

From Proletarian Internationalism to Non-Alignment: Kim Il Sung's Concept of the "Era of Chajusŏng" and DPRK Foreign Policy in the 1970s

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Abstract

In the early-mid 1970s the DPRK leadership presented a new analysis of the international situation and the political tasks required of it. This new narrative was summarized by Kim Il Sung's concept of the "era of chajusŏng," a historical conjuncture in which the "primary tendency" was a universal yearning for national self-determination clashing with the declining forces of imperialism. The struggle implied in this conception was one in which nation-states, rather than subaltern classes, were the primary protagonists, and of which the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was the most important political expression. This understanding of the historical moment rationalized a set of objectives, strategies, and partnerships quite different from those pursued by its socialist allies, but which made possible a level of international engagement previously foreclosed to Pyongyang. In the process, the DPRK leadership at times openly downplayed the contemporary relevance of Marxism-Leninism, particularly in the Global South.

Key words: North Korea, Non-Aligned Movement, chajusŏng, foreign policy, Third World, ideology

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Jae Kyu Park, Byung Chul Koh, Taw-Hwan Kwak (eds), *The Foreign Relations of North Korea: New Perspectives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987); Chi Young Pak, *Korea and the United Nations* (Kluwer Law International, 2000); Ria Chae, "Diplomatic War: Inter-Korean Relations in the 1970s," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 27, no. 2 (December 2014): 307-330, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sej.2015.0003>; Steven Lee, "The Korean Armistice and the End of Peace: The US-UN Coalition and the Dynamics of War-Making in Korea, 1953-76," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 183-224, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jks.2013.0018>; Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); Nate Kerkhoff, "North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement: From Adulation to Marginalization," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 28, no. 1 (2021): 41-71; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27067068>; Moe Taylor, *North Korea, Tricontinentalism, and the Latin American Revolution, 1959-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Chenjun Wang, "Revisiting Cold War rhetoric: implications of North Korean strategic culture," 7 Mar 2024, *e-International Relations*: <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/03/07/revisiting-cold-war-rhetoric-implications-of-north-korean-strategic-culture>.

2

Gwang-Oon Kim, "The Making of the Juche State in Postcolonial North Korea," in *Origins of North Korea's Juche: Colonialism, War and Development*, ed. Jae-Jung Suh (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013): 63-87.

1. Introduction

The 1970s were the high point of North Korean foreign policy. In this decade, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) saw a dramatic expansion of its formal bilateral ties and economic cooperation beyond the socialist camp, as well as international support for its position on Korean unification. As a result, it saw real, if limited, advances towards its goals of economic development, reducing dependency on the USSR and China, and the removal of US military forces from South Korea. This was no accident, but rather the result of a multi-layered foreign policy strategy responding to the shifting geopolitical dynamics of the time. Key to this strategy was expanding engagement with the newly independent and developing nations of the "Third World," at a time when these states were finding common cause in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Previous studies of DPRK foreign policy in the 1970s have tended to focus on the Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks of 1972, the "Korean question" at the United Nations, and Pyongyang's expanded diplomatic ties with countries in the Global South.¹ In much of the discourse the identifiable shifts in DPRK foreign policy are assumed to be purely opportunistic, typical of the "rogue state" motif which reflexively renders any activity of the DPRK state in a language of subterfuge and villainy. DPRK efforts to strengthen ties with the Global South or support the NAM are frequently dismissed as masking ulterior motives, catering to the ego of Kim Il Sung, or as a domestic propaganda tool. While DPRK foreign policy is of course related to key, long-standing priorities of the regime – e.g. competition with Seoul – much of the existing scholarship still fails to examine in depth why strategies and tactics underwent significant shifts at certain moments. This is at least in part because the DPRK's "turn to the Third World" is often misrepresented as a singular phase or tactic, and/or simply one more odd pivot of an idiosyncratic leadership. DPRK foreign policy towards the Global South and its ideological premises in fact evolved through several distinct phases during the Cold War, not at random or by whim, but as rational responses to changing international and domestic conditions. Moreover, and as Gwang-Oon Kim has argued, DPRK engagement with the Global South since the 1950s is better understood in the context of Korea's colonial experience and historical development, rather than as the unlikely detour of a Stalinist "hermit kingdom."²

Mostly absent from the scholarship outlined above is the question of what ideas and analyses may have guided decision makers within the DPRK state in the 1970s as they chose to undertake a major change of course in foreign policy. What was the understanding of international conditions that justified such a significant shift in strategy and tactics? Where did the DPRK see the world going and where did it envision itself in this future? To what extent did the North Korean leadership break with Marxism-Leninism, and what does this tell us about the nature and role of ideology within the DPRK leadership?

It is this ideological dimension of the DPRK's foreign policy shift of the 1970s that is the focus of this essay. It argues that in the early-mid 1970s the DPRK leadership began to publicly articulate a new analysis of the international situation and the tasks required of it, one which involved sharp turns from, or even total reversals of, previously held positions on a number of issues. This represented a third phase of North Korean engagement with the Third World, evolving out of

its earlier concept of the “Anti-Imperialist, Anti-US United Front” it championed in the 1960s, and its prior participation in the nascent Asian and Afro-Asian solidarity politics of the 1950s. This new foreign policy doctrine was summarized by Kim Il Sung’s concept of the “era of *chajusŏng*,” a historical conjuncture in which the “primary tendency” (*kibon ch’use*) was no longer class struggle nor the conflict between the socialist and capitalist blocs, but rather a universal yearning for national self-determination clashing with the declining forces of imperialism. The struggle implied in this conception was one in which nation-states, rather than subaltern classes, were the primary protagonists, and of which the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was the most important political expression. The map it drew of the world transcended not only the Cold War divide, but even the North/South, core/periphery binary, emphasizing states’ commitment to “independence” over their socio-economic system or position in the global economy. This understanding of the historical moment rationalized a set of objectives, strategies, and partnerships quite different from those pursued by its socialist allies, but which made possible a level of international engagement previously foreclosed to Pyongyang. In the process, the DPRK leadership at times openly downplayed the contemporary relevance of Marxism-Leninism, particularly in the Global South, emphasizing the priority of post-colonial societies to pursue a development strategy based on indigenous conditions and national sentiment, rather than to adhere to pre-existing models or ideologies.

In attempting to understand this ideological shift, this essay focuses on how the DPRK leadership articulated its new analysis of the international situation to international as well as domestic audiences in the 1970s, primarily by examining key speeches and essays by Kim Il Sung, his interviews and conversations with foreign delegations (including journalists, political organizations, and governments), as well as the foreign policy editorials of *Kŭlloja*, the monthly organ of the WPK Central Committee. Such “official” North Korean sources are of limited use for many subjects, due to the Kim Il Sung regime’s predilection for aggrandizing domestic achievements while downplaying failures or internal dissensus. However, such public-facing communications of the government are of significant value in gleaning how the North Korean leadership viewed the international situation and its political possibilities. This is primarily because DPRK foreign policy in the 1970s was heavily multilaterally focused – it sought to build an expansive coalition of political actors in the Global South committed to specific objectives and international initiatives. This in turn required the DPRK leadership to persuade allies and potential allies of its reading of international conditions and the feasibility and desirability of the goals and strategies it proposed. The value of these sources is increased by comparing them with non-DPRK sources on what policies and initiatives the DPRK government actually pursued on the international stage – allowing one to judge the correlation between rhetoric and action – as well as by comparing them with declassified internal state documents. Like much recent scholarship on DPRK history, this essay utilizes documents of the foreign affairs archives of the DPRK’s socialist allies which have been compiled and translated by the Wilson Center’s Cold War International History Project, including Kim’s private correspondence with Yugoslav leader and NAM founder Josip Broz Tito from 1973-79.

