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## **North Korea and China: A Difficult History, Part II**

Last week, we examined the Minsaengdan Incident and the onset of the Korean War. This week, we will discuss the final phase of the Korean War, the ceasefire, the introduction of *Juche* and the impact of the Cultural Revolution.

### **The Korean War: The Latter Stages of the War and the Ceasefire**

Among the issues that caused tensions between China and Korea was the management of the railroads during the war. Chinese troops encountered difficulties when using roads to supply their forces. The roads were not in good shape and their war materials were vulnerable to American air attacks. Given that most of the rolling stock and crews were Chinese, Chinese Volunteer Army (CVA) Commander Peng Dehuai wanted to gain control over the railroads to deliver war materials. However, Kim Il-sung didn't want China to take over North Korea's rail system for two reasons. First, the regime was trying to start reconstruction and didn't want to divert rolling stock for war materials, and second, Kim was offended by the loss of sovereignty. Nevertheless, China and the U.S.S.R. coerced the North Koreans into giving up control of their railways to China for the duration of the war.

The final indignity the Kim government had to face was the ceasefire determination. Stalin and Mao wanted to keep the war going. Both wanted to keep the U.S. occupied with the fighting in Korea as this

would reduce America's ability to defend other parts of the world. In addition, Mao was receiving military aid from the Soviets and feared that the war's end would end the flow of aid. On the other hand, Kim wanted a ceasefire. His country was being steadily bombed by the U.S. and North Korea couldn't really begin reconstruction without an end to hostilities.

A second issue involved prisoners of war (POWs). Chinese troops didn't aggressively capture POWs. Their military experience was mostly derived in the Chinese Civil War where they didn't pursue POWs and they continued that behavior during the Korean War. On the other hand, the Korean People's Army (KPA) tried to capture as many prisoners as they could with the idea that they would be used as forced labor for reconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the sides couldn't agree on how to resolve the return of POWs; it wasn't important for China, but it was critical for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

As discussions wore on, neither Stalin nor Mao was swayed by Kim's pleas. At heart, both China and the Soviet Union were willing to continue the fight because it improved their broader geopolitical positions. In conversation, Stalin said, "Mao is right; this war is getting on America's nerves. The North Koreans have lost nothing, except for casualties they suffered during the war."<sup>2</sup> Zhou also said

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<sup>1</sup> Zhihua, S. (2004.) Sino-North Korean Conflict and its Resolution during the Korean War. *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Winter/Spring (Issue 14/15), page 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, page 20.

that “...one must be firm with America. The Chinese comrades must know that if America doesn’t lose this war, then China will never recapture Taiwan.”<sup>3</sup> Simply put, the Soviets and Chinese were more than willing to sacrifice North Korean lives for their own geopolitical goals.

The impasse wasn’t broken until Stalin died in March 1953. Soviet policy under Khrushchev changed to supporting the ceasefire. South Korean leader Syngman Ree tried to stall the end of the conflict by releasing POWs without U.N. authorization. Ree’s action led CVA Commander Peng to respond with another military campaign against Kim’s wishes.

The Korean War laid bare the differences between China and North Korea. As the above analysis shows, both the U.S.S.R. and China treated North Korean interests as secondary to the goals of international socialism, which were defined differently by both China and the U.S.S.R. China had little regard for the military competency of North Korea. In the early stages of the war, Kim’s military moved too quickly, leaving them exposed to a counterattack. Had it not been for Chinese intervention, North Korea would probably not exist today.

