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## North Korea's Third World Policy during the Cold War: *Light and Darkness*

*Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World.* By Benjamin R. Young. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021, 232 pages, ISBN: 9781503627635.

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### The Composition of the Work

In South Korean society during the Cold War, research on North Korea (DPRK) was very paltry due to ideological restrictions, the poverty of data, and the lack of experts. However, since the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, research on North Korea has been actively carried out thanks to the interest and vitalization of the unification movement, and has given us many excellent results. Research on North Korea now covers all aspects of that state's history, politics, society, and economy. However, South Korean researchers in North Korean studies have dealt with very limited subject areas in North Korea's diplomacy and foreign relations. From the 1990s, North Korea-Russia, North Korea-China, and North Korea-US relations have been their main concerns.

The realm of true value in North Korea's diplomacy during the Cold War was its Third World (non-aligned) diplomacy. Little is known about North Korea's external activities in these regions during the Cold War. Perhaps, in view of the difficulties in obtaining relevant data, earnest research in this field is only possible if the diligence of experts with accurate

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data about numerous regions is premised.

An assistant professor of homeland security and emergency preparedness at Virginia Commonwealth University, Benjamin R. Young's research interests include East Asian studies, Cold War international history, security studies, and international relations. Young's book, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and The Third World*, focuses primarily on the Third World policy of the North Korean government and its active role in Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the Cold War. The book's table of contents is as follows:

1. Building a Reputation, 1956–1967
2. Kimilsungism beyond North Korean Borders, 1968–1971
3. Kim Il Sung's "Korea First" Policy, 1972–1979
4. Kim Jong Il's World and Revolutionary Violence, 1980–1983
5. Survival by Any Means Necessary, 1984–1989

Although the book is divided into chronological periods, this does not necessarily translate to a clear division in the content of North Korean policy. Rather, it can be seen that the continuity of North Korean diplomacy traverses the above time periods.

The author conducted an in-depth study of publications, mainly produced by the North Korean government, as well as official records of the United States, Mexico, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and countries of the former Eastern Bloc. He has also made extensive use of the US National Archives, which preserves records of the US State Department's close monitoring of the activities of North Korean officials and diplomats in the Third World from 1968 to 1979. In particular, diplomats from these aforementioned countries stationed in Third World countries reported back to their respective governments on North Korea-related print media and other North Korean activities, records which later became invaluable resources for the study of the time and place. This book would have been difficult to write without a careful examination of this wide range of materials.

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Young's study does not examine the industrialization process of North Korea, nor the extent to which the North Korean system relied on aid from the Soviet Union and China, but rather analyzes the political, ideological, military, and cultural ties between Pyongyang and the decolonizing world. Young explains how Third Worldism shaped North Korea's national identity, which in the Third World was based on the core principles of independence and anti-colonialism, and how that identity was articulated through dialogue with Third World supporters and through Juche, the state ideology of North Korea.

### **Solidarity with Major Anti-imperialist Countries**

Young's book opens immediately following the August faction incident of 1956, which might be called the final show of resistance in North Korea to the momentum that would lead to the Kim Il-sung monolithic regime. At this time, the North Korean leadership actively pursued Third World diplomacy to enhance its international status as a truly independent government and to establish its own legitimacy by depicting South Korea as a puppet of the United States. The basic goal of North Korea's foreign policy in the 1960s was to maintain neutrality in the Sino-Soviet dispute by advocating solidarity with the international communist movement and to pioneer diplomatic relations with the Third World.<sup>1</sup>

The international environment at the time was favorable for the North Korean leadership to implement its foreign policy. For instance, on the international stage, the solidarity between Indonesia's Sukarno and Kim Il-sung, who was calling for anti-imperialist independence, was natural. The North Korea-Indonesia relationship was based on shared values of national

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1. According to professor Shu Guang Zhang, the increasingly tense relationship between China and the Soviet Union between 1954 and 1962 demonstrated that the shared interest of fighting common enemies was not enough to sustain the alliance between the two communist powers (Zhang 2010, 375).

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autonomy, self-sufficiency, and nonalignment. Both leaders defined their respective nation's role as that of vanguard in a new international order that prioritized national liberation and global decolonization.

