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EVOLVING CHINESE AND SOVIET POLICIES TOWARD THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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OVERVIEW

After decades of seeming imperviousness to the dramatic changes occurring throughout East Asia, the Korean Peninsula has clearly entered a period of fluidity. This is as apparent in the policies of China and the Soviet Union toward the two Koreas as it is on the Peninsula itself. Between the two, Chinese policies show the sharper changes. It may be ironic, in this regard, that the greatest uncertainty concerns the future policies of the Soviet Union. This paper analyzes the evolving policies of China and the Soviet Union toward the Korean Peninsula and assesses their implications.

CHINESE POLICIES

Introduction

Chinese policies toward the Korean Peninsula present something of an enigma. On the one hand, there is no denying that the Chinese have lost ground to the Soviets in North Korea over the past couple years. This is evident in a number of developments. The Soviets have provided North Korea MiG-23s and SA-3 missiles, breaking a decade-long Soviet moratorium on the supply of advanced military equipment to Pyongyang. They have routinized intelligence overflights—directed partly at the People's Republic of China (PRC)—while instituting plane and ship visits to North Korea and ceremonial military exchanges. The Soviets have also increased their high-level political exchanges with North Korea, including visits by Soviet Politburo member Aliyev to North Korea in August 1985, by Premier Kang Son-San to Moscow in December 1985, by Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze to Pyongyang in January of 1986, and by Kim Il-Sung to Moscow

in October 1986. Kim's Moscow visit was his second in less than two-and-a-half years, and there remains talk of a possible Gorbachev visit to North Korea.¹

Closer Soviet-North Korean ties are also reflected in increased North Korean support for Soviet domestic and foreign policies and greater public Soviet support for key Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) policy positions. The North Koreans, for example, have been effusive in their praise for Gorbachev's economic restructuring and arms control initiatives, while they have muffled their differences with Soviet policy toward Afghanistan and Indochina and moved farther than ever in acknowledging the Soviet role in Korea's postwar "liberation." The Soviets, for their part, have stepped up their rhetoric condemning the annual U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) "Team Spirit" military exercises and the alleged development of a U.S.-Japan-ROK military "alliance," while endorsing Pyongyang's call for the creation of a nuclear free zone on the Korean Peninsula. Moscow's decision to participate in the Seoul Olympics is a conspicuous exception to the growing concatenation of Soviet-North Korean ties.

Despite these tangible signs of improved Soviet-North Korean relations—and in contrast to the past pattern—there has been no backsliding in China's policy of contacts with South Korea. This policy began in May 1983 when the Chinese used the hijacking of a Chinese civilian aircraft to Seoul as an excuse for opening contacts. Over the past several years there has been further progress. Chinese and South Koreans now routinely visit each others' countries for sports exchanges and international meetings.² Chinese officials attended the October 1985 International Monetary Fund (IMF) meeting in Seoul, for example, while participating fully in the Asian Games held last fall in the South Korean

¹ The *Washington Post*, December 4, 1986.

² For at least some purposes, the Chinese even allow direct flights between Beijing and Seoul. The *Christian Science Monitor*, August 19, 1986.

capital. South Korean diplomats have also gone to China, several of them in their official capacities. These exchanges have become so routine that when Kim Il-Sung arrived in Beijing in May 1987, a number of South Koreans were also in town—some competing in a badminton tournament and others attending an international conference.

At the same time, several international incidents have been amicably settled between the two countries. Family reunification visits—mainly of South Koreans to relatives in Northeast China—have gained further momentum. And South Korean businessmen have begun visiting the PRC with increasing frequency.

Perhaps most notable, trade has continued to grow between the two countries. In 1986, for example, bilateral commerce through Hong Kong increased seven percent to \$646 million; when direct trade between Pusan and Shanghai is included, trade between the two countries last year is estimated to have reached \$1.2 billion.³ Other estimates place current trade at "up to U.S. \$3 billion."⁴ Either figure exceeds by a substantial margin China's bilateral trade with North Korea, which in 1986 totaled only \$515 million.⁵ Although much of the trade between China and South Korea is still conducted through intermediaries, it is becoming both more open and direct. A Chinese plan to open a trade office in Seoul after the Olympics, allegedly conveyed privately to South Korean leaders, would facilitate a further expansion of bilateral commerce—as well as other forms of interaction.⁶

³ *The Asian Wall Street Journal Weekly*, July 13, 1987.

⁴ *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 7, 1988, pp. 15-16.

⁵ *The Economist*, January 23, 1988, p. 27.

⁶ *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 17, 1987, p. 11. Telexes can already be sent directly between South Korea and the PRC.

Given the objective importance of North Korea to the PRC, these policies represent something of an enigma. The central questions are how to interpret this apparent enigma and how to assess its implications.

Factors Behind Chinese Policies

In addressing the first question, it is important to avoid the tendency to approach the Korea issue exclusively in terms of the Sino-Soviet rivalry. The Soviet dimension is an important consideration. PRC policies toward the Korean Peninsula, however, are a product of other factors as well. Among these, three seem particularly important.

