

North Korea's Overseas Troop Deployments and Weapons Exports¹

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1. Introduction

North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK) is said to have participated in many wars in Asia and Africa. Not only did North Korea start the Korean War in 1950, but it also sent its troops or weapons to the Chinese Civil War (second phase), the Vietnam War, the October War (Yom Kippur War), the Rhodesian Bush War and Gukurahundi, the Ogaden War, the Iran-Iraq War, the Angolan Civil War, and so on. More recently, on March 23, 2016, the Russian state news agency TASS reported that North Korea had deployed two military units, named Chalma-1 and Chalma-7, to the Bashar al-Assad administration during the Syrian civil war.²

North Korea has also officially admitted to sending troops overseas and exporting weapons. The *Choson Sinbo*, published by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, a pro-North Korean organization, reported the following on April 3, 2000:

"From August 1945 to July 1994 the DPRK helped four countries to wage revolutionary wars and provided military assistance to 53 countries to build national armies. Recently, the DPRK opened the Hall of Internationalism at the Museum of Historic Sites of the Revolution of the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces in order to publicize these facts in full. The fact that the DPRK helped other countries in their revolutionary wars and helped them build national armies has been rumored in the past, however this is the first time it has been confirmed as a fact and made public in full. From August 1945 to April 1950, during the liberation struggle in China after the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War and before the establishment of the new Chinese government, Korea supplied 100,000 weapons, one million pairs of shoes, 3,000 rolls of cloth and thousands of tons of explosives. Korea also fought in the wars in northeast China and elsewhere and contributed greatly to the liberation of China. During the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1969, Korea

¹ This article is a revised version of one originally published in Singapore in 2023, as the following information indicates. Satoru Miyamoto, "North Korea and Wars in Africa and Asia," Kumiko Haba, Alfredo Canavero, Satoshi Mizobata eds., *100 Years of World Wars and Post-War Regional Collaboration: How to Create 'New World Order'?*, (Singapore: Springer, 2023), pp. 131-139.

² TASS news agency, March 23, 2016.

supplied 100,000 weapons and one million uniforms to Vietnam and sent combat and engineering units to the front to help win the war by overwhelming Hanoi's territorial air sovereignty. On the other hand, Korea wholeheartedly supported the struggle of the Syrian and Egyptian people against the Israeli invaders during the 1973 Middle East war.”³

Historically, North Korea has participated in many wars. The question is, “Why did they have to send their troops abroad so many times?” Some people may say that North Korea, as a socialist country, is “exporting revolution like Cuba.” Cuba sent its troops to many countries and exported revolution. It is not surprising that North Korea has also taken part in wars, in effect doing the same thing.

However, North Korea has sent its troops and weapons not only to socialist countries but also to non-socialist countries. North Korea would have different reasons than Cuba for participating in wars. Exporting revolution is inexplicable as a motive of North Korea because some refugees from North Korea confessed that the country exported weapons and sent troops to countries that have friendship with the U.S., such as Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Zimbabwe, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. ⁴

North Korea has friendships with former and present socialist and non-socialist countries. It is said that North Korea is an isolated country, but this is not true. We need to rethink the image of North Korea. At present, it has diplomatic relations with 159 countries that are members of the United Nations. During the Cold War, North Korea signed alliance treaties not only with the Soviet Union and China but also with Libya and Cuba. Contrary to what many people think, North Korea is friendly with many countries worldwide.

However, the growing number of friendly countries is the reason why North Korea has sent troops and weapons to numerous wars. To which friendly countries has North Korea sent troops and weapons? I want to clarify this by examining the chronology of North Korea's foreign policy.

1. Changes in North Korea's Foreign Policy

First, I should emphasize that North Korea currently has diplomatic relations with many members of the United Nations (UN). At the end of 2023, North Korea had diplomatic relations with 159

³ *Choson Sinbo*, April 3, 2000 (Korean).

