti-imperialist and socialist ideas. Its overtures to independent African countries can best be viewed as an investment in the future. Recognition from African countries would bolster Kim Il-sung's claim that the DPRK was the only legitimate Korean state and, by extension, would enhance Kim's own domestic position as a charismatic ruler. North Korea thus quickly established diplomatic relations with African states as soon as they became independent. In other cases, North Korea supported national liberation movements when the liberation struggle became a protracted liberation war, especially in southern Africa (Van der Hoog 2019).

Cultural diplomacy was an important dimension of North Korea's Africa policy. A crucial tool was the establishment of Juche Study Centres, the first of which was founded in Mali in 1969. Juche was the official ideology of the DPRK and stressed the importance of self-reliance, a message that resonated in African capitals. The Juche Study Centres placed Kim Il-sung in the foreground as the most important figure in post-colonial development (Myers 2015). North Korea established Juche Study Centres in approximately thirty countries across the continent, though most centres appeared to be active in West Africa. The centres organised public discussions on texts from Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, which were translated into English and French, as well as African languages such as Swahili or Afrikaans. In addition, North Korean newspapers and magazines were translated and distributed to African audiences. Occasionally, the Juche Study Centres (often in conjunction with North Korean embassies) organised film shows and photo exhibitions, which showcased the promises of a socialist paradise in North Korea (Van der Hoog 2022c).

Another key diplomatic instrument of North Korea was its 'invitation diplomacy', which brought influential African elites to Pyongyang to experience the impressive economic growth and political organisation of the DPRK (Park 1978). Virtually all first-generation leaders of independent African nations visited Pyongyang before or after they took office, often

several times. Upon their arrival, the African leaders were welcomed by thunderous crowds, were taken on tours around the city and were guests at banquets held in their honour. In addition to political leaders, North Korea invited African journalists, policymakers, party officials and students for specific conferences, training or scholarships (Van der Hoog 2019). Kim Il-sung, however, visited the African continent only once, when he toured around Algeria and Mauritania in 1975 (Suh 1988).

The North Korean successes in Africa worried South Korean officials, as they feared that they would lose ground in UN discussions and resulting votes. South Korea's Africa policy was, however, hampered by limited diplomatic capacities, a tainted image and a restrictive strategy. Seoul did not invest nearly as much as North Korea did in African diplomacy, for the simple reason that it lacked money. Whereas North Korea's post-war economic reconstruction inspired awe, South Korea lagged behind. Its economy (and national security) was highly dependent on the US. Between 1950 and 1960, a total of US\$2.41 billion in aid was given to South Korea by international donors, out of which US\$1.8 billion came from the US (C. Kim 2009). Seoul therefore initially lacked sufficient manpower and resources to spend in Africa. In addition, non-aligned or socialist African countries tended to dislike South Korea's politics. Seoul's dependence on the US was not beneficial for its image in Africa, as the US was highly unpopular for its Jim Crow laws, the Vietnam War and interference in the decolonisation of the continent. Moreover, South Korea was ruled by a right-wing dictatorship that was condemned by many African countries (Chung 2003). North Korea, in contrast, skilfully exploited its image as an anti-colonial power that pursued socialist policies.

PHASE TWO (1972–1990)

The second phase of Korean diplomatic competition in Africa commenced in 1972 with the Sino-American *détente*. For several decades, the US did not recognise the People's Republic of China. The US tried to isolate the government in Beijing and instead fostered relations with the Republic of China government in Taiwan. In 1972, the momentous visit of the US president Richard Nixon to Beijing heralded a new era of easing tensions between the two states. For South Korea, the rapprochement between the US and China, its socialist adversary, provided an opportunity to follow suit and change its foreign policy towards pro-North Korea countries in Africa (Lyong 2020).