The first relates to China's domestic situation. Since the late 1970s, under the rubric of the "Four Modernizations," China has increasingly turned its attention to domestic reform and economic development. Some experts have gone so far as to liken these reform efforts to other historical instances of massive political, economic, and societal change such as the Meiji Restoration.⁷ Whatever the relevance of such comparisons, it is clear that China is now committed to a process of modernization as a priority national objective.

In terms of foreign policy, this commitment requires an alleviation of international tension—what the Chinese call a "peaceful environment"—so as to enable China to turn its energies inward to economic and technological development. It also requires an opening to the outside world—especially the West—for trade, investment, and access to modern technology. War in Korea, or even heightened tension and instability, rank very high in the Chinese calculus of developments that could prevent these from happening, a fact

⁷ See, for example, Michael Oksenberg and Kenneth Lieberthal, "Forecasting China's Future," *The National Interest*, Fall, 1986, p. 18.

which dictates changes in Chinese policies toward the Peninsula. Put simply, the Chinese cannot afford a blowup with the United States and Japan over Korea. The general demise of ideology and concomitantly greater emphasis on pragmatism in China strengthen this awareness.

At the same time, South Korea has come to have a new weight in Chinese eyes, both as an attractive trading partner and—to some extent—as a model for the PRC's own development. This new weight is evident in the attention paid to the South Korean economic experience, as well as in the increasing openness with which China is conducting its so-called "unofficial" relations.⁸ The positive impression the Chinese have formed of South Korea in the course of these interactions has undoubtedly strengthened this tendency.

The second factor concerns trends on the Peninsula itself. From North Korea's perspective, these must look increasingly adverse. It has already lost the economic competition with the ROK and risks losing its military edge as well in the not too distant future. It has made no headway in undermining South Korea's alliances with Japan and the United States; on the contrary, these alliances have been considerably strengthened. It has had no success in containing South Korea's diplomatic successes, as reflected in Pyongyang's failure to enlist international support for its sundry proposals on the Seoul Olympics. And it is having increasing trouble persuading its allies—beset with their own domestic difficulties and needs for a period of peace—to accept its definition of national interest.

⁸ See, for example, "An Analysis of the 'Economic Miracles' of Asia's 'Four Little Dragons,'" in *Red Flag*, April 1987, translated in *JPRS China Report*, May 19, 1987. Although more negative in tone than other articles in economic journals like *Shijie Jingji (World Economy)*, the fact that *Red Flag* published such a substantive analysis is itself significant and attests to the attention the Chinese are paying to the experience of states like South Korea.

This last point is particularly true concerning Pyongyang's unwavering commitment to reunification on North Korean terms. Although both Communist powers pay lip service to North Korea's reunification policies, they have made clear over the years that they have much higher priorities—not the least of which is avoiding war with the United States. Several years ago, then Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang was reported to have gone so far as to tell visiting Australian Prime Minister Hawke that "it isn't feasible" to reunify Korea any longer, given the reality of two governments on the Peninsula.⁹

At the same time, neither China nor the Soviet Union are being particularly forthcoming in supporting North Korea in its economic difficulties. As early as 1985 the Chinese indicated publicly that they would not extend much additional assistance to North Korea.¹⁰ Deng Xiaoping is reported to have turned down Kim Il-Sung's request for crude oil supplies during the North Korean leader's most recent trip to Beijing—although he did agree to donate 100,000 tons of grain—allegedly because North Korea has failed to pay back its existing crude oil debt to the PRC.¹¹ If true, this report would place the Chinese alongside the Russians—who appear reluctant to move significantly on new economic commitments to Pyongyang and continue to insist on balanced trade, repayment of North Korea's debt, and cash payments in all bilateral transactions—in their increasingly hard line toward North Korea's economic management. It might also account for the renewed emphasis in North Korean propaganda on "self-reliance" (*juch'e*) and the unprecedented attack by Kim Il-Sung's son, Jong-Il, on party officials for their "defeatism," their "worship of big powers and dogmatic approach to foreign things," and their tendency to "harbour illusions about big countries or developed nations."¹²

⁹ *The New York Times*, February 9, 1984.

¹⁰ FBIS, *China*, January 16, 1985, p. D-5.

¹¹ *North Korea News*, August 3, 1987. Also see The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report -- China, North Korea*, No. 4, 1987 (The Economist Publications Limited, 1987), p. 28.

¹² "On Some Problems of Education in Juch'e Idea," *The People's Korea*, July 25, 1987.

South Korea's recurrent political difficulties are undoubtedly heartwarming to North Korean leaders and bolster the ideological conviction in Pyongyang that Seoul is on the verge of collapse. In this context, the recent successful elections in South Korea and the prospect of a peaceful political transition can only be a huge disappointment, if not a major shock. Even before the elections, however, realistic assessments within the North Korean leadership must have led to a more sober conclusion: the *long term* trends are decidedly against North Korea.