It is hoped that this essay provides insights into the historical evolution of North Korean foreign policy, including how it has responded to external conditions, and into the questions of factionalism and policy adaptability within the DPRK

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In the context of the May 1961 military coup in Seoul which brought Park Chung Hee to power and raised the threat of another war with the South, Pyongyang was increasingly critical of the Soviet policy of “peaceful coexistence,” and skeptical they could rely on Khrushchev’s support in the event of such a conflict. Moreover, the North Korean leadership was incensed by what they perceived as undue pressure to side with Moscow in the Sino-Soviet split, including Khrushchev’s rejection of Kim Il Sung’s request for military aid in December 1962.

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The Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization from April 1960 – April 1961, CIA report, June 15, 1961, FOIA Electronic Reading Room: www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-00915R001300050007-5.pdf.

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For example, the CIA identified the DPRK as one of the junior funding partners of AAPSO’s April 1961 executive committee meeting in Bandung, which produced a resolution on Korea demanding the withdrawal of US troops from the South and the unification of the peninsula. The DPRK also sat on the preparatory committee for the 1962 Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Cairo. See “The Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization from April 1960 – April 1961.”

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Moe Taylor, *North Korea, Tricontinentalism, and the Latin American Revolution, 1959-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 26-28.

7

Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk ch’anggŏn 10 chun’yŏn kinyŏm kyŏngch’uk taehoesŏ han” [At the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea], *Rodong Sinmun* [Workers’ Daily], September 9, 1958.

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Mo Soon Young and Jeon Young Sun, “Puk’an munhwa hyŏpchŏngŭi chŏn’gae yangsang kwa kŭ t’ŭkchŏng - kwangbok ihubut’ŏ 1950 nyŏndaerŭl chungsimŭro” [The Development of the North Korean Cultural Agreement and its characteristics, from independence to the 1950s], *T’ongirŭnmunhak* [The Journal of the Humanities for Unification] 55 (May 2013), 221; <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE02230811>

state. Moreover, because the 1970s represent the peak of Pyongyang’s engagement with the international community and its commitment to peaceful diplomacy and multilateralism, this history forces us to consider whether or not a crucial moment to secure peace on the Korean Peninsula was missed in the 1970s.

2. Background: the DPRK and the Third World

The North Korean leadership’s foreign policy shift of the 1970s is best understood in the context of its longer-standing engagement with the Global South, shaped as it was by the dynamics of global decolonization and the Cold War. At the time of the division of the peninsula in 1945, Korea was a predominantly agrarian society situated firmly in the periphery of the global capitalist economy, emerging from three decades of Japanese colonial rule. Like communists throughout Asia, Korean communists received Marxism-Leninism as a strategy for national liberation and post-colonial development, a pathway to a sovereign and non-capitalist modernity. The ruling WPK championed the wave of anti-colonial revolt that followed the end of the Second World War, seeing in it a tectonic shift underway in human history.

From the founding of the DPRK in 1948 to the souring of relations with the Soviet Union in 1962,³ the formal WPK position on colonialism and what was becoming known as the “Third World” was in line with Soviet orthodoxy. That is to say, it was based on Lenin’s theory of imperialism, and reflected Moscow’s desire for a stable international environment as it rebuilt from the destruction of the Second World War, a policy formalized in 1956 as “peaceful coexistence” (*mirnoye sosushchestvovaniye*). Nevertheless, the North Korean leadership demonstrated a particular interest in the emerging networks of Asian and Afro-Asian solidarity in the 1950s. Neither of the two Koreas was invited to the Bandung Conference of 1955, whose organizers wanted to avoid the controversy of the divided peninsula. However, the DPRK was a founding member of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) established in Cairo in December 1957, a more militant organization with a substantial degree of communist influence. The North Korean writer and senior party figure Han Sŏrya was elected to the organization’s executive in 1960, alongside such notable figures as Patrice Lumumba, Jaramogi Odinga, Joshua Nkomo, and Mehdi Ben Barka.⁴ The DPRK continued to play a significant role in AAPSO and the many conferences it organized in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁵ In the same period, the WPK worked hard to build relationships with communist parties and civil society actors throughout the Global South, frequently inviting delegations to Pyongyang, participating in international conferences and campaigns, and granting scholarships to young communists to study in Pyongyang and Kusŏng.⁶ In September 1958, noting that “the flames of national liberation struggle” were burning across the Global South, Kim Il Sung declared that “proletarian internationalism lies at the base of our country’s foreign policy” and that his government was “actively supporting the national liberation movements of colonial peoples.”⁷ Shortly after, Pyongyang announced its first diplomatic relations outside of the socialist camp: the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale’s (FLN) government-in-exile based in Cairo, and the Republic of Guinea, after the West African nation declared independence on October 2 under the leadership of Sékou Touré.⁸

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Susan Williams, *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa* (Public Affairs Press, 2021).

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Kim Il Sung, “Hyŏn chŏngsewa uri tang ūi kwaŏp” [The Present Situation and the Tasks of Our Party], October 5, 1966, in *Chŏnjip* [Works] vol. 37 (Korean Workers’ Party Publishing House, 2001), 230-300.

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Formally called the *Solidarity Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America*. The event gathered representatives of left-wing and communist parties, armed revolutionary groups, and select governments from across the Global South, over 600 people from 82 countries in total. The primary message of the event was the fundamental importance of solidarity with Vietnam, and global armed struggle against US imperialism.

3. The Anti-Imperialist, Anti-US United Front

The second major phase of North Korean policy towards the Third World took place in the 1960s, in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, the Cuban Revolution, the US invasion of Vietnam, and Park Chung Hee’s military coup in the Republic of Korea (ROK). Pyongyang’s evolving perspective was shaped by the direct military threat posed by the USA and the ROK, as well as frustration with its Soviet and Chinese allies. On one hand, revolution appeared to be on the horizon across the Global South. The Cuban Revolution had established the first socialist republic in the Western Hemisphere and sparked upheaval across Latin America and the Caribbean, with leftist guerrilla movements emerging in most countries. There were communist-led insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia, and popular, violent insurrections confronted the remnants of European colonial rule across Africa. A successful campaign of armed struggle against British rule in Southern Yemen established the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1967.

On the other hand, it appeared that the probable triumph of revolutionary movements was routinely thwarted by the United States flexing its military might and global reach. Washington intervened across Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s to topple popular governments which veered too far to the Left. Just as African nations like Ghana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo threw off the shackles of colonialism, the US conspired to destabilize them, what historian Susan Williams calls “the covert recolonization of Africa.”⁹ The perennial example was Vietnam, where the United States unleashed the largest bombing campaign in human history to prevent communist party rule.

In this context, the WPK argued, the primary task of the international Left was the defeat of US imperialism, to break US capacity to militarily intervene in the Global South. Washington’s strategy, according to Kim Il Sung, was to concentrate its massive military resources in particular theatres of revolution, thereby overwhelming leftist forces who would otherwise prevail. However, if more people in more places took up armed struggle against US imperialism and its domestic allies, US forces would be stretched increasingly thin. While the limits of US power were already on display in Vietnam, the WPK argued, “two, three, many Vietnams” – in the famous words of Che Guevara – would push it into the abyss. This project is what the WPK called “the Anti-Imperialist, Anti-US United Front:” an expansive coalition of left-wing and nationalist forces willing to take up armed struggle against US imperialism in the Global South. The WPK formalized this new foreign policy line at the Second Party Conference in October 1966.¹⁰

This militant line put the DPRK at odds with both the Soviet and Chinese leaderships, as the two powers competed for influence over the international communist movement in what was known as the Sino-Soviet split. However, it engendered a heightened friendship with Cuba and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), symbolized by the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in January 1966.¹¹ These three states were widely recognized as constituting a new, informal bloc within the socialist camp, increasingly bold in their willingness to speak on behalf of the Third World and to challenge the authority of Moscow and Beijing. The DPRK and Cuba coordinated in sending volunteers to Vietnam and backing guerrilla insurgencies across Latin America, while Pyongyang escalated military actions against South Korean and US targets on the Korean Peninsula. South

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Puk'an ūi p'ongnyŏk' hyŏngmyŏng (kerilla) such'ul mit oeguk chŏngbu chŏnbok ūmmo, 1971" [North Korea's export of violent revolution (guerrillas) and conspiracies to overthrow foreign governments], 1971, document no. 4241, Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea.