Another key solidarity was with Cuba, and immediately after the Cuban Revolution North Korea established a close cooperative relationship with that revolutionary government. In particular, Che Guevara's visit to North Korea laid the foundation for a strong and reciprocal relationship between the two countries. Above all, the two countries formed a strong bond over their common anti-Americanism, and both actively supported guerrilla fighters and national liberation movements in the Third World.

Kim Il-sung dedicated himself to assisting Vietnamese communists from the late 1950s. The Vietnam War proved useful for enhancing Kim's international and domestic prestige. His visit to North Vietnam in 1958 helped strengthen the ties between these two Asian communist countries both seeking national reunification. Eager to reaffirm the people's support for anti-colonialism through the Vietnam War, the North Korean leadership sent the North Korean Air Force to participate in the Vietnamese struggle. Expressing his dissatisfaction that Moscow and Peking were too passive in their support of North Vietnam, Kim Il-sung put into practice the independent *Juche* line by providing direct support to North Vietnam. Young stresses that Pyongyang was not sparing in its active support of North Vietnam, as it believed that the outcome of the Vietnam War would have decisive consequences for its own security, US behavior, and the prospect of revolution in South Korea. On the other hand, the Vietnam War allowed North Korea the opportunity to evaluate the South Korean army without an all-out war on the Korea Peninsula, and in Vietnam North Korea tried to demoralize South Korean troops sent to this same war and entice them to communism.

By the end of the 1960s, both the Soviet Union and China had come to respect North Korea's independent position and to recognize Kim Il-sung's self-reliant identity (Suh 1988, 207). From that time, North Korea launched a diplomatic offensive to promote Kim Il-sung's overseas status and secure Third World allies in its fight for greater international recognition in

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competition with South Korea. The goal of these diplomatic activities was ultimately focused on contributing to national reunification under the lead of Kim and North Korea.

Kim Il-sung considered the Third World fertile ground for the spread of his brand of autonomous anti-colonialism that would bolster his global fame. Especially in the late 1960s, Kim viewed the DPRK, Cuba, and North Vietnam as the forming a vanguard of world revolution and he sought to lead a formal political coalition of small states unified under the rubric of national autonomy and anti-colonialism (p. 45).

### **The Performance of Juche in the Third World**

During the Cold War, North Korea trained many Third World guerillas, and it seemed to be a relatively easy undertaking in which a small country could exercise their fair share of influence among radical groups. Young explains how communist rebels from Mexico and Sri Lanka entered North Korea, received training and support, and then returned to their home countries. By early 1971, it was reported that more than 2,000 guerrillas from 30 countries received training in North Korea. North Korea's insistence on national autonomy and anti-colonialism appealed to Third World rebels, who were seeking an anti-Western ideology for their national liberation movements (p. 53), although North Korea's support of such guerilla movements sometimes hindered its diplomacy in the Third World. In 1973, North Korea sent 92 of its pilots to Egypt to assist Egypt in its fight against Israel (supported by the United States), and it is known that North Korean pilots conducted many operational sorties up through 1975. North Korea had been providing military aid to Syria since the late 1960s. After the Iran's 1979 revolution, the DPRK established various ties with that country under mutual feelings of anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism. Support for Palestine was extended as a way of appealing to Arab governments in the Middle East and gaining diplomatic recognition in the region. North Korea's pro-Palestinian policies, including military support, greatly improved North

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Korea's status and prestige in the Middle East.