And yet, there is almost nothing in official North Korean history that takes China’s intervention into account. With the end of the Cold War, a treasure trove of declassified documents has emerged. A 1955 report<sup>4</sup> from two Soviet diplomats, Boris Ponomarev and Nikolai Fedorenko, discussed conditions in the DPRK. The two diplomats relayed observations to their superiors in Moscow about the economy, the state of ordinary people in North Korea and

foreign relations. Their comments on the DPRK’s views of the war were unusually telling:

*The experience of working in Korea shows that the Korean comrades underrate the role and importance of Chinese aid to Korea and, in particular, downplay the role of the Chinese volunteers in the fight against the American intervention. This is evident if only from the fact that at an exhibit in Pyongyang devoted to the war with the interventionists only one of the 12 pavilions was devoted to the Chinese volunteers but the remaining pavilions described the combat operations of the Korean People’s Army, ignoring the operations of the Chinese volunteers. The role of the Chinese volunteers was clearly downplayed at the exhibit.*<sup>5</sup>

Not only did the CVA suffer 600k dead or missing<sup>6</sup> compared to the North Korean military’s 406k casualties, but China was unable to follow through on its plans to take control of Taiwan, an issue that remains unresolved today. North Korea appears to have constructed its national narrative on the idea that it alone fought the West to a stalemate in the Korean War. The reality that North Korea was led into the war by a neophyte who would have lost the war without Chinese intervention isn’t one that creates political dynasties. At the same time, it’s easy to see how Chinese leaders have a difficult time taking the Kim regime seriously. This does nothing but create conditions of animosity between the two states.

### **The Development of *Juche***

In late 1955, King Il-sung announced the policy of *Juche*, which roughly translates into “self-reliance.” In practical terms, this

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 20.

<sup>4</sup><http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114590>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 10.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/28/world/asia/korea-n-war-fast-facts/index.html>

policy set North Korea on a path of autarky. The goal of this policy appeared to be designed to reduce the DPRK's dependence on China and the Soviet Union. In October 1973, the First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov, visited North Korea. Again, due to the declassification of Cold War documents, we are able to gain general insights into the inner workings of North Korea and Communist relations.<sup>7</sup> In his report, Zhivkov pointed out to Kim that "...smaller countries like the DPRK and Bulgaria cannot develop all the areas of industry..."<sup>8</sup> and suggested that it would be beneficial to North Korea if Kim integrated his economy into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), the Soviet Union's program for unifying the Communist Bloc's economies. According to this report, Kim was noncommittal to his guest. Integrating into COMECON was antithetical to *Juche*. We note that Ponomarev and Fedorenko reported to Khrushchev that Kim was wasting Soviet aid through mismanagement and excessive personnel turnover.<sup>9</sup>

In 1956, Kim Il-sung began a purge of Korean Workers Party (KWP) members who had contacts with China.<sup>10</sup> Later purges also targeted those with training or experience in the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Mao and Khrushchev became involved after some of the purged North Koreans fled to China. As a result, Kim was forced to reappoint purged officials and release others from prison.

<sup>7</sup><http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114533>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, page 5.

<sup>9</sup> Op cit., Ponomarev and Fedorenko, pp. 2-3 and 6-9.

<sup>10</sup><http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115702.pdf?v=69ed67be75fe09cb1e2f9e5f482d6e1b>

<sup>11</sup><http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111637.pdf?v=96c43eb2cbd29ffd1aa81884fae4ecbf>

Kim almost certainly viewed this as a violation of Korean sovereignty.<sup>12</sup>

However, the purges resumed within a year, with some 3k KWP members being purged. Although some had contacts with either China or the U.S.S.R., there were some party members that wanted to use aid and focus development on consumer goods, whereas Kim wanted to focus on capital goods production. These dissenters were expelled from the party.<sup>13</sup> This group also defected to China.

Mao became increasingly unhappy with Kim and equated him with Imre Nagy<sup>14</sup> and Joseph Tito. Mao made these comments to Soviet officials who passed them on to Kim in the early 1960s in a bid to pull North Korea closer to the Soviet orbit.

Kim Il-sung's program of *Juche* was designed to protect Korean sovereignty and independence. Although he did need aid from China and the U.S.S.R., he feared that both nations were using this support to guide his behavior and policies. And, to a great extent, he was correct in this assessment.

### The Cultural Revolution

As the 1960s wore on, Sino-Soviet relations steadily deteriorated. Mao, who had lost influence after the disastrous Great Leap Forward, re-established control with the Cultural Revolution. He was developing his own views of Marxist thought and no longer wanted to follow the lead of Moscow. At various times in the 1960s, border clashes increased; borders were not clear in many areas and the Soviets were afraid China could support ethnic movements in its

<sup>12</sup> Op cit., Person, page 3.