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A.W. Singham (ed), *The Nonaligned Movement in World Politics* (Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977), 236.

Korean intelligence believed that by 1971 more than 5,000 leftist militants from around the world had received military training inside the DPRK.¹² In this context, the DPRK's state-to-state relations within the Global South remained limited. It viewed most of the governments of Latin America, for example, as "fascist puppet states" of Washington's informal empire. Therefore, rather than seeking diplomacy and commercial trade opportunities with these governments, it supported the revolutionary movements aiming to topple them.

4. Changing international conditions of the 1970s

By the early 1970s the WPK's vision of an "Anti-Imperialist, Anti-US United Front" was increasingly divorced from objective conditions. The victory of US-backed counter-insurgency operations against leftist guerrilla movements in Latin America and elsewhere, along with the gradual de-escalation of the Vietnam War, undermined the idea that the proliferation of armed struggle throughout the Global South could bring down US imperialism. Both Cuba and the DRV made pragmatic shifts towards a closer political and economic alignment with the Soviet Union, ending any pretensions to neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split, or an independent Third World bloc within the socialist camp.

At the same time, a different set of conditions was emerging in the early 1970s that opened new possibilities. As European colonies in the Global South continued to gain independence in the decades following the Second World War, UN membership expanded from 51 members in 1945 to 127 by 1970. Two-thirds of UN member states were now developing countries, and therefore had the potential to pass or defeat resolutions within the annual General Assembly by voting as a bloc. Many of the newly independent governments of the Global South were heirs to popular anti-colonial struggles supported by the socialist camp. In such countries, capitalism was often associated with colonialism and exploitation, while socialism was seen as a pathway out of dependency and backwardness. While few were ruled by bona fide Marxist-Leninist parties, many adopted reformist and "national" programmes focused on state-led development and self-reliance – becoming what the Soviet Union classified as "socialist-oriented" rather than "socialist" countries.

This growing Third World coalition was given political expression in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which hit its stride in the 1970s to become an important force in international politics. Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser were the main drivers behind the founding conference in Belgrade in September 1961, attended by twenty-five heads of state. Beginning as a coalition of small and newly independent countries asserting their right to remain independent of both Cold War blocs, by its Fourth Summit in Algiers in September 1973 membership had grown to seventy-five countries, with a more radical platform based on decolonization, nuclear disarmament, South-South cooperation, and support for national liberation movements in the Global South.¹³ The organization primarily pursued its goals through the UN General Assembly and other UN intergovernmental organizations, chief among them the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The central rallying cry of the movement became the New International Economic Order (NIEO), formally endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1974. As Jürgen Dinkel notes, NAM presented a genuine challenge to the international status quo, and "both its exponents and opponents believed there was a chance this new order might in fact be established, indicating the existence of an alternative to the Western economic model."¹⁴

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Jürgen Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927–1992)*, trans. Alex Skimmer (Brill, 2019), 225.

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Lee, “The Korean Armistice,” 205.

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UNCURK was a commission launched by the UN at the outbreak of the Korean War and aligned with the US-led war effort, intended to oversee the establishment of a “unified, independent and democratic government of all Korea...” Spencer C. Tucker (ed), *The Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, second edition, vol. I (ABC-CLIO, 2010), 891.

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“Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK, Report, 27 September 1973. Subject: The DPRK and the Non-Aligned Summit in Algiers,” September 27, 1973, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116004.

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“Letter and Message from the President of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Kim Il Sung, to President Josip Broz Tito,” May 23, 1974, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/letter-and-message-president-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-kim-il-sung-president-josip.

The Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers Conference in Georgetown, Guyana, in August 1972 passed a resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from the Korean Peninsula.¹⁵ This was followed by the Fourth Non-Aligned Summit in Algiers in September 1973, which passed a resolution on “the Korean question” endorsing key demands of Pyongyang: immediate withdrawal of US troops from the South, the dissolution of the United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK),¹⁶ and a rejection of “dual representation” in the UN General Assembly.¹⁷ The latter proposal, favoured by Seoul, would see both the ROK and DPRK join the UN as separate members. Pyongyang maintained, by contrast, that as Korea was one nation, only a unified peninsula could occupy a seat in the General Assembly. In May 1974 Kim Il Sung wrote to founding NAM leader Josip Tito, explaining his reading of the international situation and stating, “our country, as a country belonging to the Third World, desires to join the ranks of the Non-Aligned Countries if they do not object to this.”¹⁸ The DPRK was granted full membership at the Conference of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Non-Aligned Countries in Lima in August 1975, alongside Vietnam, Panama, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At the same ministerial meeting, the ROK’s application was rejected, a clear sign that Seoul was losing its diplomatic competition with Pyongyang within what was seen as the “progressive” Third World. The DPRK went on to earn a seat on the NAM Coordinating Bureau at the Sixth Summit in Havana in September 1979.

There were other factors influencing a shift in DPRK foreign policy: the improvement in DPRK-Sino relations and Beijing’s assumption of the China seat on the UN Security Council; Washington’s decision to significantly reduce the number of US troops in the ROK; and the rise of a democratic opposition in the ROK headed by Kim Dae Jung. More fundamentally, as the high-point of armed revolutionary struggle in the Global South seemed to have passed, a growing, largely socialist-oriented Third World coalition wielding significant leverage within the UN system offered another path through which the DPRK could pursue its foreign policy objectives. Expanded cooperation within the Global South could advance Pyongyang’s economic goals, in particular its long-standing desire to reduce dependency on the Soviet Union and China. Eschewing its former militancy in favour of peaceful diplomacy also increased opportunities for trade, loans, and technology transfers from some advanced capitalist countries. What emerged as a new foreign policy strategy focusing on multilateralism and Third World solidarity was accompanied by a new analysis of the international situation and the tasks demanded of it, the foundation of which was Kim Il Sung’s concept of the “era of *chajusŏng*.”

5. The “era of *chajusŏng*”

The WPK’s new line began to appear in Kim Il Sung’s public speeches and interviews with foreign journalists in 1974. One of its earliest, explicit articulations came at a mass rally in Pyongyang to honour the visit of Houari Boumédiène in March. It came six months after the Algerian leader hosted the Fourth Non-Aligned Summit in Algiers, which resulted in NAM formally adopting the DPRK’s position on Korean unification. The speech was subsequently published for an international audience under the title, “*The revolutionary cause of the peoples of the Third World that march flying the banner of independence will certainly triumph.*” State visits

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These included delegations from India, Sudan, Senegal, Dahomey, Mozambique, Algeria, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, Panama, and Costa Rica.

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Scholarship on DPRK-Argentina relations is a relatively new field, and the significance of this journal and the DPRK government's choice of it as the platform for such an important text has yet to be explored. However, it was clearly connected to warming relations between Pyongyang and the government of Juan Perón.

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Kim Il Sung, *El movimiento de los no alineados es una poderosa fuerza revolucionaria antiimperialista de nuestra época* [The Non-Aligned Movement is a powerful revolutionary anti-imperialist force of our time] (Ediciones en Lenguas Extranjeras, 1976).

