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13 Warmongering and Worldmaking: North Korean Diplomacy, African Decolonization, and the Pyongyang Conference of 1987

North Korea is renowned for its military diplomacy. The launching of ballistic missiles at home and the selling of weapons abroad, such as ammunition to Russia or technology to Iran, enhances its status as a regime gone rogue.¹ Since 2006, North Korea has been sanctioned by the United Nations for its expanding weapons programme, in particular because of the development of nuclear capabilities.² North Korea's role as a warmongering nation has a historical precedent, as Pyongyang had been a prolific exporter of arms and training since the 1960s. Military export was "an important part of its foreign policy strategy" during the Cold War, and numerous state and non-state actors around the world benefited from North Korean support.³ Especially in Africa, North Korea was an "exceptional player" in terms of military assistance.⁴ Today, its catalogue of violence remains impressive and serves as an important means of generating revenue.⁵

Yet, this is not the entire story of North Korea's role in the world, at least during the Cold War. In addition to warmongering, North Korea also engaged in worldmaking. Coined by Adom Getachew, the concept of worldmaking describes how anticolonial politicians, activists, and intellectuals from around the world challenged the global system by calling for self-determination, emancipation, and a New International Economic Order.⁶ This chapter argues that under Kim Il Sung's leadership, North Korea cooperated with African states to alter the global order in an effort of worldmaking. This side of Kim's diplomatic strategy is under-

1 S.-H. Choi, "North Korea Sent Russia Millions of Artillery Shells: South Korea", *Time*, 14 June 2024; J. S. Park, "The Iran Secret: Explaining North Korea's Rocket Success", *The Diplomat* (blog), n.d (accessed 21 June 2024).

2 United Nations Panel of Experts, "S/2010/571, Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 1874 (2009)", 5 November 2010.

3 A. Berger, *Target Markets: North Korea's Military Customers in the Sanctions Era*, London: Routledge, 2016.

4 J. S. Bermudez, *Terrorism, the North Korean Connection*, New York: Crane Russak, 1990.

5 A. Berger, "Disrupting North Korea's Military Markets", *Survival* 58 (2016) 3, pp. 101–30.

6 A. Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

appreciated, as most scholarship emphasizes the proliferation of arms from Pyongyang. A fitting example of North Korea's engagement with worldmaking is the "Extraordinary Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Countries on South-South Co-operation", which was organized in Pyongyang in 1987 under the auspices of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).⁷

The Pyongyang Conference is a useful counterargument against the security-infused understanding of North Korean-African cooperation. Held between 9–13 June 1987, this event attracted delegations from the Global South to discuss the transformation of the global order.⁸ This is a revealing case study of the internationalist agenda of Kim Il Sung, as it shows that his foreign policy was not entirely centred around guns and bullets. In the available literature on North Korea's role in the world, however, the Pyongyang Conference is absent – this event has been virtually forgotten or ignored. Nate Kerkhoff's study of North Korea's participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, for instance, does not mention the Pyongyang Conference at all.⁹ I nevertheless believe that this event is a revealing window to analyse North Korean-African encounters. Furthermore, the contents of the Pyongyang Conference allow us to question the validity of the Cold War lens to understand North Korea's cooperation within the Global South.

This chapter is based on novel primary sources from archives in the Global South. The main part of the analysis is based on declassified cables from the Diplomatic Archives of South Korea. During the Cold War, South Korean diplomats carefully monitored North Korean activities around the world, including in Africa, and compiled extensive reports that were communicated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Seoul. This archive is a treasure trove for the study of Korean competition during the Cold War and include seventeen files (a total of 3619 pages) on the Pyongyang Conference.¹⁰ All aspects of the event are covered:

7 I encountered the Pyongyang Conference during the archival research for my PhD thesis. As such, I have mentioned this event in my dissertation and two stand-alone publications. See T. A. van der Hoog, "North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa, 1960–2020", PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2024; T. A. van der Hoog, "Microphone Revolution: North Korean Cultural Diplomacy During the Liberation of Southern Africa", in: C. Stolte and S. L. Lewis (eds.), *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2022, pp. 265–290; T. A. van der Hoog, "On the Success and Failure of North Korean Development Aid in Africa", *NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series*, February 2022, pp. 31–42.

8 력 맹 특별 . , 1987.6.9–6.13. 17 [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties on South-South Cooperation. Pyongyang, 9–13 June, 1987. 17 volumes], vol. 1, 25166, Diplomatic Archives of the Republic of Korea (hereafter DAROK), Seoul.