⁴ RI Bok-gu, *The Top Secret of North Korean Ballistic Missiles*(北朝鮮弾道ミサイルの最高機密), translated by KIM Chan (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2006), pp.109-111 (Japanese); KOH Chong-Son, *Kim Jong Il's Secret Arms Factories*(金正日の秘密兵器工場), Translated by Yu Nakane (Tokyo: Business-sha, 2001), p.75 (Japanese).

of the 193 members of the UN. In addition, North Korea has diplomatic relations with three non-members of the UN: Palestine, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), and the European Union (EU). In all, North Korea has diplomatic relations with 162 countries.

However, North Korea did not intend to expand its diplomatic relations beyond those with socialist countries when it was founded. When North Korea was established, it had diplomatic relations with only 11 socialist countries. Its foreign policy prioritized the Eastern Bloc until the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s.

Table 1 shows the number of foreign countries with which North Korea has established diplomatic relations. In the 1940s and 1950s, North Korea had diplomatic relations only with socialist countries. However, since the Sino-Soviet split, the number of countries with which it has established diplomatic relations has increased.

| | |
|-------|----|
| 1940s | 11 |
| 1950s | 3 |
| 1960s | 21 |
| 1970s | 66 |
| 1980s | 15 |
| 1990s | 32 |
| 2000s | 24 |
| 2010s | 1 |

North Korea established diplomatic relations with 66 countries in the 1970s because of the Sino-Soviet split. The Sino-American rapprochement changed North Korea's foreign policy from Communist bloc diplomacy to Third World diplomacy.

Therefore, North Korea's participation in the war is in line with two objectives. One is to export revolution as a member of the Eastern Bloc and the other is "anti-imperialism" as a member of the Third World. I realize that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the two objectives. However, based on these two objectives, I will try to explain several cases of North Korea's

⁵ Satoru Miyamoto, "North Korea's Foreign Policy: A Non-isolated Country with Expanding Relations," *The SAGE Handbook of Asian Foreign Policy* (Los Angeles: Sage Publishing, 2020), pp. 636-656.

participation in overseas wars.

2. Wars for the Eastern Bloc

North Korea was founded as a member of the Eastern Bloc. Therefore, it could only send arms and troops to foreign communist parties (i.e., export revolution). Until the end of the 1960s, North Korea's foreign activities were mostly cases of exporting revolution as a communist country. I will present two cases.

A. Chinese Civil War (second phase)

Almost half of the early leaders in North Korea were members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) before the liberation of the Korean peninsula from the Japanese Empire in 1945. Naturally, they supported the CCP when the Chinese Civil War began in Manchuria (later called Northeast China) in 1945.

The Chinese Civil War is generally considered to have broken out in 1946. However, in November 1945, Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP) soldiers clashed with CCP soldiers at the Shanhai Pass, an entrance to Manchuria from mainland China.

The CCP organized the Northeast People's Self-Governing Army—led by Lin Biao—in Manchuria in November 1945. While Lin Biao brought many Korean communists to Manchuria from Yan'an, the home base of the CCP, he regimented many Korean partisans supported by the Soviet Union. It is believed that his actions reflected Stalin's will. The Soviet-backed Korean leaders had two choices: help North Korea build a new country or fight against the CNP for the CCP and the Soviet Union. KIM Il-sung was a member of the group that chose to return to North Korea.

Therefore, the early leaders in North Korea, including KIM Il-sung, supported Lin Biao and his army because they felt it was their duty as communists and Koreans under the control of the Soviet Union. When Lin Biao's army was defeated in late 1945, his army was sheltered in North Korea. The North Korean leaders also provided Lin Biao with weapons confiscated from the defeated Japanese army. They supplied 100,000 weapons, one million pairs of shoes, 3,000 rolls of cloth, and thousands of tons of explosives.⁶

The North Korean leaders sent not only arms and ammunition to Lin Biao's army but also soldiers.

⁶ *Choson Sinbo*, April 3, 2000.

It is said that several thousand soldiers from North Pyongan Province (northwest Korea) participated in the Chinese civil war.⁷

Korean soldiers in the CCP fought against the CNP in Manchuria, but some pursued the CNP as far as Hainan (the southernmost area of China). Korean soldiers supported North Korea after the Chinese Civil War and participated in the Korean War. Therefore, I can safely say that the Korean War was an additional competition to the Chinese Civil War for the Korean communists.

