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Introduction

“When the establishment of ‘diplomatic relations’ with south Korea by the Soviet Union is viewed from another angle, no matter what their subjective intentions may be, it, in the final analysis, cannot be construed otherwise than openly joining the United States in its basic strategy aimed at freezing the division of Korea into ‘two Koreas,’ isolating us internationally and guiding us to ‘opening’ and thus overthrowing the socialist system in our country [...] However, our people will march forward, full of confidence in victory, without vacillation in any wind, under the unfurled banner of the Juche¹ idea and defend their socialist position as an impregnable fortress.”²

The *Rodong Sinmun* article quoted above was published in October 5, 1990, and was written as a response to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union, a critical ally for the North Korean regime, and South Korea, its archrival. The North Korean government’s main reactions to the changes taking place in the international environment during this time are illustrated clearly in this passage: fear of increased isolation, apprehension of external threats, and resistance to reform. The transformation of the international situation between the years of 1989 and 1992 presented a daunting challenge for the already struggling North Korean government. However, unique among the communist regimes created under Soviet occupation, North Korea, formally named the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, was able to withstand the wave of reform that swept through Eastern Europe and endure against conditions that were much more devastating than what brought down the other communist governments. How is it that the North Korean regime has been able to withstand the pressures of change? What impact did the transformation in the international situation have on North Korea’s seemingly contradictory or “highly bizarre and unpredictable” foreign policy?³

The answers for both these questions can be found in the North Korean government’s reactions to the changes that were taking place between the years of 1989 and 1992. Articles from the North Korean communist party’s official newspapers, *Rodong Sinmun*, *Kulloja*, and the *Pyongyang Times* reveal that the changes taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were tremendously unsettling for the North Korean government and that they were seen as major challenges to the regime’s continued existence. Due to the loss of important allies from South

¹ Suh Jae-Jean states that the ruling ideology of “*Juche* thought functions as a ruling concept and the central principle of social composition in all walks of life such as politics, economics, social programs, foreign policy, and national defense.” In Kim Il Sung’s own words, *Juche* (or *Chuch’e*) is defined as “holding to the principle of solving for oneself all the problems of the revolution and construction in conformity with the actual conditions at home.” In terms of foreign policy, *Juche* has emphasized independence from foreign interference and self-reliance. More information is available in chapters two to five in Tai Sung An’s *North Korea in Transition: From Dictatorship to Dynasty* (Conneticut: Greenwood Press, 1983) and Jae-Jean Suh’s “Ideology,” in *Prospects for Change in North Korea*, ed. Tae Hwan Ok and Hong Yung Lee (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1994): 11-44.

² Commentator’s Article, “‘Diplomatic Relations’ Bargained for Dollars,” *Pyongyang Times*, October 6, 1990; As shown by this passage, the North Korean media uses a lower case for “south” when describing South Korea.

³ Doug Bandow, “Nuclear Issues Between the United States and North Korea,” in *North Korea After Kim Il Sung*, ed. Dae-Sook Suh and Chae-Jin Lee (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998): 123.

Korea's northern diplomacy, North Korea found that it could no longer count on international diplomatic support, a realization that became painfully clear when the Soviet Union went against North Korea's desperate pleas to stop the normalization process with South Korea.⁴ Acutely aware of its marginalized international position and the possibility of external and internal pressure to reform, the foreign policy of North Korea underwent significant changes.

To accommodate the new international environment, the North Korean government showed much more restraint in its foreign policy and commitment to engage in dialogue with its enemies such as South Korea, Japan, and even the United States. This helped re-establish a favorable geopolitical climate, where North Korea's neighbors were willing to work with the existing North Korean regime, unlike East Europe where reform and change were encouraged. However, with limited support and no assurance against international interference on its sovereignty, the North Korean leadership turned to the development of nuclear weapons to substitute for the lost deterrence that existed during the Cold War. Developing nuclear weapons also bolstered the legitimacy of the North Korean regime. Externally it brought foreign countries to the negotiating table and internally it restored the faltering legitimacy brought on by its new accommodating foreign policy, which contradicted the ruling *Juche* ideology. Although North Korea's foreign policy and the survival of the Kim Jong Il regime has been often depicted as exceptional and even inexplicable, the North Korean government was able to endure because it understood its international position and was able to rationally adjust its foreign policy to its geopolitical conditions to achieve legitimacy both internationally and internally.