Soon after the start of the Sino–American détente, the South Korean government announced the June 23 Declaration, a foreign policy shift from rigid anti-communism to more flexibility in selecting international partners. This allowed for a more flexible approach towards Africa. South Korea changed its tactics and ramped up its diplomatic activities on the African continent. A revealing example is that of Gabon, which had established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1962 and diplomatic ties with North Korea in 1974. Instead of severing its relations with Gabon, as it would have done earlier, the South Korean government invited the president of Gabon to Seoul. The South Korean prime minister formed a task force to prepare for the state visit and mobilised hundreds of thousands of citizens for the arrival ceremony of El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba. Kia, Korea’s automobile manufacturer, even launched a new van named Bongo following the state visit. Similarly, South Korea established diplomatic ties with Sudan while the latter had already established a diplomatic relationship with North Korea. Nevertheless, South Korea’s Africa policy was responsive at best and a long-term foreign policy goal was largely ‘missing’ in Park Chung-hee’s regime in the 1970s (H. Lee 2009a).

Yet South Korea’s foreign policy diversification for Africa continued to move forward in the 1980s. South Korea’s president, Chun Doo-hwan, visited Kenya, Senegal, Gabon and Nigeria for the first time in 1982. The visit expanded South Korea’s diplomatic partners and led to the establishment of diplomatic ties with socialist states in Africa, such as Somalia, Zambia, Mali and Togo. However, the interest in Africa quickly died out after the presidential visit and failed to yield meaningful diplomatic gains, as this expansive drive was not guided by a clearly defined diplomatic strategy (H. Lee 2009b). Despite these setbacks, South Korea was steadily growing its presence in Africa, thereby countering to some extent North Korea’s earlier successes. North Korea, during this time, reaped the benefits of its diplomatic investments by providing development aid and military support to several African partners. The outcomes of this diplomatic engagement were only possible because of the mutual trust that had been established during the first phase, when North Korea had invested in cultural diplomacy.

Development aid became a central instrument of North Korean foreign policy, as it was a cost-effective way to deepen relations with African states and to boost North Korea’s global image as a leader of the non-Western world. At least twenty newly independent countries accepted North Korean aid during this era, which the DPRK framed as a prime example of South–

South cooperation. This mostly included agricultural aid. North Korean technical advisors were sent to set up experimental farms, inspired by Juche methods, and surveyed improvements in irrigation (Van der Hoog 2022a). Several agricultural hubs across Africa were named after North Korea and some of these institutions survived, such as the Kim Il-sung Research Institute of Agricultural Science in Guinea (Bremer 2022b). While this can be considered a diplomatic win for the DPRK, it appears that the projects suffered from practical difficulties, such as communication problems, broken equipment and a lack of trust (Van der Hoog 2022a).

In addition, North Korea offered military support to the armies of African governments and liberation movements, establishing military training camps and providing training in Angola and Tanzania, as well as other strategic sites in (southern) Africa. During the 1980s, North Korea excelled in providing presidential security to African governments that wanted to consolidate their recently acquired power (Van der Hoog 2025). A well-known example is the Fifth Brigade, a Zimbabwean army brigade that was trained by approximately 100 North Korean instructors in 1981–1982. The Fifth Brigade subsequently massacred and pillaged their way through Matabeleland, a violent genocidal campaign that strengthened the ruling party of President Robert Mugabe (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and The Legal Resources Foundation 1997). North Korea offered similar services to countries across Africa, many of which gladly accepted North Korea's help in strengthening their security situation (Bechtol 2018).

All in all, the second phase painted a mixed picture of a time when inter-Korean competition had perhaps reached a high point. While South Korea steadily grew its presence in Africa by following an altered strategy, North Korea reaped the benefits of its earlier investments but failed to sustain its strategy. This can be illustrated through the case of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an organisation that wielded considerable influence in Africa. In 1975, North Korea became a member of the NAM while South Korea was barred from joining. It was a decision that added greatly to the prestige of North Korea and boosted its Africa policy, since African states constituted a major part of the NAM. North Korea's participation in NAM summits and workshops – some of which were held in Pyongyang – meant direct access to African governments on a wide range of topics (Kerkhoff 2020).