9 N. Kerkhoff, "North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement: From Adulation to Marginalization", *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 28 (2020) 1, pp. 41–71.

10 See the DAROK reference numbers 25166–25182.

speeches and draft resolutions, dinner menus and conference floor maps, and the hotel rates of Pyongyang. A significant part of the collection is devoted to African participation (both via governments and national liberation movements), which was extensive. African leaders gave keynote speeches and the conference declaration included references to the African continent. Although the contents of this archive are incredibly valuable for the study of the Cold War, its usage is relatively limited because of language barriers (most material is only available in Hanja and Hangul) and access policies (the archives are located in Seoul). The pro-South Korean bias in the material must be considered, given the fervent inter-Korean rivalry that marked the analysis of its authors. This material is complemented by a variety of African primary sources, among them a report of Namibia's participation in the University of Namibia Archives.¹¹

The first section of this chapter considers North Korea's diplomatic strategy amidst African decolonial transitions. The foreign policy of Pyongyang was characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, North Korea was firmly part of the communist bloc and depended on the Soviet Union and China for its survival. On the other hand, North Korea successfully operated as an independent player in Africa through the adoption of non-aligned principles. The second section argues that North Korea's role in the Non-Aligned Movement was not a failure, as is commonly believed. This is illustrated by the Pyongyang Conference, despite this event being subject of intense diplomatic competition between both Koreas. The third section offers a description of the Pyongyang Conference, with specific attention to the role of African participants. The third section analyses North Korean-African interactions through the lens of worldmaking. With the "Pyongyang Declaration and Plan of Action on South-South Cooperation" the conference delivered a blueprint for a new world order, but the question remains how genuine – let alone effective – these efforts were.

1 North Korean Diplomacy and African Decolonization

North Korea was one of several foreign powers that became intimately involved in the decolonization of the African continent. For a long time its activities in Africa were overshadowed by larger Communist powers, most notably the Soviet

¹¹ T. A. van der Hoog, "A New Chapter in Namibian History: Reflections on Archival Research", *History in Africa*, January 2022, pp. 1–26.

Union, China, and Cuba.¹² In recent years new scholarship has emerged that singled out North Korea's influence in Africa, which originated from the division of the Korean peninsula at the end of World War II.¹³ Both Koreas vehemently opposed one another and claimed the position as the legitimate representative of the peninsula.¹⁴ Motivated by a competition with South Korea for votes in the United Nations, North Korea launched a large-scale diplomatic charm offensive across Africa.¹⁵ Many African anticolonial groups and governments were receptive to Pyongyang's anti-imperialist message and subsequently benefited from Kim Il Sung's diplomatic, military, and cultural support.¹⁶

In the public perception, the proliferation of weapons from Pyongyang became a defining feature of Kim Il Sung's diplomacy. For North Korea, the export of weapons and related services was an important "contribution to the country's foreign policy aims" that started in the 1960s.¹⁷ Joseph Bermudez argued that, in terms of providing military assistance, North Korea experienced its "greatest overall success and involvement" in Africa. North Korea despatched military advisors to African armies and invited African revolutionaries to receive military training at North Korean facilities, specifically in the fields of counterinsurgency warfare and presidential protection.¹⁸ In a study of North Korea's contemporary clients, Andrea Berger showed that many relations in Africa date back to the twentieth century.¹⁹ A large-scale network "grew out of the Cold War and continues into our own times", ac-

12 Z. Brzezinski and A. Dallin, *Africa and the Communist World*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963; I. Greig, *The Communist Challenge to Africa: An Analysis of Contemporary Soviet, Chinese and Cuban Policies*, London: Foreign Affairs Publishing, 1977; T. H. Henriksen, *Communist Powers and Sub-Saharan Africa*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1981.

13 S. H. Ryu, "North Korean Engagement in Africa during the Cold War: A Survey of Recent Historiographical Analyses", *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics, Society, and Economics* 2 (June 2022), <https://doi.org/10.48770/ker.2022.no2.13>.

14 S.-S. Park, "Africa and Two Koreas: A Study of African Non-Alignment", *African Studies Review* 21 (1978) 1, pp. 73–88.