This paper will show the evolution of North Korea's foreign policy by: (1) comparing and contrasting North Korea with Eastern European countries, particularly East Germany and Romania, to establish that geopolitical conditions played a critical role in understanding the regime's survival; and (2) examining the North Korean government's reactions to the changes in its international environment using official newspapers to illustrate how the government adjusted its foreign policy to create a favorable geopolitical condition. The comparison between Eastern European countries and North Korea will illustrate the key factor which distinguished North Korea from the East European countries: the geopolitical environment. For this section, studies regarding the collapse of the communist regimes during the late 1980s and early 1990s will be presented to show how geopolitics played a critical role in regime change, especially in East Germany and Romania, which share important similarities with North Korea. After establishing that the geopolitical context was essential in explaining the survival of the North Korean regime, the rest of the paper will examine how North Korea was able to foster a favorable environment through its new foreign policies. This section of the paper will be divided into two parts. First, the paper will observe the North Korean leadership's initial reactions to the collapse of the communist regimes in the Soviet bloc using various official statements and publications,

⁴ Northern diplomacy was South Korea's diplomatic strategy aimed at reducing tensions and improving inter-Korea relations by establishing formal ties with socialist countries. Detailed explanations will follow later in the paper.

including articles from the *Rodong Sinmun*, *Kulloja*, and the *Pyongyang Times*.⁵ Analyzing these records will show what the regime's concerns were and how it assessed its situation during this time. Secondly, these reports will be examined chronologically to determine the evolution of the North Korean foreign policy response between 1989 and 1992 and why it evolved in this way.

The use of newspapers as the primary source for this research warrants a short discussion about their value in studying North Korea. All three newspapers were published by the Worker's Party of Korea and served as the direct medium for the regime's policies and opinions. Kim Il Sung's statements regarding these publications clarify the role that they played:

The Party uses the Party organ to inform the Party members of its policies, as well as to instruct and to signal the conduct of the members. The editorials are especially important reflections of the Central Committee's decision and intentions.⁶

As shown by this statement, the articles that appear in these publications are direct expressions of the leadership, revealing its main concerns and interpretations. Also, the newspapers provide contemporary account of events, which can supplement the lack, or at times absence, of reliable data regarding North Korea. Professor Ko Yu-Hwan of Dongguk University writes that "as most North Korean official documents are reinterpreted and manufactured, official newspapers are the only material that the truthfulness is guaranteed and are actually reflective of the facts and opinions expressed when the events take place."⁷ This means that examining the official newspapers during 1989 and 1992 will provide the best account of the North Korean leadership's reactions to the changes that took place in Eastern Europe, and its considerations in formulating its foreign policy responses.

Understanding the Longevity of the North Korean Regime

Before introducing how the transformation of North Korea's foreign policy enabled the regime to survive beyond the Cold War, it is necessary to examine some previous attempts at answering the question of how the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il regimes were able to outlast their allies in the Soviet bloc. Unfortunately, efforts to solve this puzzle of the North Korean leadership's endurance has resulted in a litany of valid yet limited answers, which have failed to establish a clear and overwhelming consensus among scholars. In fact, many scholars have stated that the North Korean regime's survival during the 1990s, when "the country's gross national product more than halved, most of its factories either cannibalized or operating at less than 30% capacity, and an increasing number of people in northeastern provinces either falling into a slow-motion famine cum triage mode at home," as "nothing short of miraculous," and "a defiance of

⁶ Yu-hwan Ko, "Nodong Sinmun ul tonghae bon Pukhan pyonhwa" (Seoul: Sonin, 2006), 25.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

‘natural laws’ of the politics of transition.”⁸ This bewilderment among scholars has led to diverse explanations, which often emphasize the uniqueness of the North Korean situation. Some commonly cited factors include the unique leadership structure based on *Juche* ideology of self-reliance, the feudalistic social structure of North Korea, the Confucian culture embedded in the Korean population, and the successful integration of the military apparatus.⁹

This emphasis on North Korea’s uniqueness has created a disproportionate focus on North Korea’s domestic conditions when explaining its longevity. Of course, the internal political circumstances, socioeconomic conditions, as well as the state’s ideology cannot be ignored; however, as will be shown by the East European experience, the geopolitical situation was the determining factor for regime survival. Therefore, without placing North Korea’s internal developments in the larger geopolitical context, it will be difficult to fully understand its continued existence. In other words, the study of North Korea should not only focus on its uniqueness, but also on its commonalities with other communist countries.