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"Chosŏn rodongdang ch'anggŏn 30 tolse chŭm hayŏ", [On the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea], October 9, 1975, in Kim Il Sung, *Chŏnjip* [Works], vol. 30 (Korean Workers' Party Publishing House, 1985), 554-555.

by Syrian president Hafez al-Assad in October and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire in December were also occasions for Kim to extol the new narrative, as was his May 1975 visit to Algiers, one of his few travels outside of the communist bloc. The ideas contained in these speeches were repeated and elaborated in a series of interviews Kim gave to media and political delegations from the Global South invited to Pyongyang throughout 1974-75,¹⁹ and a correspondent interview with Agence France-Presse (AFP) in May 1975. Kim's October 1975 speech marking the thirtieth anniversary of the WPK's founding reflected this new reading of the international situation, relating it to national goals and the party's commitment to building a socialist society. An essay Kim wrote for the inaugural issue of the Argentinian journal, *Guía del Tercer Mundo* (Third World Guide) published in December 1975, "El Movimiento de los No Alineados es una poderosa fuerza revolucionaria de nuestra época" ("The Non-Aligned Movement is a powerful revolutionary force of our time")²⁰ was Kim's first formal treatise on the subject, and emphasized the central role he saw for NAM in the current historical juncture. This was also the title of a book published in multiple languages for foreign audiences in 1976,²¹ containing twenty-five of Kim's speeches, essays, and interviews, mostly from 1974-75, but including a few of Kim's commentaries on foreign affairs from the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was followed up in 1982 with *On the Non-Aligned Movement*, which solidified the new party line by omitting any pre-1975 commentary, while adding Kim's speeches and interviews on the subject from 1976-1982.

The foundation of the WPK's new narrative was a certain understanding of the historical moment. Kim proclaimed that the world had entered the "era of *chajusŏng*." *Chaju* can be translated into English as "independence," "sovereignty," "autonomy," or "self-reliance," although this last translation causes some confusion, as it is commonly used for the more familiar North Korean term of "*chuch'e*." The addition of *sŏng* implies the quality of, or state of being, *chaju*. North Korean translators have traditionally equated *chajusŏng* with the English words "independence" and "sovereignty," and it also holds a connotation of pertaining to the nation or government, rather than the individual. Early English-language texts on the subject intended for foreign audiences translated *chajusŏng* as "independence," however, as the concept became increasingly central to WPK ideology, it began to receive the same treatment as *chuch'e*: translations used the original Korean word (자주성) and transliterated, for example "chajusong" in English, and "zazusong" in Spanish.

By declaring the era of *chajusŏng*, Kim was asserting that the world had entered a period where the "primary tendency" (*kibon ch'use*) was a universal and irrepressible yearning for national self-determination contra its chief obstacle: imperialism. In his October 1975 speech commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the WPK, Kim defined the era of *chajusŏng* thusly:

The current period is the era of *chajusŏng*. The people of numerous countries of the globe at present demand *chajusŏng* and struggle against all forms of subjugation (*yesok*). No nation tolerates its *chajusŏng* to be violated by foreigners. The people of the socialist countries, the people of the Third World countries, to say nothing of the people of the capitalist countries, demand *chajusŏng*. The fact that the people of the world demand *chajusŏng* and many countries march along an independent path (*chajuŭi kil*) is the primary tendency (*kibon ch'use*) of our era, which no force can stop.²²

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Kim Il Sung, "Entrevista con el director de los diarios 'Expreso' y 'Extra' de Lima, Perú" [Interview with the director of the newspapers 'Expreso' and 'Extra' from Lima, Peru], June 2, 1974," in *América Latina avanza victoriosa bajo las banderas del antiimperialismo, independencia y soberanía* [Latin America advances victorious under the banners of anti-imperialism, independence, and sovereignty] (anonymous publisher, 1975), 74.

24

Taylor, *North Korea*, 203-205.

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Kim Il Sung, "Las nuevas fuerzas ascendentes deben unirse bajo la bandera del antiimperialismo y la independencia" [The new rising forces must unite under the banner of anti-imperialism and Independence], speech in honour of Mobutu Sese Seko, December 15, 1974, in *El movimiento de los no alineados*, 258.

As in Lenin's classic theory, the WPK described imperialism as both a system and as the foreign policy of individual states. As a system, imperialism was the international order headed by Washington, in which countries of the Global South saw their resources plundered for the benefit of advanced capitalist countries, a system ultimately propped up by the hard power of the United States with its global network of foreign military bases. However, imperialism also had its regionalised and contingent expressions, for example, the vestiges of Portuguese and French colonialism in Africa, white settler rule and apartheid in Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa, Zionism in the Middle East, Spain's occupation of the Western Sahara, etcetera. As in the past, however, the WPK tended to emphasize the agency of the United States, arguing that US imperialism always lay behind the ability of weaker actors to engage in imperialist and colonialist policies.

While the WPK rejected the Chinese thesis that the Soviet Union represented a form of "social-imperialism," Kim often suggested that the struggle for *chajusŏng* was also a challenge facing socialist countries. In June 1974 Kim remarked that "socialist countries should not interfere with the policy adopted by another country" and that "in a family there should be an atmosphere in which everyone can take coffee or tea in the morning, according to their taste."²³ This was in line with a history of Kim criticizing the Soviet Union and China when he felt they were guilty of "big power chauvinism" towards the DPRK and other small socialist countries like Cuba and the DRV. Pyongyang also condemned Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, and archival records reveal that, at least privately, Kim was deeply critical of Soviet and Cuban intervention in Africa in the 1970s.²⁴ While Kim stopped short of describing such activity as "imperialist", he came quite close, such as during his May 1978 meeting with Nicolae Ceaușescu when he remarked: "It looks like neither the Soviet Union nor Cuba have learnt from history when the capitalist countries used war to get out of crises," in reference to the involvement of those states in the Angolan Civil War and the Ogaden War. The more salient point is that in Kim's analysis, even states within the socialist camp could and did face threats to their sovereignty from fellow socialist states, and therefore were not neutral parties in the contradiction he was attempting to situate at the centre of global politics.

Imperialism, according to Lenin, was the outstanding character of capitalism since the late nineteenth century, and subjugated peoples had always resisted foreign domination. However, what defined Kim's era of *chajusŏng* was not imperialism, but its antithesis: a global striving for national self-determination that transcended cultures, socio-economic systems, and even the North/South, core/periphery divide. Moreover, the international balance of forces had changed, and with it, the horizon of possibility. The struggles for national liberation unleashed by the Second World War had reached a critical mass, culminating in a united Third World coalition poised to fundamentally alter the international order. As Kim explained before to Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko in December 1974, the world had entered a "period of great transformation" in which the "decaying imperialist forces are breaking apart and crumbling" while the "new, growing forces of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are emerging as the masters of the world."²⁵ It was this heightened conflict between a universal aspiration for national self-determination and the declining forces of imperialism – not the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – that had become the "primary tendency" (*kibon ch'use*), with the Third World emerging as a "great driving force (*k'ōdaran ch'udongnyōk*) advancing human history."²⁶

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Kim, “Chosŏn rodongdang ch’anggŏn,” 553.

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Kim Il Sung, “Ppŭllŏkpulgadam undong ūn uri shidae ūi wiryŏk’an panje hyŏngmyŏng nyŏngnyang ida” [The Non-Aligned Movement is a powerful revolutionary force of our time], Dec 16, 1975, in *Kim Il Sung, Chŏnjip* [Works], vol. 30 (Korean Workers’ Party Publishing House, 1985), 680.

28

Kim Il Sung, “Respuestas a las preguntas del presidente del Partido Socialista Costarricense, presidente de la Unión de Periodistas de Costa Rica y presidente del Instituto de Amistad y Cultural Costarricense-Coreano” [Replies to questions from the president of the Costa Rican Socialist Party, president of the Union of Journalists of Costa Rica, and the president of the Institute of Costa Rican-Korean Friendship and Culture], April 13, 1975, in Kim, *El Movimiento de los No Alineados*, 265.

29

Kim Il Sung, “Entrevista con la delegación de periodista panameños,” [Interview with the delegation of Panamanian journalists] September 1, 1974, in Kim, *América Latina avanza*, 59-60.

30

Ibid.

31

“Las nuevas fuerzas ascendentes,” 261.