However, North Korea did not manage to turn its initial achievements

into significant results. While it appeared that North Korea would become a significant voice within the NAM, Kerkhoff (2020) shows that fellow member states eventually tired of Kim Il-sung's approach to politics. He subsequently lost his relevance within the organisation and North Korea failed to achieve its objective of marginalising South Korea. However, South Korea did not succeed in marginalising North Korea either. This phase of inter-Korean competition ended in the 1990s with another seismic geopolitical event that changed international relations.

PHASE THREE (1990–PRESENT)

The end of the Cold War and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union rearranged the global order, a process with major implications for inter-Korean rivalry. In 1991, both Koreas were finally admitted to the UN General Assembly as full members. Following this momentous achievement, Korean interest in Africa initially dissipated. The two Koreas entered the third phase in very different conditions. South Korea had transformed itself from a dictatorship into a democratic country and had experienced impressive economic growth in the meantime – its economy was already 20 times the size of North Korea's. It subsequently found that investing diplomatic resources in East Asia was more practical than in Africa. This became evident when South Korea closed down 11 embassies across Africa in the four years after its UN membership was confirmed (Yoo and Seol 2015). For North Korea, though, the 1990s meant a decade of disaster. Without the support of the Soviet Union, the North Korean economy crashed and a large-scale famine was the result. North Korea no longer had the funds to maintain its large-scale diplomatic presence in Africa. While many analysts predicted the fall of the DPRK, the struggling regime managed to stay afloat but significant changes were made in domestic and foreign policy (Bridges 1995; Noland 2004).

However, Korean interest in Africa eventually re-emerged once the ROK and the DPRK recognised the new potential of Africa. The 'Africa Rising' narrative of the early 2000s, which celebrated the substantial growth in GDP of several African countries and regions, coincided with a renewed importance of Africa for Korean interests. However, where the ROK was now able to spend money in Africa to enhance its global image, North Korea was compelled to earn money to ensure its survival.

Twenty-four years after the first South Korean presidential visit to the continent, another president of Korea, Roh Moo-hyun, visited Egypt,

Nigeria and Algeria – a visit that coincided with Ban Ki-moon's race for the highest position in the UN. During this trip, the South Korean government announced international development cooperation plans specifically constructed for the African continent. Korea's Initiative for Africa's Development pledged to triple foreign aid to Africa within two years, while an assurance was given to organise the Korea–Africa Forum on a regular basis (MFA 2006). South Korea's renewed interest in Africa should be viewed in the context of regional rivalry between China and Japan, two countries that have a longer diplomatic presence in Africa and can spend larger amounts on foreign aid or loans (S. Kim 2019). South Korea tries to emulate these neighbouring countries but is relatively late in catching up. While it launched a regular Korea–Africa Forum in 2006, Japan had already hosted the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 1993 and China had launched the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in 2000.

Instead, South Korea opted to become a middle power with an impressive story of economic growth and a vibrant culture to win the hearts and minds of people in Africa (S. Kim 2021). For instance, the South Korean government bought the intellectual property rights of a number of Korean TV dramas and extended them to cash-constrained broadcasting companies across Africa free of charge. By way of another example, although this was criticised as 'the worst aid', the government gifted vehicles with a screen displaying K-pop as development assistance to Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia (People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy 2016). S. Kim (2018, 2020) argues that the public-oriented diplomatic change over the previous two decades is now bearing fruit. While the modality of providing free TV dramas appears to be aggressive, a growing number of people in Africa find Korea's economic experience and culture attractive, particularly against Japan and China, and of course, North Korea.