15 J. Owuoye, "The Metamorphosis of North Korea's African Policy", *Asian Survey* 31 (1971), pp. 630–645.

16 B. R. Young, "The Struggle for Legitimacy: North Korea's Relations with Africa, 1965–1992", *British Association of Korean Studies (BAKS) Papers* 16 (2015), pp. 97–116; L. Choi and I.-y. Jeong, "North Korea and Zimbabwe, 1978–1982: From the Strategic Alliance to the Symbolic Comradeship Between Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe", *Cold War History* 17 (2017) 4, pp. 329–349; B. T. Manatsha, "Geopolitical Implications of President Seretse Khama's 1976 State Visit to North Korea", *Botswana Notes and Records* 50 (2018), pp. 138–152.

17 Berger, *Target Markets: North Korea's Military Customers*.

18 Bermudez, *Terrorism, the North Korean Connection*.

19 Berger, *Target Markets: North Korea's Military Customers*.

cording to Bruce Bechtol. North Korea has consequently turned the proliferation of arms and the busting of sanctions “into an art form”.²⁰

African decolonization was a messy process. Several campaigns for self-determination resulted in prolonged conflicts where nationalist movements fought for independence. Once successful, postcolonial governments were faced with the challenge how their rule could be solidified and their nations transformed.²¹ As a result, African actors were receptive to external aid, which often came from Asian donor countries.²² Such cooperation was framed as Afro-Asian solidarity, but also became entangled with the ideological struggle of the Cold War, as many donor countries were part of the communist bloc.²³ For outside observers, Pyongyang was firmly entrenched within the communist bloc, as the regime of Kim Il Sung relied on China and the Soviet Union for its survival. In Africa, however, North Korea branded itself as a country that was independent from both Sino-Soviet tensions and Cold War rivalries.

In short, North Korea’s foreign policy paradox was the tension between its communist origins and non-aligned tactics. A particular important decision was the adoption of Juche thought as the guiding concept for North Korean society. Often translated as “self-reliance”, Juche made North Korea distinct from more mainstream Leninist or Stalinist doctrines, which was appealing to African states that were wary of communist influence. Brian Myers has argued that Juche primarily served to boost North Korea’s global image.²⁴ Another significant achievement was North Korea’s membership of the Non-Aligned Movement (discussed in further detail below). Several African states accepted North Korean development aid or cultural programmes and justified these decisions by pointing at North Ko-

20 B. E. Bechtol, *North Korean Military Proliferation in the Middle East and Africa: Enabling Violence and Instability*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2018.

21 S. R. Dorman, “Post-Liberation Politics in Africa: Examining the Political Legacy of Struggle”, *Third World Quarterly* 27 (2006), pp. 1085–1101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600842365>.

22 D. Bobiash, *South-South Aid: How Developing Countries Help Each Other*, London: MacMillan, St. Martin’s Press, 1992.

23 G. McCann, “Where Was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity? Africa’s ‘Bandung Moment’ in 1950s Asia”, *Journal of World History* 30 (2019) 1, pp. 89–123, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2019.0014>; L. Dallywater, Ch. Saunders, and H. A. Fonseca (eds.), *Southern African Liberation Movements and the Global Cold War ‘East’: Transnational Activism 1960–1990*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019.

24 B. R. Myers, *North Korea’s Juche Myth*, Busan: Sthele Press, 2015.

rea's status as a non-aligned country.²⁵ This is indicative of how African states navigated Cold War rivalries to their own advantage.²⁶

Non-alignment allowed North Korea to gain “relatively effortless access to numerous regimes and organizations”.²⁷ This is noteworthy considering the fact that North Korea was not a part of the Bandung Conference of 1955, which is generally considered as the starting point of Afro-Asian solidarity.²⁸ Nevertheless, North Korea eagerly adopted the “Bandung spirit” and participated in multilateral diplomacy. As the inter-Korean dispute had reached a stalemate at the United Nations, competition moved to other international organizations.²⁹ North Korea participated for instance in the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) and persuaded the secretariat to back its proposals for reunification of the Korean peninsula, all the while criticizing South Korea for its political and military dependency on the United States.³⁰

Pyongyang's proudest moment, however, was its membership of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1975. South Korea was barred from entering the organization, which was a diplomatic victory for Kim that he relentlessly exploited in Africa. Established in 1961, the NAM was “arguably the most important institution for the Global South”, writes Nate Kerkhoff, and was generally considered to be an outcome of the Bandung Conference. The NAM attracted members with its attempt to steer clear of great power politics and decentral organization. North Korea lobbied the organization to obtain summit hosting duties and to gain support for its proposals to reunify the peninsula. Several summit charters in the 1970s and 1980s contained pro-North Korea resolutions. Through these meetings and documents, Kim Il Sung was able to project himself as one of the leaders of the Global South.³¹

25 van der Hoog, “On the Success and Failure of North Korean Development Aid in Africa”; van der Hoog, “Microphone Revolution”.