If these trends continue, North Korea will increasingly be faced with a choice among: doing nothing, and watching its strategic situation deteriorate further; emulating the Chinese by opening itself to the outside world and adopting a long-term, peaceful approach to the question of "reunification;" and taking active steps to try and set back South Korean progress. The Chinese understand this very well and have an interest—spurred and made tangible by repeated North Korean terrorist activities (most recently the bombing of a civilian South Korean airliner near the Thai-Burma border) and by North Korea's ongoing redeployment of military forces closer to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—in encouraging the second, rather than the third, alternative. This interest presumably accounts for the low-key Chinese response to the political unrest in South Korea during the spring of 1987, as well as the apparent equanimity with which the Chinese accepted the outcome of the December elections.¹³

The third factor relates to China's basic view of itself and its long-term strategic aspirations. Although China has undergone sharp swings in policy and cycles of alignment and isolation, the gravity of modern Chinese politics, as one specialist put it several years

¹³ See *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 3, 1987 for a useful summary of Chinese reactions and FBIS, *China*, December 17, 1987, pp. 7-9 and January 4, 1988, pp. 7-8 for treatment of the election itself.

ago, has centered on a commitment to strategic independence.¹⁴ The Chinese see themselves as a global actor, and they define their security in global terms. The long-term Chinese objective—symbolized by their current emphasis on an "independent" foreign policy—is to carve out an independent position alongside the two superpowers.

This aspiration carries with it a requirement for responsible international behavior. It also involves a "globalization" of Chinese foreign policy in which the PRC begins to interact with all members of the international community in all existing fora. Today, China is more constructively engaged in global politics than at any time in its history. It has established diplomatic relations with over 125 nations and joined most international economic organizations. It has sent a large number of its brightest students abroad to study and expanded its cross-cultural exchanges. And it has significantly increased its economic activity in the world, becoming in the process an important trading partner for an increasing number of nations.¹⁵

China's more global involvement has bolstered domestic trends toward pragmatism and supported its transformation from a revolutionary to a reformist—and in some ways even a conservative—state. It has also made China a force for stability, both in the region and the world at large. This applies in particular to the Korean Peninsula where the costs of instability are so high.

¹⁴ Harry Harding, "Change and Continuity in Chinese Foreign Policy," *Problems of Communism*, March-April 1983, p. 18.

¹⁵ By 1981, China had already become the third largest importer of American goods in Asia and Japan's fifth largest trading partner overall. Harry Harding, ed., *China's Foreign Relations in the 1980s*, (Yale University Press, 1984), p.207.

The Soviet Factor and Chinese Calculations

Among Chinese security concerns, few are more important than developments on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁶ In this context, the Soviet factor has been a critical element in Chinese calculations since the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is one reason why Beijing has given such a high priority to North Korea for decades, reflected in frequent high-level visits, firm political support, and substantial economic and material assistance.¹⁷

For three reasons, however, the Chinese do not approach North Korea as a zero-sum game vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. First, the Chinese are confident of their own position. This confidence results partly from a historically close relationship, stemming not just from Korea's past as a tributary of China but from years of concrete Chinese support and close *personal* ties between Chinese and North Korean leaders in the postwar period. It also results from China's awareness of North Korea's objective need for the PRC as a counterweight to the Soviet Union.

Second, the Chinese see limits to Soviet-North Korean relations. They know, for example, that Kim Il-Sung's emphasis on "independence" is not mere rhetoric but the paramount North Korean national interest. This interest derives both from Korea's geo-strategic location and Pyongyang's experience with Soviet efforts in the postwar period to turn North Korea into a satellite state. The Chinese also know that North Korea's deep suspicions about the Soviet Union are reciprocated by Moscow's distrust of Kim Il-Sung.

¹⁶ For treatment of this and related issues, see Jonathan Pollack, "U.S.-Korean Relations: The China Factor," in Robert Scalapino and Sung-joo Han, eds., *United States-Korea Relations* (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1986), pp. 188-202.

¹⁷ A good example of Chinese sensitivity to North Korean reactions is the visit of PRC President Li Xiannian to Pyongyang in early October 1986, which occurred while Chinese athletes were attending the Asian Games in Seoul. See FBIS, *China*, October 3, 1986, pp. D1-D4.

The Soviets are unwilling to give North Korean leaders what they want in the absence of much greater control over North Korean actions—which, again, the Chinese do not expect Pyongyang to provide.

In addition, the Chinese do not see the Soviets as a *long-term* solution to North Korea's problems. They know that only Moscow can provide the advanced military hardware the North needs to maintain its military superiority over South Korea. Indeed, they expect improvements in Soviet-North Korean relations as Pyongyang seeks help with its pressing problems. In the long term, however, the Chinese know that the Soviet Union is not in a position to reverse North Korea's decline relative to South Korea. Only a decision by North Korea to alter its priorities and open up to the outside world—which the Chinese are in a position to facilitate—can accomplish this. This contributes to a certain confidence in the long-term evolution.