B. Vietnam War

North Korea sent its air force to North Vietnam to fight against U.S. and South Korean forces in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. One of North Korea's goals in participating in the Vietnam War was to defend North Vietnam as a member of the Eastern Bloc. This can be seen as another revolutionary export.

However, this was also for the purpose of defending North Korea. For North Korea, which was at odds with the United States, it was desirable to have a unified Eastern Bloc to defend North Korea. The Eastern Bloc was on the verge of collapse due to the Sino-Soviet split, an undesirable outcome for North Korea's national security interests.⁸

During the Vietnam War, both China and the Soviet Union sent auxiliary troops and substantial aid to North Vietnam. The Supreme Leader of North Korea, KIM Il-sung, believed that joining with North Vietnam to participate in the Vietnam War was symbolic of a solid Eastern Bloc. Therefore, North Korea decided to send auxiliary troops to North Vietnam as a member of the Eastern Bloc.

First, North Korea sent tunnel workers and other noncombatants to North Vietnam in 1965. Then, on October 5, 1966, at the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) conference, KIM Il-Sung declared the need to send North Korean troops into North Vietnam. He believed forming a united front against "American imperialism" would solidify the Eastern Bloc. North Korea was trying to fight against American imperialism and its South Korean "puppet" in Vietnam.

North Korea dispatched the air force's 203rd Unit in October 1966 to North Vietnam. The 203rd

⁷ Satoru Miyamoto, "The Influence on the Process in the Foundation of the Korean People's Army by China-North Korea Relations (북중관계가 조선인민군 창설 과정에 미친 영향)," *Modern Korean History*, Vol.1, No. 1 (March 2013), pp. 7-29 (Korean).

⁸ Satoru Miyamoto, "The Dispatch of DPRK Troops to Vietnam (朝鮮民主主義人民共和国のベトナム派兵)," *The Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies*, No. 2 (February 2003), pp. 58-67 (Japanese).

Unit consisted of approximately 150 members, including 24 pilots (There is another report. See "North Korea and the Vietnam War"). Fourteen of them—12 pilots and two ground staff—died during the war. The unit then changed its name to the 923rd Regiment under the North Vietnamese Air Force commander and shot down 26 U.S. Air Force planes during the war. It was estimated that they would withdraw from North Vietnam in 1969.⁹

North Korea fought against American imperialism and its puppet in a vain effort to consolidate the Eastern Bloc. Despite KIM Il-sung's wishes, the Eastern Bloc could not renew its past ties. In March 1969, the Soviet Union and China clashed militarily on Damansky Island (on the border between the Soviet Union and China). The leaders of North Korea were shaken. We can see it from the fact that this incident was not reported in North Korea. Therefore, North Korea gave up its Eastern Bloc diplomacy.

3. Wars for the Third World

North Korea had to change its foreign policy from Communist bloc diplomacy to Third World diplomacy in the 1970s because of the Sino-Soviet split and the Sino-American rapprochement. After the Damansky Island clash, North Korea was able to heal its relations with China, but China moved closer to the United States, which North Korea had hated for its imperialism. North Korea had to find other friendly countries to oppose the United States. The friendly countries North Korea found were members of the Third World. Therefore, North Korea, as a member of the Third World, began to participate in wars for anti-imperialism. I will present two cases.

A. October War (Yom Kippur War)

Egyptian President Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat, who had been preparing to fight Israel with Soviet assistance, suddenly announced on July 18, 1972, that the Soviet military advisory group was withdrawing at the request of the Egyptian government. This certainly prevented the Egyptian armed forces from continuing their preparations for war. Saad el-Shazly, the chief of staff of the Egyptian armed forces, noted that the shortage of MIG pilots remained unresolved.