North Korean authorities also enthusiastically turned to newspaper advertising as a way of disseminating Kim Il-sung's works, and screened films to promote both Kim Il-sung's *greatness* and North Korean society in the Third World. Pyongyang's sponsoring of free trips to North Korea aimed at influential figures in the Third World helped to expand propaganda and longing for the North Korean system, even among Third World-oriented organizations such as the American Black Panther Party. However, the propaganda on Kim Il-sung's deified status also met with rejection in some areas. Many Third World travelers to the DPRK shunned the ubiquitous cult of Kim Il-sung, though tending to acknowledge the rapid decolonization and industrialization of North Korean society. To promote regional support for people of the Third World, Pyongyang formed and funded friendship societies throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which served as its main vehicle for exporting Kimilsungism to these regions. The DPRK government genuinely believed that Kimilsungism could be a useful anti-colonial ideology for the decolonizing world. From the mid-1970s, the Third World became more of a space for the development of nationalist agendas than one of revolutionary cooperation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, North Korea's method of supporting the Third World, mainly in Africa, was to send workers and technicians to build factories, irrigation projects, palaces, and stadiums, in countries eager to accept cheap or free developmental assistance. North Korea's non-aligned diplomacy mainly focused on Africa, though it was not limited to there. DPRK diplomacy also actively targeted Jamaica, Nicaragua, and small newly independent Caribbean islands (Barbados, Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines), which are geographically close to the United States. The scope of North Korea's aggressive diplomatic activities also expanded from Southeast Asia to the South Pacific region, including the Solomons and Fiji, although it was not always successful there.

According to Young, Kim Il-sung did not simply view the Third World as a platform for political propaganda or support. He also worked hard to secure economic benefits for North Korea through exchanges with these

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countries. For example, in an interview with the North Korean delegation returning from its visit to Africa in November 1984, Kim pointed out the specific current status of agriculture and industry in Mozambique, Tanzania, and Equatorial Guinea, and suggested that North Korea actively promote joint venture projects with these countries (Kim 2009b, 311-323).

On the other hand, Young details the influence of and reaction to Juche ideology that emphasized self-reliance and self-strengthening, implying that it was the most important factor in raising North Korea's status in the decolonizing world. International seminars on the Juche idea were held regularly in Pyongyang and other Third World cities, and Juche joined the Third World modernization discourse emphasizing independence and anti-colonialism. The Juche idea was also highly appreciated by prominent Western intellectuals, such as Luise Rinser. Of course, North Korean authorities invested heavily in the export of Juche, the process of which was accompanied by the idolization of Kim Il-sung, reflection of the North Korean people's perception of their leader.

Pyongyang's diplomacy toward the Third World relied heavily on the framework of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). North Korea denied the past communist view that saw Yugoslavia's President Tito as a revisionist by praising Tito for doing so much for the unity and independence of the people of the Third World.<sup>2</sup> In a seeming diplomatic success for North Korea, at the 1975 NAM conference in Lima, Peru, NAM members agreed to invite North Korea into that international body but not the South. North Korea's NAM membership came without prior consultations with fellow socialist countries, including the Soviet Union, and diplomatically, North Korea's independent path was further strengthened as a result. Rather stunning is the author's view that the "Axe Murder Incident," in which North Korean soldiers killed two US soldiers at Panmunjom in 1976, was part of an attempt to highlight the USFK issue at the NAM Conference being held simultaneously in Sri Lanka (p. 90). Pyongyang wished to use the NAM as a

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2. The changing nature of relations between North Korea and Yugoslavia during the Cold War is dealt with in detail in Park (2022).

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diplomatic medium to advance its goal of having US forces withdrawn from South Korea, but NAM member states were not unified on this issue.

As the author alludes, the 1970s were the most successful period for North Korea's Third World policy. At this time, the North Korean economy achieved its most rapid growth and its political stability was established as Kim Jong-il, son of Kim Il-sung, became the heir apparent to North Korean leadership.

Although Pyongyang's Third World diplomacy aimed to gain an edge in competition with Seoul, another important driving force behind it was ideological, that is its "powerful anti-imperialist revolutionary capability that reflects the basic trend of the present age" (Kim 2009a, 290). While some scholars have emphasized the negative diplomatic legacies of North Korea, such as its role in conflicts and its diplomatic ruptures with a series of non-aligned countries, Benjamin Young has chosen to focus on the performance and achievements of North Korea's diplomacy.

### **Changes in the International Situation and North Korean Diplomacy**

Galvanized by the success of North Korea's Third World diplomacy, the Park Chung-hee government in South Korea responded directly. The most striking example is South Korea's courting and winning an alliance with Gabon. When Gabon's president, Omar Bongo, visited South Korea in 1975 he received a huge welcome. He subsequently visited South Korea three more times through 2007, making of Gabon North Korea's only diplomatic defeat in Africa. According to Young, North Korea responded by constructing a party cadre training school free of charge in Gabon and sending ten specialists to Libreville to build a large statue of Omar Bongo.