Third, and related to this last point, the Chinese are not without their own sources of leverage over North Korea. They can apply this leverage through both "carrots" and "sticks." The "carrot" concerns Pyongyang's strong desire for contacts with the United States and ultimate trade and other dealings with the West. As the only state with close relations with both North Korea and the United States, China is in a position to help "broker" an opening to the West—a role that is critical to North Korea given its past track record, its dismal economic prospects, and the widespread suspicions in the West of North Korean intentions. The "stick" concerns the ROK. If North Korea moves too far toward the Soviet Union, the Chinese are perfectly capable of adjusting both the speed and scope of their opening to South Korea. This is something the North Koreans understand and, given their inherently disadvantageous position relative to Beijing, want to prevent.

For these reasons, the Chinese are not overly concerned by the improvement in Soviet-North Korean relations, although they watch the evolving relationship closely. The Chinese see improved ties as an irritant, not as an immediate threat, and they are hopeful that a resumption of the North-South dialogue will reduce whatever political benefits Moscow might try to reap in North Korea through its provision of military and economic assistance.

Chinese Objectives and Policy Approach

From this perspective, China has sought to accomplish two primary objectives in its policies toward the Korean Peninsula over the last several years. It has sought to lower tensions on the Peninsula and reduce the risk of renewed military conflict. And it has tried to get North Korea involved in more productive internal activities and external relations. These objectives have dictated an essentially three-pronged approach.

Toward North Korea, China has sought to mix continued expressions of firm support with efforts to nudge North Korea in new directions. It has faithfully represented North Korean positions on issues of importance to Pyongyang, while encouraging North Korean leaders to follow China's lead in domestic reform and external reorientation. China has also stressed the importance of dialogue with South Korea as a means for both refurbishing North Korea's international image and opening prospects for greater economic contacts with the West.

Toward South Korea, as described above, China has pursued a policy of "unofficial contacts," involving sports exchanges, contacts with South Koreans in international fora, family reunification visits, a burgeoning trade relationship, and other forms of "unofficial" contact. The Chinese continue to publicly support North Korean positions in an effort to

maintain a viable relationship with Pyongyang. In *practice*, however, they evince a growing, if tacit, acceptance of South Korea.

Toward the United States, China has sought to induce greater U.S. dealings with North Korea. The Chinese have publicly supported North Korea's "tripartite" proposal calling for talks involving the United States and the two Koreas, while echoing Pyongyang's assertions of its "peaceful" intentions. Privately, the Chinese have stressed the North's inability to attack the ROK without China's support, which they imply would not be forthcoming.¹⁸ Pointing to their own more extensive dealings with the ROK, they have urged the United States to take steps toward Pyongyang that would help end its isolation and reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula.

SOVIET POLICIES

Introduction

An assessment of evolving Soviet policies toward the Korean Peninsula must begin with two prefatory points. First, Soviet policy has focused primarily on *North* Korea. Aside from some limited contacts at sports events and occasional international conferences—most of which were cut back after the Soviets shot down a civilian Korean

¹⁸ Deng Xiaoping was reported to have told Secretary of Defense Weinberger on the latter's visit to Beijing in October 1983 that North Korea has neither the intention nor capability of invading South Korea. He added that China can not sit idly by *were the ROK to attack the North*, implying that the situation would be different if Pyongyang moved militarily against South Korea (italics supplied). (*The Washington Post*, October 21, 1983.) Since then, some Chinese have been even more explicit in their private comments. Chinese Communist Party adviser Zhang Xiangshan reportedly told a Japan Socialist Party delegation, for example, that "if the DPRK strikes the first blow and starts a war, China would be in no position to support her." (*The Yomiuri Shimbun*, June 25, 1984.) More recently, Chinese leaders are reported to have privately conveyed a pledge to the United States not to send troops to support a North Korean attack on South Korea. (*The Sankei Shinbun*, January 17, 1988.)

Airlines plane in September 1983—interactions between the two countries have been, and remain, minimal.¹⁹

Second, Soviet policy toward *North* Korea has to be placed in a historical context. The changes in Soviet policies over the past two years—and the new activism under Gorbachev more broadly—are indeed noteworthy. Bilateral relations between Moscow and Pyongyang have a dynamic of their own, however, which results from the two countries' experience in the postwar period. This dynamic continues to influence the character of Soviet policies toward North Korea.

Basic Pattern

Although the Soviet Union and North Korea are formal allies, the bilateral relationship has for many years been strained and difficult. This difficulty stems from rather divergent perspectives.²⁰

From a North Korean perspective, the Soviets have shown at best limited and qualified support for Pyongyang's fundamental interests. They have demonstrated little enthusiasm for Kim Il-Sung ever since he purged competing factions and consolidated his power in the mid-1950s. They have been ambivalent about Kim's official ideology of *juch'e* on which the legitimacy of his regime has heavily rested. And they have made clear their distaste for Kim's plan to appoint his son, Jong-Il, as his successor, despite some modest gestures

¹⁹ The paucity of interactions is one manifestation of a much broader Soviet disinterest in South Korea. See, for example, Peter Berton, "The Soviet Union and Korea: Perceptions, Scholarship, and Propaganda," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Spring 1986, pp. 3-28.