26 J. Kirby, “Between Two Chinas and Two Koreas: African Agency and Non-Alignment in 1970s Botswana”, *Cold War History* 20 (2020) 1, pp. 21–38.

27 Bermudez, *Terrorism, the North Korean Connection*.

28 Ch. Lee, *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010.

29 Ch. Y. Pak, *Korea and the United Nations*, Leiden: Brill, 2000.

30 Regional cooperation: AAPSO, Pamphlet Collection, Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) Library, Uppsala.

31 Kerkhoff, “North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement”.

2 The Non-Aligned Movement and Diplomatic Competition

It is commonly believed that North Korea's participation in the NAM was a failure. Kim Il Sung's primary goal was to isolate South Korea, but allegedly North Korea's relevance to non-aligned politics quickly disappeared. Nate Kerkhoff's assessment of North Korea's skill in statecraft is bleak, as he describes Kim's "narrow and short-sighted political motivations", "tone-deaf political statements", "foreign relations blunders", and "incompetency in diplomacy". Kerkhoff states that North Korea was able to host several smaller conferences between 1980 and 1983, on issues such as agriculture and education. By 1986, however, "North Korea had spent its political capital [. . .] with very little in return." North Korea simply "did not grasp the intricacies of the organization" and became marginalized.³²

This chapter, in contrast, argues that North Korea's participation in the NAM was more successful than it appears. In 1986, its biggest moment was yet to come – the hosting of the Pyongyang Conference of 1987. While this conference is not mentioned in Kerkhoff's analysis of North Korea and the NAM, it allowed North Korea to get involved in the debate about a New International Economic Order (NIEO).³³ The concept of the NIEO was launched by the NAM in 1973 at a summit in Algiers. Kerkhoff argues that North Korea only "paid lip service" to this economic aim, citing a "lack of preparation or willingness to attune itself with NAM goals".³⁴ Nevertheless, the Pyongyang Conference signifies another side of the story.

In addition to spreading an anti-South Korean agenda, North Korea leveraged its membership of the NAM to gain access to African allies and claim credibility as a non-aligned player.³⁵ The Pyongyang Conference was the first NAM event on South-South cooperation and North Korea could therefore claim to host a "significant historic meeting".³⁶ 76 out of 101 NAM members attended the conference, as well as 14 non-NAM members and 15 non-state actors. North Korea had also invited representatives of the Vatican and observers from international organizations such

³² Ibid.

³³ P. N. Agarwala, *The New International Economic Order: An Overview*, New York: Pergamon Press, 2014.

³⁴ Kerkhoff, "North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement".

³⁵ 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 1, DAROK 25166.

³⁶ Ibid., vol. 14, DAROK 25179.

as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).³⁷ This was a grand, international event that strengthened North Korea's image abroad.

Naturally, South Korea vehemently opposed North Korea's place in the spotlights. In 1988, South Korea was scheduled to host the Olympics in Seoul.³⁸ It was a momentous occasion to showcase the development of the South Korean state, exactly forty years after its establishment.³⁹ Seoul believed that North Korea would use the Pyongyang Conference to "engage in slanderous propaganda" and feared that the Korean peninsula would be included in the programme, although this had "nothing to do with the original purpose of South-South cooperation".⁴⁰ South Korea launched a diplomatic charm offensive to influence NAM members that were invited to Pyongyang. South Korean diplomats travelled to state capitals across the world to deliver personal letters with offers of stronger political ties, economic cooperation, and visits to Seoul.⁴¹ In return, South Korea requested their hosts to "play a positive role in blocking any lopsided decision in which the position of the Republic of Korea is not reflected".⁴² Special envoys were sent to Asia, Central and South America, the Middle East, and Africa.⁴³

For the African mission, South Korea sent delegations to Nigeria, Gabon, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast.⁴⁴ The objectives were to ensure that, first, the Pyongyang Conference would not interfere with the 1988 Seoul Olympics, and second, that these countries would support the accession of South Korea to the United Nations. In all cases, South Korea received promises of general cooperation or assurances that their requests would be considered.⁴⁵ Yet, these activities in West

37 Ibid., vol. 13, DAROK 25178.

38 Ibid., vol. 1, DAROK 25166.

39 The Pyongyang Conference of 1987 and the Seoul Olympics of 1988 were followed by another major event in 1989: the World Youth Festival, held in Pyongyang. World Youth Festival, Pyongyang, North Korea, July 1989, TNA, FCO 21/4436.