In the face of increasingly tense superpower relations, the government of South Korea (2022) introduced the 'Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region' at the end of 2022. While the US, the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and Canada similarly mapped out their Indo-Pacific strategy, these countries did not include Africa in it; South Korea, in contrast, included Africa as one of six sub-regions in its strategy (MFA 2022). The strategy suggests counter-terrorism and development cooperation in education, agriculture, health, electrical energy and climate change response as priority areas for South Korea–Africa cooperation. Africa's place in Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy signals that Korea's primary

modality of engagement in Africa should be in development cooperation. Given that the South Korean government views development cooperation mainly as a tool of public diplomacy, it can be expected that the soft power drive shall continue across Africa.

For North Korea, earning hard foreign currency became imperative for its survival, and this immediately impacted its activities in Africa – even more so since 2006 when the UN imposed sanctions against the DPRK in response to the country conducting a nuclear test. North Korean diplomatic staff and foreign (trade) missions evaded authorities in almost forty African countries (Berger 2016; Mallory 2021; The Sentry 2021), where they were engaged in a variety of illicit trades, such as minerals, cigarettes, rhino horn and ivory (Rademeyer 2017; see also United Nations Panel of Experts 2014, 2017, 2021). North Korean doctors appear to be active in several African countries as medical cooperation seems to be an effort to maintain ‘economic ties’ (Bremer 2022a, 2022c).

However, the two main areas of state-level cooperation between North Korea and African countries appear to be military cooperation and construction work (Van der Hoog 2022b). North Korea offers African countries a diverse set of options for military cooperation in the 21st century, including the provision of repair services for outdated Cold War-era weapons, the procurement of new weapon systems, the construction of munition factories and the training of elite army units (Bechtol 2018; Berger 2016; Bermudez 1990). This has become one of the ‘most profitable revenue sources’ for North Korea (United Nations Panel of Experts 2014:25). Another important source of revenue is construction work in Africa. North Korean art studios designed and built a wide range of public buildings across the African continent, including presidential palaces, museums, cemeteries and monuments (Che 2022). Despite North Korea’s pariah status, African post-colonial elites have expressed an interest in North Korean visual aesthetics (Van der Hoog 2019). Construction work is often executed by forced labourers from the DPRK and constitutes a lucrative line of business (Van der Hoog 2018).

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the rival foreign policy agendas of South Korea and North Korea in Africa. During the first phase, which lasted from the end of the Korean War until the Sino–Soviet détente, North Korea’s diplomatic offensive was much more successful than South Korea’s. Kim Il-sung

benefited from creating an image of anti-imperialist fervour, while South Korea's Hallstein Doctrine hampered the country's ability to connect to African governments.

During the second phase, which started with the Sino–Soviet détente and ended with the demise of the Cold War, South Korea switched gears and adopted a different approach to engaging with African governments. This led to a hotly contested rivalry between both Koreas. While North Korea reaped the benefits of its diplomatic investments during this time, most notably through its membership of the NAM, it was not able to enlarge or even maintain its 'diplomatic edge' over South Korea.

During the third phase, which followed the end of the Cold War and their simultaneous admission to the UN, both Koreas operated in a different world and adjusted their strategies accordingly. North Korea went into survival mode and now chases hard foreign currency in Africa, while also circumventing the sanctions regime of the UN. South Korea, in contrast, embraced a successful cultural and developmental diplomacy approach which seems to greatly enhance its status in Africa and beyond.

While this chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the major developments characterising Korea–Africa relations, it deliberately focused on Korea's foreign policy. African foreign policies fall outside the remit of this study, but we wish to emphasise that the agency of African governments is evidently an important factor in diplomacy (see, for example, Kirby 2020). African countries made independent foreign policy decisions and were influenced by a host of local and regional developments, including the protracted wars of independence in southern Africa and the structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s. Moreover, they actively benefited from inter-Korean rivalry as they played both Koreas off against each other in order to maximise their gains.

The vast majority of scholarship on Korea–Africa relations is, like this chapter, focused on the motives of both Koreas to engage with the outside world. We hope that future research in this field will explore the question as to how and why African states engaged with the Korean peninsula. Such an endeavour will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of the varied ways in which Korean and African governments, businesses and people interact.

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