At the Sixth Congress of the KWP in 1980, Kim Jong-il officially emerged as the heir to power in North Korea, and his succession was criticized by some left-wing parties in the West and the Third World that were supporters of North Korea. In Young's words, "this nepotistic transfer of power angered many Communists and leftist-leaning fellow travelers who



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attended the Sixth Party Congress,” including the Socialist People’s Party of Denmark, Social Democratic Labor Party of Norway, People’s National Congress of Guyana, Socialist Party of Lebanon, National Liberation Party of Costa Rica, and Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (p. 97). However, there is no indication that such a power succession weakened the North Korean regime or provoked the possibility of regime change.

As a means of strengthening North Korea’s internal solidarity and accelerating its foreign policy, Kim Jong-il enthusiastically utilized North Korea’s mass gymnastics. Up until 2001, the DPRK government sent mass gymnastics specialists to forty-eight countries, most of them members of the Third World, on ninety-four different occasions (Kim et al. 2002, 42). Young emphasizes that many leaders in the Third World also recognized the power of mass gymnastics to mobilize youth populations and foster patriotism during an era of decolonization. North Korea used its mass gymnastics instructors as a cheap but effective means of spreading its anti-Western and anti-imperialist ideas in Africa. Young endeavors to communicate the positive and negative effects of this by introducing various reactions to the performance of mass gymnastics in these countries.

While the author gives a positive evaluation of Kim Il-sung’s achievements and legacy as an international leader, he takes the opposite attitude with the Kim Jong-il era. The official appearance of Kim Jong-il coincided with the period when South Korea had gained an economic advantage over North Korea and the new Cold War began internationally as a result of American anti-communist policy. In 1983, an explosion aimed at South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan during his state visit to Rangoon, Burma’s capital, killed 17 South Koreans. The bombing was believed to be the work of North Korean special agents, although North Korea still denies it. From the author’s point of view, this event led to a dramatic change in North Korea’s foreign policy and a characteristic feature of Kim Jong-il’s diplomacy.

According to Young, Kim Jong Il took the DPRK’s foreign policy in a more militant and aggressive direction, unofficially disagreeing with Kim Il-sung’s policy of anti-colonial assistance, often free of charge, to Third World

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rebels and revolutionary governments (p. 94). Under Kim Jong-il, the need for hard currency to preserve the loyalty of high-level party officials and bolster a stagnant North Korean economy meant North Korea focused increasingly on illicit activities in the Third World, such as smuggling and arms proliferation. Consequently, Kim Jong-il's version of diplomacy prioritized revolutionary violence—the key to undermining the ROK's legitimacy and paving the way to his own succession as the next leader of the DPRK, which would lead North Korea's foreign policy along a more terroristic path.

What has consistently characterized DPRK diplomacy has been that state's diplomatic rivalry with the ROK, which could never be overlooked in its policy measures. North Korea invested resources even in the Caribbean region due to the participation of these small island nations in international forums, such as the UN. Despite being relatively insignificant players in Cold War politics, these small islands mattered in inter-Korean rivalry as both sides vied for diplomatic recognition (p. 118). Thus, the South Pacific remained dominated by North Korean influence and became one of a few spaces where Pyongyang exerted greater influence than Seoul. It was North Korea's financial assistance, and not the teachings of Kim Il-sung, that South Pacific island nations most welcomed (p. 123).

The DPRK did not abandon its Third World diplomacy entirely, continuing to send technical and agricultural specialists all over Africa during the mid-1980s. Still, many military experts supported local military training in African countries. Uganda's decision to expel the South Korean ambassador in September 1984 was viewed as a North Korean victory in the inter-Korean diplomatic rivalry.

North Korea faced an identity crisis in the late 1980s, when Seoul surpassed Pyongyang in international status and economic power. In response to South Korea's hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korea tried to maintain its status by holding the 1989 World Festival of Youth and Students, but this event led to economic difficulties amidst the crisis of real socialism.