40 력 맹 특별 [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 1, DAROK 25166.

41 Ibid., vol. 2, DAROK 25167.

42 Ibid., vol. 3, DAROK 25168.

43 The Diplomatic Archives of South Korea contains extensive reporting from the special envoys per region. For Asia, see 력 맹 특별 [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 5, DAROK 25170, and vol. 9, DAROK 25174. For Central and South America, see *ibid.*, vol. 6, DAROK 25171 and vol. 10, DAROK 25175. For the Middle East, see *ibid.*, vol. 7, DAROK 25172, and vol. 11, DAROK 25176. The two files on Africa are discussed in greater detail below.

44 력 맹 특별 [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 4, DAROK 25169.

45 Ibid., vol. 8, DAROK 25173.

Africa were countered by Kim Il Sung in other parts of the continent. Kim invited political leaders from Ethiopia, Madagascar, Guinea, Botswana, and Zambia to his birthday party in Pyongyang. Other leaders, such as the Tanzanian president Ali Hassan Mwinyi, were invited to North Korea for general visits.⁴⁶ This is illustrative of Kim's "invitation diplomacy", which, according to Sang-Seek Park, was an essential instrument in North Korea's successful African diplomacy.⁴⁷

The run-up to the conference therefore had a distinct African dimension. The honour to host a NAM conference on South-South cooperation was bestowed on North Korea in Zimbabwe at the 8th Non-Aligned Summit in Harare in 1986.⁴⁸ Kim Il Sung pulled out all the stops to get a good result at the summit. He utilized his personal relations with the Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe, who benefited from his support during the liberation struggle and the first years of postcolonial rule.⁴⁹ Kim courted influential African leaders and donated a significant sum of money for the organisation of the summit.⁵⁰ Although the final declaration did not contain all of North Korea's wishes, it was decided that the NAM would reconvene next year in Pyongyang for an Extraordinary Ministerial Conference.⁵¹ This was, as Soulé-Kohndou Folashadé indicated, also the first time that the term "South-South cooperation" appeared in a summit declaration of the NAM.⁵²

⁴⁶ Ibid., vol. 12, DAROK 25177.

⁴⁷ Park, "Africa and Two Koreas: A Study of African Non-Alignment".

⁴⁸ *Zimbabwe News* 20 (1989) 11, L968.91005 Z711 v.20, Northwestern University Library (NUL), Evanston; 력 맹 특별 [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 1, DAROK 25166.

⁴⁹ Government of Zimbabwe, "Prime Minister Addresses State Banquet in North Korea, 9 October 1980", Policy Statement No. 1 [Harare: Government Printer, 1980], Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel.

⁵⁰ North and South Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, Harare, August–September 1986, TNA, FCO 21/3602; 탄 , 1985–86 [North Korea–Tanzania relations, 1985–86], DAROK 23558.

⁵¹ North and South Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, Harare, August–September 1986, TNA, FCO 21/3602.

⁵² F. Soulé-Kohndou, "Histoire contemporaine des relations sud-sud. Les contours d'une évolution graduelle" [Contemporary history of South-South relations. The contours of a gradual evolution], *Afrique Contemporaine* 248 (2013) 4, pp. 108–111.

3 The Pyongyang Conference for South-South Cooperation

The Extraordinary Ministerial Conference was held between 9 and 13 June, in 1987. Kim Yong Nam, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of North Korea, chaired the event, which was hosted in the People's Palace of Culture in Pyongyang. North Korea chartered special aircraft services from Moscow and Beijing to Pyongyang to make travel convenient and free of charge.⁵³ Organized as a traditional multilateral conference, the working languages were English, French, Spanish, and Arabic.⁵⁴ In addition to a flurry of plenary and committee meetings, delegates were treated with a display of mass gymnastics (called "Prospering Korea of Juche"), musical performances by 5,000 artists (called "Paean to Happiness") and several banquets that featured Korean dishes.⁵⁵ The full scale of North Korea's cultural prowess was on display.