Despite the wide acceptance of geopolitical conditions as the deciding factor in the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the critical role that geopolitical conditions played for North Korea’s survival has been largely ignored.¹⁰ It is true that even in explaining the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, distinct causes are identified for each country. A broad consensus exists on why the collapse of the Eastern European countries came about: the “loosening” of Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev towards principles of “non-interference” and “independence of parties to define the paths of their own development.”¹¹ By the late 1980s, this loosening had expanded to the extent that the Brezhnev Doctrine—which effectively stated that the Soviet Union would intervene militarily if the Eastern European countries tried to compromise or distort the imposed communist rule—had largely dissipated.¹²

To understand the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and why there is a focus on geopolitical conditions, it is necessary to introduce the notion of legitimacy within the context of communist establishments. Schopflin states that for communist regimes created by the Soviet Union, legitimacy was sustained “not just through force and the threat of force but, more importantly because it has some vision by which it can justify itself,” which for the communist countries meant positioning themselves as “the legatee of a communist revolution.”¹³ This communist camaraderie, which depended on the “moral support” from the Soviet Union and the rest of the Soviet bloc countries, was an important source of “prestige to the party leadership.”¹⁴

⁸ Samuel S. Kim, “North Korea in 1999: Bringing the Grand Chollima March Back In,” *Asian Survey* 40 (1999): 151; Scott Snyder, “North Korea’s Challenge of Regime Survival: Internal Problems and Implications for the Future,” *Pacific Affairs* 73 (2000): 517.

⁹ Snyder, “North Korea’s Challenge of Regime Survival,” 521.

¹⁰ Judy Batt, “The End of Communist Rule in East-Central Europe: A Four-Country Comparison,” (paper presented at the Comparative Socialist Reforms Workshop, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington DC, 1990): 368.

¹¹ Mark Kramer, “Beyond the Brezhnev Doctrine: A New Era in Soviet-East European Relations?” *International Security* 14 (1989-1990): 27, 39.

¹² Kramer, “Beyond the Brezhnev Doctrine,” 29.

¹³ George Schopflin, “The End of Communism in East Europe,” *International Affairs* 66 (1990): 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

Prestige was especially important for East Germany, since it was competing with West Germany for regime legitimacy; as will be seen later, this was certainly true for North Korea, as well.¹⁵ Also, Patrick Morgan identifies that every communist regime, but especially the North Korean regime,

has long based its internal appeal on two elements: the insistence that it is constructing a superior way of life, far advanced in comparison with other societies, and the belief that it faces a constant, severe threat from the outside. The erosion of both concepts directly threatens domestic security.¹⁶

This means that a communist country must either have substantial internal success—mainly economic prosperity—or identifiable enemies that necessitates protection from the government. Near the end of the 1980s it became clear that both elements were quickly vanishing with economic deterioration and détente with the West. As the internal appeal diminished, the support from the Soviet Union and the neighboring Soviet bloc became increasingly important to impose control over the population.

Horowitz of Rutgers University demonstrates how legitimacy was a key factor in explaining why certain communist regimes collapsed faster and with less resistance than others. Like other scholars, Horowitz states that there is something that “links” and “unites” the revolutionary upheavals in nearly every single country from Central Europe, the Baltic States, and Central Asia: the weakening of Soviet control:¹⁷

In its simplest historical terms, the breakdown of the Brezhnev Doctrine and the rise of Gorbachev’s Perestroika provided Eastern Europe with a window of opportunity to break the shackles of an unwanted, oppressive regime.¹⁸

To understand why the changes in Soviet policy led to the realization of the new opportunities, it is necessary to focus on the fact that the communist regimes were “unwanted” and “oppressive.” In effect, the East European establishments were able to survive because of the implicit and sometimes explicit support from the Soviet Union and its neighboring regimes.