⁹ Satoru Miyamoto, *Why doesn't Coup d'Etat Happen in North Korea?: Civil-military Relations and Foreign Military Assistance*(北朝鮮ではなぜ軍事クーデターが起きないのか?: 政軍関係論で読み解く軍隊統制と対外軍事支援), (Tokyo: Ushiosyobo Kojinsha, 2013), pp. 121-125(Japanese); Satoru Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (1)(朝鮮民主主義人民共和国とベトナム戦争(1))," *Bulletin, Seigakuin University General Research Institute*, Number 55 (March 2013), pp.292-310 (Japanese); Satoru Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (2) (朝鮮民主主義人民共和国とベトナム戦争(2))," *Bulletin, Seigakuin University General Research Institute*, Number 57 (March 2014), pp.211-237(Japanese).

In March 1973, Shazly asked JANG Jong-hwan, a North Korean government representative in Egypt, to send North Korean troops to train Egyptian pilots. After repeated negotiations, Shazly visited North Korea for a week, from April 6 to April 13, and met with KIM Il-sung. In the end, his visit appeared to be decisive in securing the dispatch of North Korean troops to Egypt.

North Korea aimed to establish a friendship with Egypt, the great power of the Middle East, and the Third World. Supporting Egypt was in line with North Korea's anti-imperialist ideas because Egypt was fighting against Israel, which North Korea considered to be a puppet of American imperialism.

The North Korean Air Force units, consisting of 30 pilots, eight flight controllers, five interpreters, three administrators, a doctor, and a cook—arrived in Egypt in June and were deployed in July.¹⁰

The October War immediately broke out, led by the allied forces of Egypt. Syria attacked the Israeli military on October 6 but suffered an early defeat. After Israel launched a counterattack, KIM Il-sung announced on October 17 that he would support all Arab countries. He seemed to be hoping to strengthen relations between the Arab countries and North Korea by announcing military support. The U.S. government announced that Israel had fought the North Korean air force on the same day. The whole world knew that North Korean pilots were fighting the Israeli air force in the skies of the Middle East.¹¹ North Korean pilots shot down four Israeli fighter jets early in the war.¹²

In addition, during the second half of the war, North Korea sent air force personnel to Syria at the Syrian government's request. North Korea succeeded in winning the friendship of Egypt and Syria. As a result, North Korea won many supporters in the UN General Assembly and became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1975. Therefore, participation in the October War made North Korea a member of the Third World.

B. Angolan Civil War

It has been reported that North Korea was involved in the Angolan civil war (1975-2002) among

¹⁰ IKEUCHI, Satoshi(池内恵) and Satoru Miyamoto, "The Origin of North Korea's Ballistic Missile Development: From the Memoirs of Egyptian Army General Staff Saad el-Shazly (北朝鮮の弾道ミサイル開発の起源 : シャーヅィリー・エジプト軍参謀総長の回顧録から)", *The Monthly Journal Ta (East Asia)*, Number 553 (July 2013), pp.82-86 (Japanese).

¹¹ Satoru Miyamoto, "DPRK Troop Dispatches and Military Support in the Middle East: Change from Military Support to Arms Trade in the 1970s," *East Asia*, Volume 27, Number 4 (November 2010), pp.349-352.

¹² *Rodong Sinmun*, February 12, 2012.

the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA). The MPLA has controlled the capital since 1975, when Angola gained independence from Portugal. While the Soviet Union and Cuba supported the MPLA, China and South Africa supported UNITA, and the United States supported the FNLA.

It has been reported several times - mainly by the South African press - that North Korea sent troops to the Angolan civil war in 1984. According to these reports, North Korea sent several thousand troops to fight against UNITA.¹³ W. Martin James, a professor at Henderson State University, estimated that North Korea sent 1,500 to 3,000 troops to Angola.¹⁴ It has also been reported that North Korea has sent twenty-five thousand troops to Angola.¹⁵ North Korea denied these reports on December 3, 1984.¹⁶ However, the South African press reports would be considered accurate to a certain extent based on contemporary circumstantial evidence.