Kim Il Sung's sketched the outline for a programme of solidarity in a keynote speech, titled "Let us develop South-South cooperation". In his view, the world may have gained political independence but was yet to achieve economic independence. "The present international economic system is a product of colonialism", Kim argued, and only when economic independence is realized, countries are able to "exercise full sovereignty in foreign relations and consolidate the political independence they have won". The non-aligned world should help each other via South-South cooperation, which Kim believed must be based on "collective self-reliance". The emphasis of self-reliance corresponds with his use of Juche (which is usually translated as self-reliance) to connect with the Global South. To this end, Kim proposed a series of measures in trade, agriculture, science and technology, foreign debts, and other areas.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Kim did not mention South Korea in his speech. In only the vaguest terms, Kim called for complete disarmament and the abolishment of foreign military bases, which hinted at the presence of American soldiers in South Korea. The great turnout in Pyongyang signalled, in his words, "a clear expression

53 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 14, DAROK 25179.

54 Ibid., vol. 2, DAROK 25167.

55 Ibid., vol. 17, DAROK 25182.

56 The speech is contained in *ibid.*, vol. 16, DAROK 25181. It is also accessible in book form, see Kim Il Sung, "Let Us Develop South-South Cooperation. Congratulatory Speech at the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference on Non-Aligned Countries on South-South Cooperation", in: Kim Il Sung, *For Achieving Global Independence*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2022, pp. 49–61.

of the excellent friendly relations between Korea” and the non-aligned world. A significant portion of the speech was dedicated to Africa. First and foremost, Kim expressed his “deep gratitude” to Zimbabwe for the help in convening this event in Pyongyang. He again singled out his African allies when he discussed agriculture. Kim proclaimed that it was North Korea’s “sacred duty” to make South-South cooperation a success. He therefore celebrated the deployment of North Korean technical experts in Africa, who had set up institutes of agricultural sciences and experimental farms in several countries. He vowed to “expand cooperation with African countries” in the spirit of South-South cooperation.⁵⁷ Indeed, North Korea ran numerous projects across the continent as a specific form of development aid.⁵⁸

The programme of the Pyongyang Conference dealt with the issue of South-South cooperation in the most general terms. There were sessions dedicated to an “overall review of South-South cooperation”, the “strategy and policy for South-South cooperation”, “South-South cooperation in the priority fields”, and the “mechanisms to coordinate South-South cooperation”. Nevertheless, although the conference had a global scope and was visited by delegates from all continents, the agenda contained one specific session that was defined in terms of geography: “South-South cooperation to meet the critical economic situation in Africa.”⁵⁹

Why was Africa singled out in the conference programme? It underlines the special relationship between North Korea and the African continent. African participation in the Pyongyang Conference was extensive. A wide range of African politicians attended the proceedings, representing a variety of independent states, non-state actors, and international organizations. Forty-four African states sent delegations, in addition to liberation movements such as South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), the African National Congress (ANC), and the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania, the United Nations Council for Namibia, and the Organization of African Unity.⁶⁰ Virtually the entire continent was represented; the majority of the conference was African. This is indicative of the success of North Korea’s African diplomacy, which was a vital part of its foreign policy.⁶¹ On the other hand, it also signifies that Africans were interested in cooperation with North Korea.

57 Kim.

58 van der Hoog, “On the Success and Failure of North Korean Development Aid in Africa.”

59 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 1, DAROK 25166.

60 Ibid., vol. 17, DAROK 25182.

61 Owwoeye, “The Metamorphosis of North Korea’s African Policy”.

Although Kim Il Sung provided the keynote speech, the inaugural speech of the conference was given by Witness Mangwende, the foreign minister of Zimbabwe. Mangwende read a statement of Robert Mugabe, the prime minister of Zimbabwe and friend of Kim.⁶² Mugabe used this opportunity to call for international pressure against the South African apartheid regime. He stressed that the security conditions in Southern Africa were rapidly deteriorating, a point that was echoed in another speech by Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, the Secretary-General of SWAPO (the primary liberation movement of Namibia). The South African government fiercely resisted the claims of self-determination by both the Namibian and South African majorities, and the ensuing violence spilled over to Zimbabwe and other neighbouring states.⁶³ Ya Toivo, who spoke on behalf of all liberation movements, welcomed the prospects of South-South cooperation and called for more “political, diplomatic and material assistance” to organizations such as SWAPO.⁶⁴

4 Remaking the Global Order

Getachew argues that decolonization was an attempt to “remake rather than expand international society”. In that sense, decolonization was not just a simple transfer of power, it was as a “radical rupture” that required “a reconstitution of the international order”. A reinvention of global economic structures was at the core of this ambition. Anticolonial nationalism was envisaged as a revolutionary project that could be described as worldmaking.⁶⁵ This was, to an important extent, inspired by the political thought of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and other African revolutionaries, who developed an anticolonial modernization project to reconfigure the global order.⁶⁶ An analysis of the “Pyongyang Declaration and Plan of Action on South-South Cooperation”, the

⁶² 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 17, DAROK 25182.