6. Sovereignty before Socialism

The analysis of the international situation outlined above was the basis for a re-framing of the historical task at hand. Discussion of socialism or class struggle is noticeably sparse in North Korean commentary on international affairs after 1973. The world revolution at the heart of Marxism-Leninism – the very *raison d’être* of the international communist movement – was replaced with a vision of a “new international order (*saeroun kukche jilsŏ*) in line with the interests of the people of the world,” one which was “equitable” (*kongjŏnghan*), in which “the imperialists no longer practise despotism on the international stage, nor violate the sovereignty (*chajugwŏn*) of other countries, nor plunder their resources at will.”²⁷ This meant the task of the Left in the Global South was not to mobilize workers and peasants for socialist revolution, but rather to “establish a progressive social regime and build an independent national economy and national culture”, thereby making it possible to “construct a sovereign and independent state, rich and powerful.”²⁸

Placing national liberation ahead of socialism had some basis in Marxist tradition. Lenin had famously contended that the colonized nations of the periphery constituted the “weakest link” in the global capitalist system, and therefore, national liberation struggles in the Global South, even if led by bourgeois elements, had a crucial role to play in the unfolding world revolution. Both the Chinese and Korean communist movements adopted the position that in their respective societies, given their “semi-feudal” and “backward” character, a popular revolution against foreign domination and the large land-owning class predated the proletariat’s struggle for socialism, a position widely adopted by socialist movements in the Global South. In several Latin American countries in the postwar era – Colombia, Peru, Panama, Bolivia, Argentina – communists sometimes chose to back populist-nationalist leaders in the belief that they shared with them common goals that would ultimately advance the cause of socialism: breaking the power of the traditional *oligarquía* and establishing greater domestic control over the economy.

What was unique in the WPK line of the 1970s, however, was that national liberation was no longer presented as a stage towards socialism: it was the goal itself. While Kim Il Sung was clear that the WPK was leading a process of socialist construction at home, what really mattered for developing countries, he explained to a delegation of Panamanian journalists in September 1974, was that politics and economics reflected “the interests of their people and the realities of their country.”²⁹ While Kim commended developing countries taking a socialist path, he emphasized that “the experiences of the socialist countries do not entirely correspond to the countries of the Third World”, and that “the master of the revolution of each country is that country’s own people.”³⁰ While the Third World comprised “countries of distinct social systems” and “political parties that profess distinct ideologies or ideals,” their basis for unity was the “common aspiration to oppose imperialism and develop themselves independently.”³¹ This was not merely a principle of diplomacy or pluralism. Kim reconfigured the notions of revolution and freedom as historically understood by Marxists through a fundamentally nationalist logic. This translated into Kim’s praise for not only heterodox, “national” socialist programmes which gained currency in the Global South in the 1970s, such as “Ujamaa” (Tanzania), “co-operative socialism” (Guyana), “el proceso revolucionario” (Panama), but also non-socialist concepts of economic-cultural indigenization, e.g., “Arabization,” “Africanization,” Mobutu Sese Seko’s *Authenticité*, etcetera.

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Kim, "Entrevista con el director," 82-83.

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Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus, "Peripheral Influence: The Sinaŭiju Student Incident of 1945 and the Impact of Soviet Occupation in North Korea," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 13, no. 1 (fall 2008): 1-27.

Kim Il Sung frequently employed an anecdote from Korean history to illustrate how the WPK understood the relationship between socialism and *chajusŏng*. According to Kim, shortly after Korea was liberated from Japanese rule in 1945, communists in the North were confronted with some unrest among students and young people: "Some were behaving like ultra-leftists, while some were taking the path to the right." This tense situation culminated with Kim and other senior party members meeting with the discontented youth, who had gathered in a large stadium. They demanded to know, now that Japanese rule had been overthrown, what direction their country was headed. Kim explained to them that the path Korea was embarking on was "neither US-style democracy nor Soviet-style socialism," but rather "democracy of a new type, which has nothing to do with democracy of the capitalist type, but is a Korean-style democracy that serves the interests of the Korean people."

According to the official narrative, after listening to Kim and his comrades speak, one youth from the crowd asked: "General, are you a communist?" Kim responded: "The true communists are the most excellent patriots, and only those who have the patriotic idea can be authentic communists." Kim explained that he was a communist "who does not look to other countries, but rather is based in our people and struggles for the nation and the people of Korea." These words, the story goes, won over the crowd, who erupted into cheers, demonstrating that "our people want to march on the path to independence and not take the path of submission to others."³²

The story is based on what historians commonly refer to as the "Sinŭiju student incident" of November 1945.³³ While scholars largely agree that Kim met with students angry with the Soviet occupation forces and local Korean communists, and that he mediated some kind of resolution – in large part by appealing to their sense of nationalism – the account Kim frequently employed in the 1970s is a simplification that glosses over the considerable hardship and social conflict of the occupation period. For the purposes of this essay, however, the concern is not with its utility as a historical account, but with Kim's intent in presenting the story to interlocutors from the Global South. While more than one interpretation is possible, the most obvious one is that the goal of revolution is not to implement a pre-existing ideology or model, but rather to consolidate total independence. What mattered is that the new political and economic forms to emerge take a distinctly national character and reflect the will of the people. It is a framework which replaces the Marxist-Leninist concept of revolution as the climax of class struggle, in which the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie and establishes a new regime serving its class interests, with a notion of revolution as a kind of radical democratization unleashing the will and aspirations of "the people," a process which may possibly lead down a socialist path, but which will be a distinct process with distinct outcomes in each national context.

It is worth noting that the ambivalence around the question of socialism was consistent with Pyongyang's position on unification in the 1970s. The DPRK proposed that once a peace treaty was established and US troops had left the South, the two Koreas could unite under a "Confederal Republic of Koryo." Kim told Tito in November 1979 that once this happened "we won't impose our own social system" and "we will leave the national capitalists in south Korea and we won't meddle into foreign economic concessions in south Korea." What mattered was that "our country won't become a satellite of any other country and it will remain a fully

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"Letter, Kim Il Sung to Josip Broz Tito", 16 Nov 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/letter-kim-il-sung-josip-broz-tito-0>

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Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Bedford/St. Martin's 2018), 74.

36

Son Chinp'al, "Ppüllökpulgadam undong üi sunggohan rinyömün süngni hago itta" [The noble ideals of the Non-Aligned Movement are triumphant], *Külloja*, no. 7 (July 4, 1976): 59.

37

Ibid.

38

Martin Coles, "Neighbors in Non-Alignment: The Tito-Kim Correspondence, 1973-1979," *Sources & Methods*, Oct 4, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blogs/sources-and-methods>

39

"Los partidos comunistas no deben seguir ciegamente a nadie y mantener su independencia" [Communist parties must not blindly follow anyone and maintain their independence], *Granma*, October 8, 1966.

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Kim Il Sung, "Respuestas a las preguntas de Gabriel Molina, jefe de información del periódico 'Hoy' y de otros periodistas cubanos" [Answers to questions from Gabriel Molina, chief information officer of the newspaper 'Hoy,' and other Cuban journalists], July 6, 1965, in Kim Il Sung, *Respuestas a las Preguntas de los Corresponsales Extranjeros* (Ediciones en Lenguas Extranjeras, 1974), 83.

independent and non-aligned country."³⁴ The DPRK leadership, according to such claims, conceived of unification as a process of decolonization and the consolidation of a truly independent Korean nation, rather than a confrontation with the Korean bourgeoisie in the South.