A supportive environment was especially important for countries with externally imposed communist regimes. Horowitz distinguishes among those countries where communist rule was externally imposed, as was the case in Eastern European states; those where quasi-legitimacy was achieved by mass movements, as in the case of the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union; and lastly those under family dictatorships, such as Romania and North Korea.¹⁹ He goes on to state that because the Eastern European communist governments were imposed, they lacked legitimacy and thus were more subject to rapid collapse, while the governments based on mass movements or family dictatorships retained pseudo forms of legitimacy, which

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Patrick M. Morgan, “New Security Arrangements Between the United States and North Korea,” *North Korea After Kim Il Sung*, ed. Dae-Sook Suh and Chae-Jin Lee (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998): 181.

¹⁷ Irving Louis Horowitz, “Revolution, Longevity and Legitimacy in Communist States,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 27, no. 1 (1992): 61.

¹⁸ Ibid. 62.

¹⁹ Ibid.

allowed them to resist liberalization, at least in political terms.²⁰ Nevertheless, as seen in the fall of the Romanian regime, the flexibility to reform is harder to obtain in family dictatorships due to the rigid control structure. Additionally, unlike the regimes that were formed through mass movements, the Romanian and North Korean leaderships still depended on the support from communist neighbors to reinforce the legitimacy of their dictatorships.²¹

Can geopolitical considerations be used to understand the surprising longevity of the North Korean regime? Even though there appears to be a consensus on the Eastern Europe experience, it is not hard to realize the difficulty of applying the same framework to understand North Korea. However, despite the fundamental differences between the East European countries and North Korea, it is impractical to assume that the North Korean regime is completely different from the East European regimes. The following section will show that there were indeed strong similarities in the particular international and domestic context of North Korea and those of East Germany and Romania, which suggests that such a comparison may prove valuable in acquiring a better understanding of how the North Korean regime continues to survive.

Lessons from East Germany and Romania

Why is North Korea's foreign policy change that occurred between 1989 and 1992 critical in explaining the North Korean regime's survival? The answer is that North Korea's new foreign policy was able to sustain a favorable geopolitical situation, which is why the North Korean regime underwent a different fate from the East European regimes. As will be further elaborated in this section, although it is true that North Korea is quite unique, it is also true that there are important commonalities between North Korea and Eastern European countries such as East Germany and Romania. The similarities found between these countries will help dismiss some of the causes that are often cited as reasons for North Korea's regime survival, while the differences will show what exactly allowed the North Korean regime to withstand the pressures to reform that both North Korea and the Soviet bloc countries faced during this time.

Besides the fact that both East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and North Korea were created out of the agreements between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union to divide the countries, they also shared close similarities in their internal structures. One important similarity was the totalitarian and rigid nature of both regimes that resisted any reforms. "Instead of attempting to win popular consent," East Germany built up a "formidable coercive apparatus, justified according to the tenets of traditional Marxist-Leninist ideology."²² Similarly, North Korea continued to "stiffen political control" over its population under a "Stalinist regime" since its creation.²³ This similar stance was reaffirmed by the regimes' responses to events beyond their borders; both countries showed "overt approval for the Chinese authorities' suppression of the protesting students in Tiananmen Square" and "critici[zed] the

²⁰ Horowitz, 63.

²¹ Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong Lee, "Making Sense of North Korea: 'National Stalinism' in Comparative-historical Perspective," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40 (2007): 468

²² Batt, "The End of Communist Rule," 374.

²³ Sang-Woo Rhee, "North Korea in 1990," *Asian Survey* 31 (1991): 73.

developments in Poland and Hungary,” which sent a clear message to their domestic audience of their own preparedness to use whatever force necessary to maintain control.²⁴

How, then, did the East German regime collapse? As mentioned earlier, the fall of the communist government in the GDR can be attributed to the loss of support from the Soviet Union and its neighbors. For East Germany, Soviet support was especially important:

In many respects, the breakdown of communist rule in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic is easier to explain: these regimes centered their strategy for maintaining power not on the risky enterprise of domestic reform but on ensconcing themselves firmly under the Soviet wing.²⁵

Unlike North Korea, which tried to keep itself from being too dependent on the Soviet Union and China, the East German regime was highly dependent on Soviet support. It is not surprising that “when the Soviet Union itself began to depart from those ideological principles and finally abdicated its role of ultimate guarantor of the regimes of Eastern Europe,” communist rule in East Germany “simply collapsed.”²⁶ What is especially interesting is the process through which this collapse took place. Despite the strong resistance from the communist government, without the fear of Soviet intervention, mass protests erupted.²⁷ Also important was that East Germany lost the support of its neighboring countries, which had abandoned communism. Judy Batt states that the

East German regime could not prevent its population voting with its feet: Hungary opened its border to Austria in the spring of 1989, and in September, the Hungarian government renounced its treaty with the German Democratic Republic according to which it was obliged to refuse exit from its territory.²⁸

Since West Germany offered an attractive alternative, failing to keep its borders closed and to maintain regional support proved fatal for the East German regime. As will be seen later, although North Korea’s neighbors were more tolerant of the regime, the geopolitical condition was quickly deteriorating during this period; however, unlike the East German regime, North Korea was able to adjust its foreign policy and receive assistance from its neighbors in maintaining domestic control.

