



North Korea: Making Up Lost Ground?

by Aidan Foster-Carter

On January 4, 2000, Italy became the first G7 nation to establish full diplomatic relations with North Korea. This newyear gift is the first fruit of a new bid over the past year to mend diplomatic fences and forge fresh partnerships. That effort may well net further catches soon, possibly including Australia, Canada, and the Philippines.

Any gains must be seen in the context of the serious reverses, some self-inflicted, which the DPRK has experienced internationally, especially during the past decade since the end of the Cold War. In that sense, Pyongyang is mostly making up lost ground rather than charting new pastures. Moreover, the symbolic value of chalking up new ties with lesser powers is no substitute for the need to make substantive progress with the five countries that are central to North Korea's interests: namely the U.S., Japan, China, Russia, and of course South Korea.

The Cold War Background. A brief historical sketch may help situate current developments. The DPRK was proclaimed in 1948, shortly after the Republic of Korea (ROK) was declared in South Korea. Both these new states succeeded three years of military occupation – officially so under USAMGIK in the south, undeclared in the north – by the U.S. and Soviet armies, after the peninsula was “temporarily” divided at the 38th parallel in 1945. To this day neither the DPRK nor the ROK has ever formally abandoned its claim to be the sole legitimate Korean government.

That Cold War origin and competition – further reinforced by the fact that the 1950-53 Korean War was a UN action against North Korea's invasion of the south – determined and drove both Korean states' diplomatic orientations for the next four decades. The DPRK at first had ties with all communist states but no others, until in the 1960s newly independent nations, mainly in Africa, began to open relations. Most Afro-Asian states recognized both Koreas, but more radical regimes (e.g., Algeria and Tanzania) dealt exclusively with the DPRK, seeing it as a role model of political self-assertion and rapid economic growth. Conversely, some – but not all – conservative states followed most of Latin America in recognizing only the ROK.

In retrospect, the 1970s were North Korean diplomacy's golden age. Secure in support (with some ups and downs) from the two rival communist superpowers – comprehensive treaties, including mutual military backing, were signed with both the USSR and China in 1961 – the DPRK shifted its focus to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), from which it succeeded in excluding the ROK (as palpably aligned by having U.S. bases and troops). The two Koreas competed fiercely and expensively in the Third World, establishing resident missions even in the smallest of states. North Korea

became a significant aid donor in Africa, particularly in agriculture, construction, and military training. In the Middle East, its support for Egypt – sending MiG pilots during the 1973 war with Israel – was rewarded by Cairo supplying Soviet Scud missile technology, something a wary Moscow had refused to do.

Decline and Fall. The 1970s also saw gains in Europe, including ties with not only neutral states – Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, and Finland – but also four NATO members: Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Portugal. This progress was soon negated, however, by Pyongyang's growing propensity for bad behavior. It swiftly defaulted on its first western loans from both private banks and governments, the bulk of which have never been repaid. Then the four Nordic nations, who jointly recognized the DPRK to signal disapproval of dictatorship in South Korea, almost at once acted in unison again in 1976 to expel North Korean envoys for smuggling drugs, liquor, and cigarettes. Similar charges have dogged DPRK diplomats across the planet ever since. One of many puzzles about Pyongyang's logic is how any financial gains from such activities can conceivably compensate for the huge damage they do to North Korea's reputation.

Pyongyang further harmed itself in 1983, when North Korean agents blew up half the South Korean cabinet in Rangoon, Burma – a state hitherto close to the DPRK, but which promptly broke relations and has never reopened them. The 1980s also saw the first overtures by North Korea's communist allies towards a South Korea by now too important to ignore – culminating in China, the USSR, and all eastern Europe except Albania sending teams to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, ignoring Pyongyang's call for a boycott. Formal recognition of the ROK followed soon after, accelerated by but separate from the collapse of communist rule in Europe. Thus it was the USSR, not yet Russia, which in September 1990 smashed the Cold War symmetries on the peninsula by recognizing the ROK – to Pyongyang, an act of unspeakable treachery. By 1992 China had followed suit, albeit more cautiously and sensitively. A year earlier, both Koreas had joined the UN after Beijing made it clear it would no longer veto Seoul's entry.

While the tide of history was running against North Korea, here again its wounds were in part self-inflicted. Its hostility to each Korean state having its own seat in the UN was perverse and doomed to fail. Equally self-defeating was its opposition to “cross-recognition”: of itself by Washington and Tokyo, in exchange for Moscow and Beijing recognizing Seoul. In the event, South Korea got recognition while North Korea just got cross. Most of its former nonaligned allies also moved to open ties with the ROK, though some – notably Egypt, despite having become a key U.S. ally – held out till the 1990s. Even Cambodia succumbed, despite Sihanouk's close personal ties with Kim Il Sung. Cuba and Syria may be

the last states left that recognize only the DPRK and not the ROK.

A Change of Tack. This string of reversals forced North Korea to rethink its strategy (though arguably not yet enough). Its initial reaction in 1990-92 was to explore more substantive dialogue than ever before with two major enemies, South Korea and Japan. But agreements signed with Seoul were never implemented, while talks with Tokyo foundered on several rocks – including the nuclear issue, which from 1993 dominated the DPRK's relations with the west. Pyongyang's considered – or ill-considered – response to the loss of military and other aid from Moscow and Beijing has been to develop weapons of mass destruction, notably nuclear warheads and missiles, to protect itself, and as a bargaining chip to gain political and economic benefits.

After tensions that we now know came close to war in mid-1994, the Agreed Framework signed with the U.S. in Geneva in October that year provided for the DPRK to be given two new light water reactors and fuel oil, in exchange for shutting down its nuclear site at Yongbyon. The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the consortium set up to effect this, has become – as Washington intended – a means to deepen practical contacts between North Korea and KEDO's three leading members: the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. But Pyongyang has remained mostly hostile to these three traditional foes; its launch of a rocket over Japan in August 1998 raised tensions and threatened the Agreed Framework.

Outlook. What then are the overall prospects for North Korea's diplomacy in the new century? This year may well see a few more countries following Italy's lead and recognizing the DPRK. Most of the remaining holdouts, however, including the U.S., Japan, and the major EU nations, will probably refrain unless and until Pyongyang shows itself more inclined towards peace and reform.

The ball remains in North Korea's court. Every nation on earth would welcome, and many would reward, tangible signs that the Pyongyang leopard had changed its spots. This we do not yet see. Rather, recent developments reflect mainly a more permissive attitude by others, especially South Korea. For its part, the DPRK is testing the waters and to a limited extent seeking to mend fences. Opening ties does not equate to opening in any deeper sense. But we must hope it is a small step in that direction.

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