²⁰ For more details, see the report Harry Gelman and I wrote entitled *The Future of Soviet-North Korean Relations*. R-3159-AF, The RAND Corporation, October 1984, on which this section is largely based. For a more recent approach, see Yong Chool Ha, "Soviet Perceptions of Soviet-North Korean Relations," in *Asian Survey*, May 1986, pp. 573-590.

recently in his direction. Similarly, the North Koreans see the Soviets as manifesting little enthusiasm for their interest in independence, having worked hard in the 1940s and 1950s to establish North Korea as a satellite state and to subordinate its economy to Soviet economic needs and priorities. The North Koreans see the Soviets as having given lukewarm support at best for their objective of reunification on North Korean terms, while repeatedly attempting to use their economic and military assistance as a means for exerting political pressure on Pyongyang. Together, these experiences have fostered a general North Korean image of the Soviet Union as a "big, threatening neighbor that would like to dominate North Korea as it does Mongolia."²¹

Soviet perspectives, not surprisingly, are very different. The Soviets have never forgotten that it was they who placed Kim Il-Sung in power at the end of World War II. They see themselves as the original source of his personal authority and strongly resent what they regard as his impudent behavior. The Soviets also regard the North Koreans as profoundly ungrateful for past Soviet assistance. They see their payoff—both economically, in the form of repaid debts, and politically, in terms of increased influence—as not commensurate with the scope of their investment. Most important, the Soviets regard Kim Il-Sung as a dangerous man and the North Korean regime as unpredictable. They see Pyongyang's preoccupation with gaining control of South Korea as peripheral to Soviet interests at best and—given the Soviet-North Korean mutual defense treaty—as capable of dragging the USSR into direct military conflict with the United States at worst.

As a result, Soviet policy has been rather cautious. On the one hand, the Soviets have provided sufficient economic—and to a lesser degree military—assistance to give North

²¹ Ralph N. Clough, "The Soviet Union and the Two Koreas," D. Zagoria (ed.), *Soviet Policy in East Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 187. For an analysis of Moscow's historical designs, see Donald Zagoria, "Russian Policy Toward Korea: A Historical and Geopolitical Analysis," in Scalapino and Han, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-216.

Korea incentives to maintain at least minimally correct relations with the Soviet Union, to limit the extent of North Korean political offenses against Soviet policy interests, and to preserve options for the future. On the other hand, the Soviets have selectively limited their new economic, military, and political commitments to North Korea, while lowering their expectations concerning North Korean concessions in return for Soviet assistance.

In effect, the Soviets have pursued a minimalist policy designed to constrain the outflow of Soviet resources to North Korea and minimize Kim Il-Sung's ability to drag the USSR into conflict on the Peninsula. This policy testifies to Moscow's awareness of Korea's fundamental geo-strategic importance—and hence the need for continuing Soviet assistance—as well as the difficulty the Soviets have in their relations with Pyongyang.

Factors Behind Recent Soviet Policies

This basic pattern has characterized Soviet policy toward North Korea—and Soviet-North Korean relations more broadly—throughout much of the past two decades. As noted above, however, Soviet policies have shown signs of change over the past couple years. The Soviets have provided stronger rhetorical support for North Korea's sundry proposals concerning the Korean Peninsula, while—unlike China—echoing Pyongyang's denunciations of an alleged U.S.-Japan-ROK military alliance. They have reinstated high-level political visits. They have ended their self-imposed moratorium on the supply of advanced military equipment to North Korea and resumed referring to the Soviet-North Korean relationship as a "military alliance." The Soviets have backed this up with highly publicized visits by naval flotillas and air squadrons, deliberately communicating a greater

Soviet involvement in North Korea's defense.²² Reports that a Soviet long-range bomber landed in North Korea—ostensibly because of equipment problems—after violating Japanese airspace may reflect a further ratcheting up of the military relationship.²³ So too might speculations that the Soviets have facilitated North Korean supplies of heavier weapons—including surface-to-air missiles and rocket-propelled grenades—to the Communist insurgents in the Philippines.²⁴

A number of factors have contributed to these developments. One is a growing convergence of strategic interests between Moscow and Pyongyang. As Soviet relations with the U.S. deteriorated in the early 1980s and China's opening to the West grew, both the USSR and the DPRK saw renewed interest in repairing their relationship. Efforts by the Reagan Administration to bolster ties with South Korea after a period of strained relations under President Carter—and the new administration's commitment to rebuilding American strength in Asia and the Pacific more broadly—strengthened this interest. The USSR's long-awaited provision of MiG-23s to North Korea highlight the convergence of strategic interests. In providing the MiGs to North Korea, the Soviets improved their position vis-a-vis the Chinese in Pyongyang while meeting the North Korean need for advanced fighters. Although the MiGs are not a match for the F-16s the U.S. is providing South Korea, and hence will not by themselves upset the military balance on the Peninsula, they will help North Korea maintain its edge of military superiority.