Another East European country that shared similar characteristics with North Korea’s Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il regime was Romania’s Ceausescu regime. Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong Lee state, “the North Korean regime under Kim Il-Sung and later Kim Jong-II, instead of being an anomaly that cannot be compared to any other regimes, shares a number of key institutional similarities with communist Romania under Ceausescu.”²⁹ Most importantly, as shown in Horowitz’s discussion of regime legitimacy, both North Korea and Romania’s regimes can be classified under “dynastic communism.” Horowitz states that “Rumania shared with

²⁴ Batt, “The End of Communist Rule,” 384.

²⁵ Ibid., 375.

²⁶ Ibid., 376.

²⁷ Gottfried-Karl Kindermann, “The German Unification Movement and its International Implications,” In *Europe in Transition and the Korean Peninsula*, ed. Dalchoong Kim and Werner Gumpel (Seoul: Institute of East and West Studies, 1991): 65.

²⁸ Batt, “The End of Communist Rule,” 385.

²⁹ Chen, “Making Sense of North Korea,” 460.

North Korea and Cuba a communist party dominated by a family network,” and that “this sort of Mafia-style communism is probably the hardest to uproot,” due to its “very organic intimacy” that makes it “impervious to ordinary forms of pressure and protest.”³⁰ Another important resemblance is the relative isolation of both regimes. Horowitz describes Romania as different from the other Eastern European countries in its international isolation from the Eastern and Western blocs alike. This isolation further reinforced “the pseudo-Stalinist pivot of Nicolae Ceausescu and his family,” which made Romania politically immobile and limited in its capacity to resolve domestic conflict.³¹ The isolationist and rigid political structure is also characteristic of the North Korean government. Marcus Noland states that North Korea was indeed quite similar to Romania in more than just the “dynastic continuation of a leadership that has held power.”³² He points out that Romania and North Korea are

similar in population, per capital income, social indicators, and sectoral distribution of labor, as well as central planning and its attendant maladies. Both combined rigid internal orthodoxy with symbolic independence in external affairs. Both experimented with socialism in one family; Nicolae Ceausescu’s inspiration of the development of a cult of personality is said to have been a 1971 visit to Pyongyang.³³

How did the Romanian regime, which shared a similar basis for legitimacy as North Korea, collapse in 1989? Richard Hall states that Romania’s case was unique among the East European countries, as “the Soviet decision to abstain from military intervention to save the communist party’s monopoly on power in Eastern Europe [...] had far fewer, and substantially less threatening, implications for Romania” since, similarly to North Korea, “Romania did not have Soviet troops stationed on its soil, and since the Romanian party was not dependent upon the Soviet ‘military veto’ for its hold on power.”³⁴ Although initially the Romanian government was not deeply influenced by the Soviet foreign policy decision, Romania did depend on the Soviet bloc to maintain a supportive environment.³⁵ Once the Soviet Union changed its policy to allow and encourage reforms to take place in Eastern Europe, although indirect, the Romanian government definitely felt the impact: “Romania was substantially affected by the so-called ‘demonstration’ (‘contagion’, ‘diffusion’) effect of events elsewhere in Eastern Europe. What happened elsewhere in Eastern Europe had implications for domestic Romanian politics.”³⁶ Furthermore, as seen by the Soviet Union’s use of its influence to urge the Romanian government to cease construction of a barbed-wire fence along the border with Hungary, the Romanian government could not detach itself from the events taking place in its neighboring

³⁰ Horowitz, “Revolution, Longevity and Legitimacy,” 68.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Marcus Noland, “Why North Korea Will Muddle Through,” *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 113.

³³ Ibid. 115.

³⁴ Richard Andrew Hall, “Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 (2000): 1074.