7. The "new, growing revolutionary forces"

Placing the goal of sovereignty before socialism, and replacing the horizon of world revolution with a more just and equitable world order, naturally raised the question of who were the chief protagonists in this struggle and on what terrain it was to be waged. A core argument of Marx and Engels was that in the bourgeois epoch "the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class;" it was "the class that holds the future in its hands" in the famous words of the *Communist Manifesto*.³⁵ In the twentieth century this understanding was modified, first by Lenin, to include a greater role for the peasantry, a reaction to the fact that communists in the Russian Empire, China, Korea, and elsewhere found themselves at the head of revolutionary crises in conditions of capitalist underdevelopment. In the WPK's new narrative, however, the struggle against imperialism was not one led by subaltern classes from below at all, but rather by states "marching under the banner of *chajusöng*." Following from this, NAM had replaced the "communist and workers' parties" as the international vanguard. As the struggle for *chajusöng* had become the "primary tendency" (*kibon ch'use*), NAM had become the preeminent "revolutionary force" (*hyöngmyöng ryöngnyang*) reflecting objective international conditions.³⁶ NAM was of "epochal significance in the development of human history" because it "emerged as an international revolutionary movement by reflecting the demands and aspirations of the times."³⁷

If the goal was *chajusöng* and not socialism, nationalism logically surpassed Marxism-Leninism in practical importance. The political actors Kim now put forth as examples to be emulated were not revolutionary guerrillas or Marxist-Leninist parties engaged in socialist construction, but rather Third World governments practising economic nationalism and South-South cooperation. Praise once reserved for Cuba and Vietnam was now bestowed upon new partners in the non-aligned Third World: Algeria, Somalia, Guyana, Peru, and Panama, among others. These new criteria for evaluating governments also allowed for a reconciliation with Yugoslavia, which archival records show played a key role in facilitating the DPRK's entry into NAM.³⁸ Throughout the 1960s the North Korean leadership routinely condemned the "Titoists" as "renegades" who were guilty of sowing division within the international communist movement.³⁹

The way that Pyongyang's foreign policy towards Latin America shifted in the 1970s demonstrates the implications of this new doctrine. In the 1960s the DPRK had formal bilateral ties with only one country in the region – Cuba – and regarded most others as "fascist puppet states" of the United States' neo-colonial empire.⁴⁰ Rather than seeking diplomatic ties or commercial trade, its priority was supporting the revolutionary movements aiming to topple those in power. In the 1970s, while the WPK still viewed the region as a crucial battleground in the struggle against US imperialism, in its new analysis primary agency had shifted from non-state to state actors. What signalled the region's "revolutionary" potential was no longer the proliferation of Cuban-inspired guerrilla movements as it was in the prior decade, but rather the growing strength of NAM, and the fact that states were increasingly

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Kim, "Entrevista con el director de los diarios,"

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These were Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Peru, Jamaica, Panama, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Suriname, and Grenada.

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In the 1970s several Latin American countries, Peru in particular, were active in the campaign for international recognition of a 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), that is, the principle that all coastal nations should possess exclusive economic rights to the sea within a 200-mile boundary of their coastline. North Korea also placed major importance on the issue. This movement led to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in December 1982.

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Kim, "Entrevista con el director de los diarios,"

73.

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Kim Il Sung, "Mantengamos el Zazusong: Charla con el primer vicepresidente del Movimiento al Socialismo de Venezuela" [Let us Maintain Chajusŏng: talk with the first vice-president of the Movement Towards Socialism of Venezuela], September 7, 1981, in *Sobre el Movimiento de No Alienación* [On the Non-Aligned Movement] (Foreign Languages Editions, 1982):100.

46

Isaiah A. Litvak and Christopher J. Maule, "Nationalisation in the Caribbean Bauxite Industry," *International Affairs*, 51, no. 1 (1975): 49-54; <https://doi.org/10.2307/2616932>.

prepared to stand up to Washington on issues of territorial sovereignty and resource control. In a June 1974 interview with the Peruvian journalist and former congressman Efraín Ruiz Caro (1929-2007), Kim Il Sung singled out General Velasco in Peru and President Perón in Argentina as the Latin American leaders taking "the path of independence."⁴¹ In Pyongyang's new understanding of the primary political tasks required by the current historical juncture, these nationalist, non-aligned governments were worthy of praise because they "maintained *chajusŏng*," while socialist Cuba was guilty of "flunkeyism" towards the Soviet Union. This new position resulted in a cooling of relations with Cuba (as well as Vietnam), but allowed Pyongyang to establish formal diplomatic ties with thirteen countries in the region by 1982.

It should be noted that the North Korean leadership's new assessment of Latin America had a basis in objective conditions. While Cuba had been a NAM member since 1961, nine additional countries in the region joined during the 1970s,⁴² together holding the potential to tip the scale in a particularly close vote in the UN General Assembly. Several regional issues were high on NAM's agenda during the 1970s, including Guantanamo Bay, the Panama Canal, Puerto Rican and Belizean independence, the campaign for an internationally recognized 200-mile coastal exclusive economic zone (EEZ),⁴³ and Argentina and Britain's dispute over the Malvinas (Falkland Islands). In this political climate, the United States faced a wave of attempts to nationalize US-owned assets during the decade, notably in Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Panama, Guyana, and Jamaica.

If nationalist, non-aligned governments of the Global South were leading the struggle against imperialism, even more controversial was Kim's new assertion that what he called the "second world" had become allies. By "second world" Kim referred to certain advanced capitalist countries which "demand sovereignty" and "insist on respect for the principle of independence."⁴⁴ This was generally an allusion to social-democratic and centre-Left Western governments that appeared prepared to defy the United States and supported the goals of developing countries for greater control over their resources. In 1974 Kim placed Canada, France, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland in this category. In the years that followed, the United Kingdom, West Germany, Italy, and Japan were often mentioned as well. In September 1981 – at a time when Ronald Reagan's Cold War strategy was meeting resistance from Western European leaders – Kim declared that the world needed Europe and Japan to "march along the road to independence" to prevent the United States from starting a third world war.⁴⁵

Looking closer at the example of Canada in the 1970s is helpful for understanding the North Korean leadership's reasoning. At first glance it seems improbable: Canada was a founding member of NATO, had fought in the Korean War under US command, and had never formally recognized the DPRK. However, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, first elected in 1968, was an economic nationalist known for his friendly posture towards the socialist countries, his critical views of US foreign policy, and his support for developing countries attempting to reclaim ownership of their resources. In fact, when Guyana moved to nationalize its Canadian-owned bauxite resources in the early 1970s, Trudeau offered no resistance, merely asking that the private owners receive fair compensation.⁴⁶ Moreover, Canada and the DPRK had inadvertently become allies in one respect: they were both strong advocates of the campaign for the 200-mile coastal EEZ principle, which led to the establishment of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in December 1982.

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Moe Taylor, *T'ŭraekt'ŏnŭn ssarigo ssarŭn sahoejuŭida: kigyehwa nongŏp, naengjŏn kŭrigo tu Han'guk* [The Tractor is Rice, and Rice is Socialism: Mechanized Farming, the Cold War, and the Two Koreas] (Asia Culture Center, 2022).

48

The repeated assertion of US intelligence that Pyongyang was financially supporting the election campaigns of parties and coalitions in countries including Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Dominica, Antigua, the Dominican Republic, and Peru can be found in the volume of declassified issues of *Latin America Review*, a CIA Directorate of Intelligence publication, located in the CREST database of the US National Archives.

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"Entrevista con el director de la editorial "Voluntad" de Quito, Ecuador," [Interview with the director of the publishing house "Voluntad" in Quito, Ecuador], October 9, 1974, in Kim Il Sung, *América Latina avanza*, 103-104.

50

Ibid.

This vision of a coalition of the non-aligned Third World, the socialist camp, and the progressive capitalist countries "marching under the banner of *chajusŏng*" can find little basis in Marxism-Leninism, in which states are conceived as mere vehicles for class rule, and which within capitalist societies need to be conquered and transformed by the proletariat. Yet it reflected how the DPRK leadership had re-posed the central political tasks of the current historical juncture: not as the struggle for socialism, but rather as a state-led, multilateral project to create a new international order that could enshrine the political and economic sovereignty of all nations.