<sup>13</sup> Op cit., Zhivkov, page 9.

<sup>14</sup> Nagy led the Hungarian Revolution that was forcibly constrained by tanks sent by the U.S.S.R. in 1956.

eastern regions that were sparsely populated and thus difficult to control. Open hostility emerged by 1968 when the Red Army amassed troops along the 2,738 mile border with China. The Soviets had roughly 220k troops on the border but faced the Chinese army of up to a million men. The Soviets were worried that Mao might attack and overwhelm the Red Army.<sup>15</sup>

The tensions between China and the Soviet Union affected the other members of the Eastern Bloc. With regard to North Korea, China and the U.S.S.R. each pressed for Pyongyang to ally with them. Kim remained neutral in the conflict which did not sit well with Mao.

While these tensions between China, the Soviet Union and North Korea simmered, China was moving into the tumult of the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards viewed Kim's "sitting on the fence"<sup>16</sup> as duplicitous. Red Guards set up loudspeakers on the Korean/Chinese frontier, blasting messages inviting Koreans to "smash Soviet revisionists and Kim Il-sung."<sup>17</sup> In addition, Chinese troops invaded North Korea and occupied a town,<sup>18</sup> and there were reports of a military clash in the vicinity of Mt. Paektu, a sacred mountain in Korean history.<sup>19</sup> Chinese officials argued that these incursions were to take territory as compensation for their efforts during the

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<sup>15</sup> Two notes of interest; first, these fears of China remain present to this day: [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/world/asia/russia-china-farmers.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/world/asia/russia-china-farmers.html?_r=0). Second, discord between the U.S.S.R. and China likely led to Nixon's famous decision to normalize relations with Mao in the early 1970s.

<sup>16</sup> Op cit., Person, page 3.

<sup>17</sup> <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/1/16671>, page 2

<sup>18</sup> Op cit., Zhivkov, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> This is supposedly the mountain where Kim Il-sung was born, accompanied by miraculous events.

Korean War. We suspect it was probably more about bringing North Korea to China's side during the Sino-Soviet conflict.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao moved away from an international Marxist vision of the world to positions more appropriate for a regional power. China was said to have developed a political theory of the "super state," dividing the world not into capitalist and communist, but into big and small states.<sup>20</sup> Soviet (and Eastern European) Marxists viewed this as a serious deviation from Marx (which it was). From the Chinese perspective, Moscow's position that it was the leader of the communist world was a form of "socialist imperialism."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Soviets were the primary enemy, not the West.

Chinese political actions in the 1970s were consistent with this break from the Communist Bloc. China recognized Franco's Spain in 1973,<sup>22</sup> which was significant; Franco defeated leftist forces in the Spanish Civil War and for a communist state to recognize Spain was a significant change. In addition, China expelled Chile's ambassador during the Allende era and supported Gen. Pinochet.<sup>23</sup> And, of course, normalizing relations with the U.S. during the Nixon administration was also a major break with the Communist Bloc.

Kim was caught in a tough position. He was dependent on the Soviet Union for economic support but clearly relied on China for military security. He did not want to see the two sides quarrel and could not afford to choose sides. At the same time, he could

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<sup>20</sup> Op cit., Zhivkov, page 3.

<sup>21</sup> Op cit., Batmunkh, page 3, and Zhivkov, page 3.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1973/03/10/archives/spain-announces-establishment-of-diplomatic-ties-with-pekings.html>

<sup>23</sup> Op cit., Zhivkov, page 3.

not help but notice that China's ideological direction was imperialistic and feared Mao was trying to exercise influence over North Korea in order to turn it into a vassal state. Thus, the only logical action for Kim was to remain as neutral as possible.

Cold War and the ideological issues with Deng Xiaoping. We will recap the key insights from this history and the impact on American policy toward the DPRK. We will conclude, as always, with market ramifications.

### Part III

Next week, we will conclude this report with the controversy surrounding the Kim family's dynastic succession, the end of the

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