Another factor is North Korea's pique at China's de facto opening toward South Korea. Historically, North Korea has tilted toward the USSR as a means for expressing its

²² For further details of the evolving military relationship, see Suck-Ho Lee, "Evolution and Prospects of Soviet-North Korean Relations in the 1980s," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Fall 1986, pp. 30-31.

²³ See the Kyodo report "USSR, DPRK Building Up Military Cooperation" in FBIS, *East Asia Pacific*, January 6, 1988, p. 4.

²⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 17, 1987, p. 36.

displeasure with Chinese policies. North Korea's unhappiness with Beijing's refusal to cut back on its unofficial dealings with the ROK presented the Soviets with an opportunity to score points at China's expense. In the wake of the Korean Airlines (KAL) Flight 007 shooting incident, this opportunity came at little cost to the Soviet Union.

The policy changes are undoubtedly also related to the domestic situation in North Korea. North Korea's serious economic difficulties and looming political succession represent both challenges and opportunities for the Soviet Union. Although the two countries are formally allies, it is clear that the Soviets do not have any better insight into developments in Pyongyang than do most other countries. By modifying their policies now, the Soviets are trying to gain greater understanding of the process of succession, while better positioning themselves for alternative outcomes.

Finally, improved ties with North Korea are linked to the Soviet Union's desire to be taken seriously, both as a global power and as a major regional actor. The Soviets have long chafed at their exclusion from tactical decisions concerning the Korean Peninsula. They have resented in particular the channel of communications between Washington and Beijing. Underlying all the steps the Soviets have taken so far is a determination to end this situation. If anything is going to happen on the Peninsula, they are clearly saying, the Soviet Union will have to be involved.

IMPLICATIONS

If this assessment is basically correct, then we probably can expect Chinese policies to continue over the coming period. These policies will continue not because of a Chinese

desire to "do something" for South Korea or the United States but because they serve China's interests.

There are, of course, a number of uncertainties. One is the question of political succession in North Korea. Although the Chinese have long cultivated Kim Jong-Il and other younger North Korean leaders, they do not have the same kind of relationships with them that they have had with their elders.²⁵ How this successor leadership defines North Korean interests could easily affect Chinese policies. Other imponderables include: the question of Soviet willingness to support North Korean adventurism; the evolution of Sino-Soviet relations; the internal political situation in South Korea; and domestic political change in the PRC itself. In addition, there are short-run risks of miscalculation. As events like the Rangoon bombing suggest, these could have major consequences.

At present, however, the Chinese seem well along in their intended direction. They are likely to continue to move cautiously, with continued attention to North Korean sensitivities. But they are likely to continue moving.

The broad policy implications are two-fold. First, the United States should resist any temptation to trade elements of its deterrent posture for Chinese gestures toward South Korea. Present Chinese policies serve *Chinese* interests, to state what is perhaps axiomatic, and the United States should not pay a major price to see them continue.

At the same time, however, the United States should see if there are ways to exploit its growing parallelism of interests with the PRC to induce changes in North Korea's behavior. The unilateral U.S. decision to allow its diplomats to interact with their North

²⁵ For the special efforts the Chinese have made on behalf of Kim Jong-Il, see Chong Wook Chung, "China's Role in Two-Korea Relations in the 1980s," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Fall 1986, pp. 54 and 66.

Korean counterparts at social functions and its offer to consider expanded dealings with Pyongyang in exchange for a resumption of the North-South dialogue and North Korean participation in the Seoul Olympics—both of which were communicated through Beijing—were steps in this direction.²⁶ This decision produced no results because North Korea showed little interest in this modest initiative. In the wake of the North Korean bombing of the KAL civilian airliner, the United States rescinded the decision altogether. The common interests between Washington and Beijing remain, however, and continue to serve as a basis for common efforts to alter North Korean behavior.

In the case of Soviet policies, the future is more murky. Partly this results from a series of contradictions in the policies themselves. One relates to the historical legacy. The Soviets want to improve their relations with Pyongyang, yet they continue to distrust North Korean leaders; their interest in helping North Korea maintain its edge of military superiority, therefore, runs up against their larger interest in avoiding an unwanted war with the United States. Similarly, any interest in being responsive to North Korea's economic difficulties collides not only with the USSR's own domestic priorities but with Moscow's continued unhappiness with North Korea's economic performance. Finally, despite the recent adjustments, the Soviets still do not like North Korean policies, not the least of which is Kim Il-Sung's effort to institute hereditary succession. These contradictions will not be easy to resolve.

Second, at some level, improved Soviet-North Korean ties hinder more important Soviet efforts to improve relations with the PRC. This is particularly true concerning increased military ties, which the Chinese understand are directed at least partly against

²⁶ *The New York Times*, March 10, 1987.

them. Yet it is precisely in this military area where the greatest common interests between North Korea and the Soviet Union lie.