8. Political struggle in the era of *chajusŏng*

The WPK's conception of a new global order followed, in essence, that of the Non-Aligned Movement: new institutions and international conventions that could serve as the framework for a more just world economy conducive to the goals of developing countries, and enshrine the political and economic sovereignty of all states. In this context, Kim championed the initiatives of non-aligned states within the UN General Assembly, and expressed high hopes in the Third World summitry of the era, such as the Conference of Developing Countries on Raw Materials in Dakar, Senegal in February 1975. The DPRK also threw its weight behind efforts to establish new international conventions seen as primarily beneficial to developing countries, such as the aforementioned UNCLOS, and the Geneva Conference of 1974-77. Perhaps above all, the DPRK became a vocal advocate of South-South cooperation: the concept that developing countries could overcome what they lacked individually in resources or technology by trading amongst themselves on a fraternal basis. Pyongyang's most well-known contribution in this regard was its *Ch'ŏllima* 28 tractors, which it gifted in large numbers to new allies in the Global South in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁷

Now that the North Korean leadership had redefined the central goal of the historical moment as *chajusŏng* rather than socialism, and called for a coalition of states across the Cold War and North/South divide, it was forced to revise its previous position on political struggle. During the 1960s it emphasized the necessity of armed struggle – rural-based, communist-led guerrilla warfare in particular – and dismissed reformism and electoralism as dead ends. But this position had little relevance now that the goal was no longer "many Vietnams" within a broader Marxist-Leninist horizon of global proletarian revolution. The WPK now accepted that there was a plurality of legitimate strategies for political struggle in the Global South. This included reformist electoral politics, and US intelligence believed the DPRK was channelling financial support to left-wing election campaigns throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁸ More interestingly perhaps, Kim explicitly endorsed military coups as being a necessary road to social change in Latin America and Africa in some circumstances.⁴⁹ In October 1974 he told the Ecuadorean publisher Humberto Ortiz Flores that as progressive civilian governments were frequently overthrown by foreign intervention, it may be up to "military progressives" to seize power and defend a nation's sovereignty against imperialism.⁵⁰ The military background of North Korean leaders likely contributed to their admiration for "anti-imperialist" military strongmen, such as Omar Torrijos in Panama, Juan Velasco in Peru, and Siad Barre in Somalia, all men who were singled out for praise by Kim Il Sung in the 1970s.

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"Plenary debate at Vancouver Socialist International (SI) congress," telegram from the US embassy in Ottawa to US Secretary of State, Nov 7, 1978, US Archives: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=276532&dt=2694&dl=2009>.

52

Declaration of the 5th Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 16-19 August 1976, 20, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies: <https://nonproliferation.org>.

53

Kim, "Mantengamos el Zazusong," 95.

It is noteworthy that in this context the WPK was attempting, unsuccessfully, to gain observer status in the Socialist International (SI) as early as the time of its fourteenth congress in Vancouver, Canada, in November 1978.⁵¹ The SI is the global federation of social-democratic and labour parties that in previous decades, as a Marxist-Leninist party of Third International lineage, the WPK would have had little to do with. Through the lens of its new foreign policy thinking, however, closer ties with the SI did not pose an ideological problem, while offering many potential benefits. Some member parties were significant players in the "second world" countries the DPRK now wished to build bridges with. Willy Brandt, for example, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), was elected SI president in 1976. The SI had become increasingly vocal on Third World issues in the 1970s, supporting many of the demands of NAM, and allying with the left-wing opposition to Park Chung-Hee in South Korea.

Lastly, it should be noted that in acknowledging a plurality of paths to progressive change in the Global South, the WPK did not renounce armed struggle. Pyongyang never recognised the military regime of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, for example, and continued to support opposition forces within the country, including the radical armed group *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR). Likewise, the DPRK was among those NAM members who voted in favour of resolutions recognizing the legitimacy of armed struggle against "the direct domination of imperialism and colonialism, Apartheid and Zionism, especially in Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, Palestine, the so-called French Somaliland (Djibouti) and other territories."⁵²

9. The era of *chajusŏng*, *chuch'e*, Marxism-Leninism

Summarizing these dramatic ideological shifts within the WPK during the 1970s, it becomes clear that the North Korean leadership had decided it was willing to make a significant break with Marxism-Leninism. In fact, in this same period official party organs, as well as Kim Il Sung himself, stated publicly that the ideas and tactics of the historic communist movement had become outdated. A reoccurring theme in *Kŭlloja* during the 1970s was that modern imperialism had evolved and acquired several new features since Lenin's lifetime. For example, US hegemony had replaced inter-imperialist rivalry, and neo-colonialism, rather than direct foreign rule, was the primary vehicle for extracting wealth from the periphery to the core. In this context, Lenin's classic theory of imperialism was deemed inadequate, requiring the more recent theoretical interventions of Kim Il Sung. In a discussion with Eloy Torres (1918-2006), vice-president of the Venezuelan socialist party *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Towards Socialism, MAS) in September 1981, Kim argued that as valuable as the theories of Marx and Lenin were, "we cannot continue to apply these dogmatically." This was because: "With the shifting of time the character of the era changes the social conditions and the *goal of the revolution* [italics added]. As these change, so does the character of the revolution and the theories and methods of it as well."⁵³

This dismissal of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy reflects the fact that the North Korean leadership's concept of the era *chajusŏng* was intrinsic to a broader political shift taking place within the WPK, namely the elevation of the Kim personality cult, and the emphasis on *chuch'e sasang* as the ideological foundation of the party. In this process, Kim was recast from a great Marxist-Leninist to an original

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While Kim Il Sung often used the noun *kyojojuŭi*, North Korean publications also use *toktanjuŭi* as the equivalent of the English “dogmatism.”

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“Materialicemos más cabalmente el espíritu revolucionario de Soberanía, Independencia y Autodefensa en todos los dominios de la actividad del estado” [Let us more fully materialize the revolutionary spirit of Sovereignty, Independence and Self-Defense in all areas of state activity] December 16, 1967, in Kim, *El Movimiento de los No Alineados*, 9-12.

56

“Chajusŏng kwa p'ŭroret'aria kukchejuŭi” [Independence and proletarian internationalism], *Kŭlloja*, no. 7 (July 1, 1969), 6.

57

“Planning talks paper on Korea,” telegram from US Secretary of State to US Embassy in Tokyo, March 13, 1975, Access to Archival Databases (AAD), US National Archives: aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=201109&dt=2476&dl=1345.

58

“Telegram from the Hungarian Embassy in Pyongyang, ‘Foreign opinions regarding the WPK’s 6th Congress,’” November 11, 1980, Wilson Center Digital Archive: digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123748.

59

Ibid.

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Orfeo Fioretos, “Rhetorical Appeals and Strategic Cooptation in the Rise and Fall of The New International Economic Order,” *Global Policy* 11, supplement 3 (October 2020): 73-82; <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12866>.

theoretician in his own right, whose original *chuch’e sasang* had become a guiding light for the oppressed peoples of the world. *Chuch’e sasang* emphasized the fundamental importance of rejecting *sadaejuŭi*, a word North Koreans translate as “flunkeyism” in English and “servilismo” (servility) in Spanish. While *sadaejuŭi* referred to deference or subservience to foreign countries, it was closely related to the error of *kyojojuŭi*,⁵⁴ or “dogmatism:” blind adherence to past interpretations of Marxism formed in different national and historical contexts.⁵⁵ In contrast, *chuch’e sasang* demanded that every revolutionary movement develop its own path, solve its own problems, and strive for independence in all fields. The WPK itself linked the development of *chuch’e sasang* to Korea’s own history of anti-colonial struggle, as well as its experience with “great power chauvinism” within the international communist movement.⁵⁶

Such a major ideological shift within the North Korean leadership did not go unnoticed. In March 1975 the US State Department observed that “North Korea is apparently diluting its ties with the communist world” and that Kim Il Sung “regards North Korea as a member of the Third World and apparently wishes to have his primary relationship with developing countries rather than with his communist neighbours.”⁵⁷ By the time of the WPK’s Sixth Party Congress in October 1980, the Hungarian ambassador to the DPRK could remark that “The characteristic attribute of these views is a pragmatic and nationalistic approach that is moving more and more away from Marxism-Leninism.”⁵⁸ An Albanian delegate was more blunt: “What kind of congress it is where not a single word mentions Marxism-Leninism, and parties with no connection to communist ideologies participate as well?”⁵⁹