³⁵ Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Personal Power and Political Crisis in Romania,” *Government and Opposition* 24 (1989): 179.

³⁶ Hall, “Theories of Collective Action and Revolution,” 1074.

countries.³⁷ These changes ultimately led to what Hall defines as a change in the “international opportunity structure,” which was “fundamental in precipitating changes in the domestic political opportunity structures” of the Eastern European countries.³⁸ With “events elsewhere in the bloc inevitably changing the political climate,” the elite and the public now believed that the region would be supportive of or even insistent on political change in Romania.³⁹ In other words, despite the appearance that the Romanian regime’s legitimacy and survival was relatively independent of its geopolitical environment, it was actually critical in maintaining control over the dissent within the country. Confident in geopolitical support for change, the dissidents overthrew the oppressive regime. Chen provides a frank summary of how the Romanian regime collapsed:

The collapse of the other Eastern European communist regimes in its close proximity created a domino effect that was extremely conducive to the regime’s final demise. Toward the end of 1989, the Ceausescu regime was in a state of total isolation, confronted by a population that was informed of and greatly encouraged by recent development elsewhere in the region.⁴⁰

As will be shown later, avoiding this isolation and loss of legitimacy was exactly what North Korea tried to achieve with its new foreign policies after 1992.

These articles show that although Romania was very similar to North Korea internally, its geopolitical position was very different. Chen and Lee state that unlike the Romanian regime which faced hostile neighbors, “the North Korean regime has been able to rely on China for diplomatic protection and economic assistance,” as well as Russia and South Korea who “also provide the Kim regime with various aids and some room for diplomatic maneuver.”⁴¹ The lack of close examples and regional pressure for reform within North Korea’s geopolitical context ultimately divided the Romanian regime’s fate from that of North Korea.⁴² For the North Korean public and any potential opposition within the elite, the closest example of dissent was the successful containment of political protest in Tiananmen Square by the Chinese government; clearly, no comparable change in the “international opportunity structure” existed in North Korea.

North Korea’s Geopolitical Conditions Between 1989 and 1991

North Korea’s geopolitical situation has generally been more supportive of the status quo than change compared to East Europe. Like East Germany, North Korea is one half of an artificially divided country that is closely related to its Southern counterpart. It is also located near China, Russia, Japan, and although somewhat distant, the United States, which has forces stationed in South Korea and Japan. All five neighboring countries are influential players and

³⁸ Hall, “Theories of Collective Action and Revolution,” 1073.

³⁹ Ibid., 1074.

⁴⁰ Chen, “Making Sense of North Korea,” 473.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Kong Dan Oh, “North Korea’s Response to the World: Is the Door Ajar?” (Paper prepared for the 1989 Annual Conference of the Council on U.S., Korea Security Studies, Seoul, Korea, November 1989): 6

stakeholders with respect to the fate of the North Korean regime. Unlike the reformed communist countries or the capitalist countries surrounding Eastern Europe that supported change and reform, studies illustrate that this was certainly not the case for North Korea.

Snyder states that “the threat of North Korea's collapse and the likely international costs of spillover, in the form of refugees or possibly even military conflict,” not only increased North Korea's leverage in international negotiations, but also compelled the various regional powers to “support the regime’s survival.”⁴³ Nolan agrees that “China, Japan, Russia, and arguably even South Korea” preferred a “muddling, domesticated North Korea.”⁴⁴ This was indeed a different geopolitical atmosphere from what the East German or Romanian communist regime had faced. Nolan goes on to state that “in light of its domestic politics and geopolitical position, North Korea is likely to muddle through, along the lines of Romania in the 1980s, with support from China and possibly Japan and South Korea, which would like to avoid its collapse,” emphasizing regional support in explaining the longevity of the North Korean regime.⁴⁵