⁶³ G. M. Khadiagala, *Allies in Adversity: The Frontline States in Southern African Security, 1975–1993*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994.

⁶⁴ Report of the delegation of the United Nations Council for Namibia to the extraordinary ministerial conference of the movement of non-aligned countries on South-South co-operation, held at Pyongyang from 9 to 13 June 1987, A/AC.131/260, 5 October 1987, PA4/1/2/73/22, UNAM Archives, Windhoek.

⁶⁵ Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*.

⁶⁶ S. Chan, *African Political Thought: An Intellectual History of the Quest for Freedom*, London: Hurst, 2021; F. Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Pursuit of Anticolonial Modernity Shaped a Postcolonial Order, 1945–1966*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023.

22-page outcome of the Pyongyang Conference, offers fresh insights into the influence of North Korea on worldmaking.

The Pyongyang Declaration criticized the “unfair international economic order” where the policies of developed countries and financial institutions hindered the growth of the Global South.⁶⁷ Indeed, Getachew emphasized that the enduring legacy of racial inequality prohibited the development of modern society.⁶⁸ According to the declaration, South-South cooperation was a “key element in their struggle for the establishment of the new international economic order” and an integral part of a wider desire for “economic, cultural and social emancipation”.⁶⁹ Getachew underlined that the NIEO was central to challenging the economic hierarchies of the twentieth century.⁷⁰ In the spirit of collective self-reliance, the Pyongyang Conference proposed a flurry of measures. This included support for a Global System of Trade Preferences, a Common Fund for Commodities, a Solidarity Fund for Economic and Social Development, and a South Bank.⁷¹ According to Getachew, international institutions that could “secure the conditions of nondomination” were a key part of an envisioned post-imperial world.⁷² The declaration therefore called for joint ventures in farming, the development and exchange of technology, cooperation in the fields of health, energy, education, and more.⁷³ Although the language was often vague, the bold ambition to transform the world was evident.

The Pyongyang Declaration also contained several specific references to African decolonization, perhaps a result of the speeches of Mugabe and Ya Toivo. Self-determination, wrote Getachew, “required a combination of nation-building and worldmaking”, and the declaration contained references to both objectives.⁷⁴ The NAM ministers explicitly rejected South African apartheid rule and called for comprehensive mandatory sanctions against its government. It furthermore expressed its concern with the neighbouring Frontline States, who suffered from the spill-over of violence, and urged the international community to provide as-

67 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 15, DAROK 25180.

68 Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*.

69 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 15, DAROK 25180.

70 Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*.

71 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 15, DAROK 25180.

72 Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*.

73 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 15, DAROK 25180.

74 Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*.

sistance to SWAPO and the ANC. The declaration praised the AFRICA Fund, which came into effect a few months earlier to support African decolonization, and appealed to the world to make generous contributions. In the context of the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development, the Global North was urged to “increase the flow of resources in real terms to Africa”.⁷⁵

The Pyongyang Conference is an example of North Korean-African attempts at world making. In this regard, it is important to not focus solely on North Korean strategy, but to understand African demands and desires for development as well. Kwame Nkrumah famously said “seek ye first the political kingdom and all else shall be added unto you”.⁷⁶ However, African nationalists soon discovered that political independence did not automatically translate into economic, cultural, and social emancipation. Freedom was not enough, the process of decolonization was not yet completed: only a transformation of the global system could achieve full liberation. Kim Il Sung understood this and invited African countries to think about a way forward. The contents of the Pyongyang Conference dealt precisely with the need for this new global order.

Importantly, the final declaration was devoid of political statements on the Korean peninsula. South Korea and its Western allies were afraid that the Pyongyang Declaration was part of the ongoing and fierce diplomatic competition between the two Koreas. However, at the end of the conference, even South Korea had to concede that the proceedings were focused on non-aligned economic cooperation.⁷⁷ South Korean diplomats noted that North Korea had shown “a surprisingly moderate and mild posture” and that the success of the conference contributed “to improving North Korea’s image in the international community and raising its voice in South-South cooperation”. It was expected that Kim would use this achievement to elevate his status in the NAM.⁷⁸ In addition to foreign policy benefits, North Korea also utilized the conference for its domestic propaganda. North Korean newspapers, for example, proudly displayed photos of Kim Il Sung posing with foreign delegations.⁷⁹ Such rhetoric was not directed at traditional Cold War divisions, but centred around non-aligned politics.