Conclusion

Guided by the concept of the “era of *chajusŏng*”, in the 1970s Pyongyang pursued a foreign policy strategy focused on peaceful diplomacy and multilateralism and premised on principles of non-alignment and Third World solidarity. This was the most successful period of North Korean foreign policy, the height of its legitimacy among the international community reflected in a level of political support and economic engagement it has not matched in any period since. Despite such tangible gains, the DPRK’s rising fortunes slowed during the latter half of the 1970s before flatlining in the early 1980s. This trajectory followed the decline of the Non-Aligned Movement that was so central to Pyongyang’s foreign policy strategy. As NAM membership expanded in the 1970s, so did its internal fissures, revealing how the concept of “Third World solidarity” obscured fundamental differences among its diverse constituency. This included its more conservative and pro-Western members who were uneasy with the agenda of “radical” states like the DPRK. Moreover, some Western governments actively conspired to undermine the movement through a strategy of selective co-option and divide-and-rule, an agenda aided by changing global economic conditions.⁶⁰ Following the oil shocks of the 1970s, and the US Federal Reserve’s decision in 1979 to initiate a period of sustained interest rate increases, many Third World countries became trapped in unsustainable debt. Forced to throw themselves at the mercy of the International Monetary Fund and the rich creditor countries, this major shift in US monetary policy allowed Washington to “tame the rebellious South,” as Giovanni Arrighi put it.⁶¹

The major shifts in DPRK foreign policy thinking evident in the early-mid

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Giovanni Arrighi, "The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence," *New Left Review* 20 (March-April 2003): 54; <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii20/articles/giovanni-arrighi-the-social-and-political-economy-of-global-turbulence>.

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Christian F. Ostermann and James F. Person (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Détente on the Korean Peninsula, 1970-1974* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), 12-13.

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Ibid.

1970s raise questions of factionalism and policy adaptability within the DPRK state historically. In May 1972 in Pyongyang, Kim Il Sung privately apologized to South Korean intelligence chief Lee Hurak for the Blue House Raid of 1968, in which a North Korean commando team attempted to assassinate Park Chung Hee at his presidential residence in Seoul.⁶² Kim blamed the incident on ultra-left elements within his government at the time acting contrary to his wishes. While the motivation behind and sincerity of Kim's remarks are open to debate, it does suggest that the drastic ideological shifts emerging in the early-mid 1970s examined in this essay may have corresponded to shifting balances of power between competing factions (however informal) within the party. Lee himself believed Kim's remarks indicated "there was a certain conflict within North Korea, at least between those who were for a stronger military and those for a stronger economy."⁶³ This serves as a reminder that the DPRK is always changing, and that decision and policy making are affected by external conditions, not fixed in stone nor chained to some immutable, driving *mentalité*.

The concept of the "era of *chajusŏng*" and the political tasks it required that were introduced by the North Korean leadership in the 1970s was a drastic shift from the militant line the party previously upheld, but not an irrational one. It was based on certain objective historical developments emerging from three decades of decolonization. Third World states dominated the UN General Assembly, the Non-Aligned Movement was at its peak of strength, and in May 1974 the UN formally adopted its call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The military defeat of the United States in Vietnam, Kissinger's failure to achieve an Egyptian-Israeli accord in 1975, and Washington's reluctant agreement to transfer control of the Panama Canal to Panama in 1977 signalled to many a precipitous decline in US power. The DPRK was benefiting from growing bilateral relations and trade not only with countries of the Third World, but Japan and Western Europe as well. Some of these same members of the "second world" appeared committed to pursuing a foreign policy independent of the United States, one friendlier to the socialist camp and more supportive of the development goals of the Third World.

Nor were the ideological shifts of the 1970s without foreshadowing. One can identify the seeds of the "era of *chajusŏng*" doctrine in the concept of *chuch'e* first put forth by Kim in December 1955, particularly in its emphasis on independence and self-reliance in both the political and economic spheres. Kim had long argued that communists must "creatively adapt" Marxism-Leninism, and develop distinctly national political programmes based on their society's unique conditions. It was not a far step to conclude that revolutionaries in the Global South need not depend on Marx and Lenin at all. This suggests that while the WPK's ideological shifts of the 1970s reflected an effort to adapt to changing international circumstances, they were also shaped by deeper impulses within the WPK leadership, namely the desire to escape dependency on the Soviet Union and China and to consolidate a domestic order whose legitimacy rested solely on its authentic Korean-ness and the infallibility of Kim Il Sung. It also supports the view that Kim Il Sung's generation of the WPK leadership is better understood as anti-colonial nationalists than as Marxist-Leninist ideologues. While it is difficult to deny that socialism has been consistently at the centre of WPK ideology, the move away from orthodox Marxism-Leninism to the more nationalist position of the 1970s was likely a more accurate representation of the values and material interests of the North Korean ruling stratum.

From this vantage point, the "era of *chajusŏng*" doctrine was the probable

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For example, see Kim Il Sung, *Amplíemos y Desarrollemos la Cooperación Sur-Sur* (Ediciones de Lenguas Extranjeras, 1992); Kim Il Sung, *Los Servicios Informativos de los No Alineados Deben Contribuir a la Causa de los Pueblos por la Independencia* (Ediciones de Lenguas Extranjeras, 1993).

destination of a journey the WPK began as early as the factional struggles of 1955-56. This may explain why, despite many changes in the DPRK in the five decades since it joined NAM, it has essentially remained a fixed pillar of its foreign policy. While NAM has never regained the prominence it had in the 1970s, the DPRK has remained a steadfast member, active in its working groups, and being re-elected to the Coordinating Bureau (CoB) in 1998. Some of the last major speeches by Kim Il Sung before his death in July 1994 were on non-alignment, and are still promoted by the WPK today as exemplary of the late leader's legacy, and as representative of the DPRK's stance on world affairs.⁶⁴ When Kim addressed the Fourth Conference of Information Ministers of Non-Aligned Countries held in Pyongyang in June 1993, his account of the international situation and the tasks it demanded had changed little since the "era of *chajusŏng*" was first declared in 1974. If anything stands out in the speech, it is that Kim does not attempt to connect the "aggressive and plundering nature of the imperialists and their neocolonial methods" to contemporaneous events. If in the 1970s Kim spoke against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, national liberation struggles across Africa, and the possibility of a "New International Economic Order," the world now appeared in a much more static state. One cannot help but sense an underlying sense of uncertainty, even confusion, in Kim's 1993 speech, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the United States on increasingly friendly terms with Moscow and Beijing, and with the DPRK facing its most serious crisis since the Korean War.

With hindsight it is easy to see NAM as the product of a particular set of historical dynamics that have definitively passed. Non-aligned summits today, even though attended by some 120 countries, are all but ignored by Western media. Certainly, the First/Third World, North/South binary that shaped most international analysis in the 1970s seems inadequate today, reflected in ongoing debates over the relevance of the concept of imperialism in the fields of international relations and global political economy. Nevertheless, with the second presidency of Donald Trump inaugurated in January 2025, Kim Il Sung's vision of a coalition of the Global South and progressive Western governments to resist US hegemony, or at least its most destructive expressions, finds reflections in the contemporary moment. Many of the aims of NAM in the 1970s appear to have been resuscitated via the BRICS+ coalition, whose member states now encompass over half the world's population. If the world is indeed in a new Cold War between the US and China, Trump's policies will continue to cause some traditional US partners to reconsider where their interests lie. As during the first Trump presidency, G7 policy thinkers indulge in talk – some would say fantasies – of "middle power diplomacy" in which actors like Canada, Japan, and the European Union might coordinate to exert a "soft containment" of the United States. In these developments we see many of the same contradictions in play as in the 1970s: Western elites torn between the need to defend their interests against the United States and their simultaneous commitment to the US-led order; elites in the Global South who must balance the benefits of regional and South-South solidarity with those of positive relations with Washington. What these developments remind us is that while much has changed since Kim Il Sung first declared the "era of *chajusŏng*," the realities of US hegemony and uneven development continue to be a source of contestation and dislocation on an international scale, dynamics bound to only increase in the current geopolitical situation.

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