In the Kim Jong-il era, the communist regime's sluggish advance into

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the Third World can be seen in two aspects. First, Kim Jong-il himself became distanced from foreign relations, even in his early successor years, as he was a *hermit leader* to the extent that he rarely traveled abroad save in China and Russia. Second, when Kim Jong-il came to power, North Korea lacked sufficient national capacity to devote itself to the Third World as it had done earlier in its history. Therefore, as Young's study points out, as South Korea's international status increased, North Korea's influence in the NAM was bound to weaken. As a major example of this, North Korea looked for countries that would support its bid to co-host the Seoul Olympics, but found only a few countries, such as Cuba, willing to do so. In response to the Seoul Olympics, North Korea invested a huge amount of money to hold the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students (1989) in Pyongyang. Of course, this event did not improve Pyongyang's image abroad. It was clear that North Korea's global status was in gradual decline due to economic difficulties, Seoul's rise in international status, and the North's inadequate relations with other countries. With the collapse of the Communist Bloc and the DPRK's crumbling economy, the appeal of North Korea-style socialism naturally lost its luster (p. 150).

### **Achievements and Challenges**

Although the title of this book, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader. North Korea and the Third World*, would seem to be an overview of North Korea's relations with the Third World through military cooperation and aid, it actually covers political, military, economic, and socio-cultural exchanges and assistance. Its greatest contribution in dealing with North Korea's relationship with the Third World is that it does not follow existing research patterns that appear to be rather superficial, but vividly depicts practical and concrete aspects of North Korea-Third World relations. Undeniably, many narratives about North Korea tend to lose their objectivity in order to focus on criticizing North Korea for political and ideological purposes. Therefore, this book can be considered an important advance in research

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methodologies on North Korea. In addition, narratives about North Korea's exchanges with the Third World help us better understand the lives of the people in North Korea.

While Young reveals many achievements (despite some criticisms) in the Third World diplomacy of Kim Il-sung, North Korea's diplomacy entered a different trajectory after Kim Jong-il became the official successor. However, the change in North Korea's diplomatic course reflects the defensive stance brought about by the weakening of the socialist camp amidst the intensification of the global Cold War in the 1980s, rather than a result of leadership change. In fact, during the co-rule of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, North Korea's external relations still belonged to the domain of Kim Il-sung. In the 1980s, in the context of North Korea's foreign exchange crisis and economic difficulties, North Korea supported African dictators regardless of political ideology, and maintained fraternal bonds with Cambodia's feudal monarchist Norodom Sihanouk. Young's book actually regards these phenomena as deviations from the trajectory of North Korean diplomacy. But if we understand that North Korea's foreign policy was based on an anti-imperialist independence line rather than adherence to a socialist ideology, it is not easy to view such attitudes and behavior as deviating from the norm.

Young has actually made an important contribution to elucidating the history of North Korea's foreign policy by discovering valuable facts related to the relationship between the DPRK and the Third World. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that some events and phases mentioned in the book follow a traditional narrative structure. The view that North Korea's foreign policy relied on revolutionary violence following the 1983 Rangoon incident is an exaggerated interpretation of specific events. Further, in the case of the bombing of KAL flight 858, there has been much controversy, and although rigorous academic investigation of the incident and its causes is called for, Young largely pursues the existing interpretation of Kim Jong-il-orchestrated terrorism.

The world's view of North Korea during the Cold War was extremely divided. From the Western perspective, North Korea was clearly a tyrannical

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and totalitarian society led by a one-man dictatorship. But the opposite view also existed, such as African political activist Karrim Essack's assertion that the Third World looked to North Korea as a model. In the current reality of deteriorating socio-economic conditions in North Korea, only a few maintain the latter view today, yet North Korea's past record has received positive appraisals from many Third World countries.

I think the message of this book is a valuable one—it is necessary to properly examine the reality of North Korea's past external relations in order to understand that country's current state and its future prospects. This work has provided a direction for future examinations of North Korea-Third World relations, which may lead to more detailed studies of North Korea's relations with individual countries and specific regions.

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