75 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 15, DAROK 25180.

76 A. Mazrui, “Seek Ye First the Political Kingdom”, in: A. Mazrui and Ch. Wondji (eds.), *General History of Africa*, vol. VIII: *Africa since 1935*, Paris: UNESCO, 1993, pp. 105–126.

77 력 맹 특별 . [Special Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Parties] (see fn 8), vol. 16, DAROK 25181.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., vol. 17, DAROK 25182.

5 Conclusion

“Let us develop South-South cooperation”, proclaimed Kim Il Sung in 1987 at the Pyongyang Conference, a message that resonated with his largely African audience. African political elites were highly invested in worldmaking and worked together with their North Korean counterparts in several international fora to alter the global order. The establishment of the North Korean state and the majority of African states occurred in a moment of widespread contestation of the liberal, post-WW II order. Many anti-imperialist revolutionaries believed that mere political independence was not enough and that a transformation of global socio-economic structures was necessary. The Pyongyang Conference was an attempt to deliver a blueprint for this vision.

In the historiography of North Korea’s international relations, the Pyongyang Conference of 1987 has been largely ignored. A recent discovery of diplomatic cables in the Diplomatic Archives of South Korea made it possible to produce the first description and analysis of this event. This offers an opportunity to interrogate larger analytical questions, such as North Korea’s role in the Cold War, the importance of Africa for North Korean diplomacy, and the question whether North Korea’s foreign policy was motivated by ideology of pragmatism.

This chapter indicates that North Korea was not a traditional Cold War actor. Although Western states were convinced that North Korea was firmly part of the communist bloc, African states saw this differently. Through the use of concepts such as non-alignment, South-South cooperation, and the Bandung spirit, North Korea branded itself as a postcolonial powerhouse, rather than as a communist country. The Pyongyang Conference is illustrative of the fact that communism was on the periphery of North Korean-African interactions – it did not feature in the conference deliberations, which focused on the notion of self-reliance and the need for a New International Economic Order.

The Pyongyang Conference was organized under the auspices of the Non-Aligned Movement, which encompassed members from across the world. In practice, however, African states appear to be the most important actors for North Korea’s diplomacy. The decision to organize the conference in Pyongyang was made in Zimbabwe, the conference was attended by numerous African delegates, and the final declaration contained specific references to issues that were important for African decolonization. The conference thereby highlights how Africa was central to North Korean foreign policy. Although North Korea also wielded its cultural diplomacy in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, it was the African continent where Kim Il Sung achieved his greatest successes.

Existing scholarship on North Korean foreign policy has utilized a transactional approach of international relations that is focused on who gets what and

why. While there is no denying that transactions were important, there was more to North Korean-African relations: an attempt at worldmaking, as showcased by the Pyongyang Conference. This chapter moved beyond a pragmatic, transactional understanding of North Korean-African cooperation and examined the idealism behind Kim Il Sung's connections to the African continent. North Korean-African interactions are often reduced to the question which security benefits either parties are able to extract out of each other. Indeed, African governments and non-state actors received weapons and military training from North Korea, while North Korea leveraged their diplomatic relationships in Africa to win votes for Korea-resolutions in the United Nations General Assembly. In contrast, this chapter serves as a counterargument against the military lens of North Korean-African relations that is prevalent in the historiography.

Decolonization was much more than political independence; it was a movement that sought to reshape the world. For a brief moment in time, North Korea was part of these efforts. Rather than rehashing its traditional image as a sponsor of terrorism, this chapter has highlighted a different side of North Korean politics. Nevertheless, Pyongyang's significance was short-lived. In the 1990s, North Korea faced economic hardship and a leadership change. Under Kim's son and successor, Kim Jong Il, North Korea took a different path and focused on regime survival by earning hard foreign currency and developing weapons of mass destruction. These decisions led to North Korea's isolated position on the world stage, while its military diplomacy continues to generate revenue and stir controversy.⁸⁰ Today, a modern iteration of an internationalist, progressive gathering such as the Pyongyang Conference would be unthinkable. North Korea's historical attempts at world making are obscured by its contemporary status as a rogue state. But it is worth remembering that the world used to be different in the not-so-distant past.

⁸⁰ T. A. van der Hoog, "Defying United Nations Sanctions: Three Reasons for African Engagement with North Korea", *On Korea: Academic Paper Series*, Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, April 2022.