Foreign information about North Korea during the Angolan civil war is confusing. John Stockwell, a former CIA officer during the Angolan civil war, reported that North Korea supported UNITA.¹⁷ Humio Nakagawa, a retired professor at Tsukuba University, reported that North Korea supported the FNLA and UNITA.¹⁸

What I can say with certainty is that North Korea has consistently supported the MPLA, according to contemporary news in North Korea. Angola's first president, Agostinho Neto, the leader of the MPLA, visited North Korea in 1968 and 1971 before Angola's independence. When he died in 1979, North Korea sent a condolence telegram to the Angolan government and the MPLA.¹⁹ I cannot imagine that North Korea supported the FNLA and UNITA.

Of course, I do not yet know the details of North Korea's participation in the Angolan civil war because they have not been made public. North Korea has announced that it helped liberate Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Madagascar, and Angola.²⁰ Therefore, if this is true, the

¹³ *Asahi Shimbun*, September 15, 1984 (Japanese: quoted from the article of the Star, a newspaper in South Africa).

¹⁴ W. Martin James III, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola, 1974-1990*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp.212-218.

¹⁵ *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 30, 1984(Japanese).

¹⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, December 3, 1984(Korean).

¹⁷ John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, (London: André Deutsch Limited, 1978), p.52.

¹⁸ Humio Nakagawa (中川文雄), "Cuba and the Angolan Civil War (キューバとアンゴラ内戦)," Humio Nakagawa ed., *Modern Latin America's relations with Asia and Africa(現代ラテンアメリカの対アジア・アフリカ関係)*, (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1980), p.43(Japanese).

¹⁹ *Rodong Sinmun*, September 15, 1979.

²⁰ KIM Hyok-mo and RI Kwang-sam, *Comrade KIM Il-sung, the Great Head of the Great Work of*

participation in the Angolan civil war was part of North Korea's anti-imperialist activities in Africa. Moreover, North Korea did not cooperate with China but with the Soviet Union as a member of the Eastern Bloc in the Angolan civil war. North Korea's participation in the war reflected two objectives: exporting revolution and anti-imperialism.

As a result, the MPLA still maintains power in Angola and has a good friendship with North Korea. Namibia gained its independence in the Angolan civil war and also holds a friendship with North Korea. After the war, North Korea built many artistic buildings and works of art in Angola and Namibia. I do not know the details yet, but it seems fairly certain that North Korea participated in the Angolan civil war.

4. Conclusion

North Korea has participated in numerous wars in Asia and Africa with two objectives: exporting revolution as a member of the Eastern Bloc and anti-imperialism as a member of the Third World.

North Korea participated in wars to export revolution as a member of the Eastern Bloc until the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. North Korea participated in the Chinese Civil War and the Vietnam War for the purpose of exporting revolution.

However, after the Damansky Island incident and the Sino-American rapprochement, North Korea began to participate in anti-imperialist wars as a member of the Third World. North Korea began to find friendly countries in the Third World that clashed with the U.S. instead of the Eastern Bloc. Because of its anti-imperialist objective, North Korea participated in the October War and the Angolan Civil War.

The two objectives sometimes coexisted when North Korea supported pro-communist parties or countries. While North Korea supported the MPLA, which the Soviet Union supported, it was in conflict with UNITA and FNLA, which China and the United States supported in the Angolan civil war. North Korea's support for the MPLA fulfilled its goals of exporting revolution and anti-imperialism.

North Korea has strengthened its friendship with other countries by participating in many wars around the world. This is one of the reasons why the North Korean regime survived after the Cold War, although many scholars expected it to collapse like the regimes in the Eastern European

Independence (자주위업의 위대한 수령 김일성동지), Vol. 8 (Pyongyang: Social Science Press, 2011), p. 266(Korean).

countries. I want to emphasize that the Eastern European countries were members of the Eastern Bloc, but North Korea is a member of the Third World. Therefore, North Korea is not an isolated country; it has surprisingly developed friendships with countries that oppose the United States. North Korea has sent troops and exported weapons to numerous wars around the world in order to establish friendly relations with countries fighting against the U.S., thereby weakening U.S. power and increasing North Korea's ability to survive. Therefore, as a member of the Third World, North Korea will continue to fight against the USA for anti-imperialism.

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