A third problem is the apparent contradiction between increased Soviet support to North Korea and the image the Soviets are trying to create of a "new" Soviet leadership committed to tension reduction and "new thinking." Continuing North Korean belligerence and ongoing terrorist activities properly make Pyongyang the pariah of the Pacific. By continuing to support such behavior, the Soviet Union raises questions among Asian nations about its own intentions.²⁷ This hinders Moscow's effort to portray itself as a "pacific" power and gain greater acceptance by the countries of the region as an "Asian" nation.

Finally, if the Soviets want to be considered a major power in the region they will have to deal with South Korea. There are some signs that the Soviets are beginning to understand this. While they have moved to bolster their relations with Pyongyang, the Soviets have also allowed some modest improvements in South Korea's ties with Soviet East European bloc countries—notably regarding trade, cultural exchanges, and quiet diplomacy. The Soviets have begun to show incipient interest themselves in increased dealings with South Korea—primarily in the area of sports but in cultural and economic spheres as well. Moscow's decision to participate in the Seoul Olympics can only heighten this interest. This induces a further degree of caution in Soviet policies toward North

²⁷ The Soviet response to proof of North Korean responsibility for the bombing of the KAL airliner was instructive in this regard. Far from condemning North Korea or even maintaining silence, the Soviets criticized the United States for providing a "pretext" for the "allegations of the puppet regime in Seoul" that there was North Korean involvement in the plane's disappearance. Portraying Pyongyang as the victim of U.S. pressure simply because it "pursues an independent policy," the Soviets went on to denounce the United States for "an attempt to evade responsibility for its deeds" as "the main source and expounder of the policy of state terrorism," FBIS, *Soviet Union*, January 25, 1988, p. 20. Subsequent Soviet statements have cited without comment North Korean propaganda, including a charge that the bombing was a "performance enacted by the South Korean puppets with direct U.S. participation."

Korea and constrains, to a certain extent, the rapid development of Soviet-North Korean relations.

Having said all this, the Soviets have *already* taken certain risks in raising the level of their relationship with North Korea. The question is how far they are prepared to go in supporting North Korean adventurism. At this point, it is difficult to forecast Soviet policies with any confidence. Several speculations, however, are possible.

At a minimum, we can expect Soviet policy toward the Korean Peninsula under Gorbachev to be more active than under his predecessors. The Soviets will be less inclined than in the past to concede the turf to China and more willing to compete for influence in North Korea. Pyongyang's pending political succession will heighten Moscow's incentives to move toward a more active orientation.

Secondly, the Korean Peninsula is not likely to be excluded from the spate of Soviet initiatives. We can anticipate further proposals from the Soviets—probably related to their call for a "comprehensive Asian security system"—concerning nuclear-free zones, international peace conferences, and confidence-building measures. Moscow's main objective in proffering these proposals will be to gain entree into the diplomatic process concerning Korea. The longer-term objective will be to improve Moscow's image, while undermining the U.S. position in the region.

Thirdly, the Soviets may well pursue a somewhat more differentiated—and skillful—approach toward the Peninsula that includes modest dealings with South Korea. China's own dealings with the ROK will facilitate increased Soviet interactions. These interactions will be more constrained than those of the PRC, however, by the Soviet desire to bolster its strategic position in North Korea. For this same reason, the Soviets are likely to show little

interest in substantive progress on inter-Korean issues, since the almost certain result of any real rapprochement between the North and the South would be diminished Soviet influence. Those who see truly "new thinking" in Gorbachev's policies and a genuine desire to help reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula, therefore, may well be disappointed.

The present uncertainties concerning Soviet policies, however, suggest the need for humility in offering such speculations. Indeed, the striking changes in the Soviet Union over the last two years have produced debate within the United States over the direction of Soviet policy toward the Korean Peninsula—as over Soviet policies more broadly—and their implications for U.S. policy. Few analysts subscribe wholly to any single school of thought, and the differences among them are often more of degree than of kind. One can identify, however, at least three broad groupings or inclinations.

One might be called the *divergent-pessimists*. These analysts believe Soviet policies and interests on the one hand and Chinese/Western interests on the other hand are moving in opposite or *divergent* directions. Such analysts see a more activist Soviet leadership out to improve its position in North Korea at the PRC's expense through the provision of military equipment, the development of military ties, and the expansion of political and other support for North Korean objectives. They regard North Korea as willing to concede this position because of its dire situation. Some believe that the basic decisions have, in fact, already been made, and that we can anticipate a growing Soviet political and military presence in North Korea—and perhaps over time a de facto "Vietnamization" of North Korea.

These analysts tend to be rather *pessimistic* about the implications of recent developments for Chinese and American interests. Viewing the situation from the

perspective of Beijing and stressing the long-term competition between China and the Soviet Union, they often urge the United States to be more responsive to Chinese entreaties that it "do something"—such as scale back the annual U.S.-ROK military exercises or initiate more extensive and direct dealings with North Korea—to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence.

A second grouping might be called the *convergent-optimists*. These analysts agree that Soviet influence has increased in North Korea, but they tend to see this development in more positive terms. Most understand that, under present conditions, strong Chinese influence in Pyongyang is preferable to strong Soviet influence. But they do not see the evolving interests of the major powers as necessarily divergent. Indeed, they see a growing *convergence* of interests among these powers stemming from their common—and increasing—desire for stability on the Korean Peninsula. Emphasizing Soviet economic difficulties and the importance of Gorbachev's new policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, they tend to see an increased Soviet need for an "alleviation of tension" and concomitantly greater interest in various kinds of "confidence-building measures."

For this reason, these analysts tend to be more *optimistic* about the improvement in Soviet-North Korean relations. On the one hand, they see the potential for greater Soviet efforts to restrain North Korean adventurism and to encourage a renewal of dialogue on the Peninsula. At the same time, they see a basis for significantly expanded interactions between the USSR and South Korea, perhaps leading over time to "cross recognition" of the two Koreas by China, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the United States. These analysts thus tend to urge increased discussions with the USSR about Korea and greater efforts by the United States to enlist Soviet assistance in maintaining peace on the Peninsula.

Straddling both of these groupings are what might be called the *divergent-optimists*. These analysts are inclined to agree with those in the first group that U.S. and Soviet interests are likely to diverge as the USSR seeks more actively to expand its influence on the Peninsula. But they are less pessimistic concerning future prospects because they tend to see the long-term trends as favoring the United States and South Korea.

Most of these analysts understand the seriousness of Moscow's domestic difficulties. They are skeptical, however, of Gorbachev's ability to successfully carry out his economic reform policies. Even if he does succeed, they are doubtful that the substance—as opposed to the style—of Soviet foreign policies will be materially affected. The Soviets operate on a *strategic* basis, they emphasize, and their long-term objectives are not likely to change. Korea's historic, geo-strategic importance to the Soviet Union ensures heightened efforts under a more activist leadership to expand Soviet influence. In this regard, they see minimal Soviet interest in significantly expanded dealings with the ROK—although they allow for the possibility of modest measures—since any benefits the Soviets might gain from such dealings pale in comparison with their strategic interest in closer relations with North Korea.

Unlike the first group, however, these analysts tend to be less alarmed about closer Soviet ties with North Korea—although they watch developments closely. They understand that a strong Chinese influence in Pyongyang is preferable to a strong Soviet influence. But they believe that—so long as the United States is actively engaged—Moscow's desire to avoid a war with the United States will limit the extent to which it will actively provoke instability on the Peninsula. They also tend to see other natural, and perhaps inherent, limitations to the rapid development of Soviet-North Korean relations, not the least of which is North Korea's fierce commitment to independence.

At the same time, these analysts regard significantly improved ties with North Korea as carrying substantial costs, as well as potential benefits, for the Soviet Union. At a minimum, closer ties will shackle the Soviets with another political and economic liability, at a time when the USSR is already over-extended. At a maximum, they will hinder Moscow's efforts to improve relations with the PRC—which is far more important strategically to the Soviet Union—while heightening tension on the Korean Peninsula. The result can only be to reinforce the growing perception in Asia of a genuine Soviet threat and to increase support for an active U.S. presence.

For these reasons, analysts in this third group tend to urge the United States not to over-react to developments in Soviet-North Korean relations. They recognize both the need, and potential opportunity, to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, many advocate continual efforts—based on South Korea's growing position of strength—to test *Soviet and North Korean intentions*. *But there should be neither excessive concern, nor undue expectations, regarding evolving Soviet policies toward the Korean Peninsula.*

More broadly, these analysts regard improved Soviet-North Korean relations as a poor vehicle for expanding Soviet influence in the region. In any event, they argue, U.S. influence is insufficient to affect the course of Soviet-North Korean relations. Instead, they tend to stress the importance of continuity in U.S. policies in general and the primacy of South Korea in particular. So long as South Korea remains strong, stable, and successful, they argue, and the U.S. alliances and friendships in North-east Asia remain vibrant, the United States can maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula and prevent further Soviet expansion in the region.

Whichever one's inclination, the inherent uncertainties dictate caution in U.S. policy. Nothing that is known about U.S. regional talks with the Soviets inspires confidence in

Moscow's willingness to significantly modify its policies on critical Asian security issues like Cambodia and Korea. Whether agreement on a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the pending U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow change this situation remains to be seen. In the meantime, North Korea's ongoing military buildup and continuing participation in terrorist activities—neither of which current Soviet policies do anything to discourage—make vigilance the paramount policy priority. Should the Soviets, and ultimately the North Koreans, change their policies in a more constructive direction, the United States will have ample opportunity to respond.

While continuing to probe Soviet intentions, therefore, the United States should further solidify its ties with South Korea. Close relations not only bolster South Korean confidence and encourage greater flexibility in dealing with North Korea. They also underpin the ROK's broader efforts to engage the USSR and PRC in meaningful interactions. Today, as in the past, a strong South Korea and close U.S.-ROK relationship remain critical to lowering tensions on the Korean Peninsula and preventing Communist expansion in Northeast Asia.