Most supportive of the North Korean regime were China and the Soviet Union (Russia after December 1991), both of which were important North Korean allies during the Cold War. Although some conflicts existed in their relationships with North Korea due to varying interests and goals, until the late 1980s, “North Korea, the Soviet Union, and China had formed a vertical alliance with the Communist ideology as a bond,” providing economic, military, and diplomatic assistance to the North Korean regime.⁴⁶ To a certain extent, this is true of Russia, as well. Although the relationship with North Korea was quite different from the Soviet Union, as Huh points out, Russia “[did] not seem to favor any sudden collapse of North Korea,” as it hoped to use North Korea “as a ‘buffer zone’ in Northeast Asia or as a ‘card up its sleeve’ in any negotiations with South Korea, China, the United States, or Japan.”⁴⁷ China had been more obvious in its support for North Korea. In fact, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China became “North Korea’s major supplier of military and economic aid and middleman to the world,” determined to “save North Korea [...] from international isolation.”⁴⁸ Also China’s primary policy goal regarding the Korean peninsula remained “keeping peace” in the region, meaning “it [would] not risk upsetting the South-North power balance by weakening or disrupting its relations with North Korea.”⁴⁹

Regional support, or at least tolerance, for the continuation of the North Korean regime was not limited to just its allies. The two Koreas had historically adversarial relations with each other even before their official division in 1948, and the Korean War effectively solidified this hostility. However, despite the North Korean government’s continued efforts to “delegitimize the Seoul government,” the South Korean government firmly followed a “peace before unification”

⁴³ Snyder, “North Korea’s Challenge of Regime Survival,” 521.

⁴⁴ Nolan, “Why North Korea Will Muddle Through,” 117.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 106.

⁴⁶ Moon Young Huh and Young Tai Jeung, “External Policies and Relations,” in *Prospects for Change in North Korea* ed. Tae Hwan Ok and Hong Yung Lee (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1994): 157, 161.

⁴⁷ Huh, “External Policies and Relations,” 166.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 166.

policy, which emphasized avoiding “all war-provocative measures” and “working on various tension-reduction measures.”⁵⁰ Although the South Korean government continued to have a tense and competitive relationship with the North, its priority was peace on the peninsula, meaning that it was willing to tolerate and work with the existing North Korean regime. However, as will be shown later, whatever the real motivation was behind South Korea’s northern diplomacy, starting in the late 1980s, South Korea was able to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea’s former allies, rapidly isolating North Korea diplomatically and creating a powerful encirclement that could easily influence the fate of the North Korean regime.

As participants in the Korean War and the target of various North Korean aggressions, the United States had maintained hostile relations with North Korea throughout most of the Cold War. Relations did improve with the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, but before the late 1980s there was not much direct contact between the two governments. However, despite North Korea’s suspicions that the United States would invade North Korea to overthrow the existing regime, in reality, “the major goals of U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula were to prevent another war, contain the Soviet Union, and maintain the status quo.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Japan “had closer relations with North Korea than did the United States,” as many Korean residents in Japan were “sympathetic to North Korea and have established pro-Pyongyang organizations.”⁵² Nevertheless, as a close ally of the United States, Japan “did not deviate from the U.S. led containment strategy in the Korean peninsula.”⁵³

During the Cold War, the North Korean regime believed that it was secure and protected, as it could depend on its allies to prevent any attacks by the United States or South Korea. However there was a clear deterioration of North Korea’s geopolitical situation between 1989 and 1991, when the Cold War alliances effectively broke down. Huh states that the Soviet Union had “no longer regarded North Korea as a partner in an ideological alliance” by the late 1980s, and as shown by the statement issued on October 8, 1991 by the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Jiang Zemin, the Chinese government “denied ‘blood-tested relations’ and instead characterized China’s ties with North Korea as simply a ‘friendly relationship.’”⁵⁴ As will be shown in the following section, this deterioration in the alliances reached outright betrayal when both the Soviet Union and China diplomatically recognized the South Korean government, going against the desperate pleas by the North Korean government. With the loss of its allies and a new world order emerging, whatever the U.S. policy may have been, the very survival of the increasingly isolated and illegitimated North Korean regime seemed to be at risk.

⁵⁰ Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 170; Sang-Woo Rhee, “From National Unification to State Unification: A Realistic Design for One Korea,” *North Korea in Transition*, ed. Chong-Sik Lee (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1991), 133.

⁵¹ Huh “External Policies and Relations,” 168.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Chae-Jin Lee, “U.S. and Japanese Policies toward Korea: Continuity and Change,” in *Korean Options in a Changing International Order*, ed. Hong Yung Lee and Chung Chongwook (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993): 33

⁵⁴ Huh “External Policies and Relations,” 153.

North Korea's Foreign Policy

To fully understand the changes in North Korea's foreign policy, it is important to identify North Korea's foreign policy goals. The primary objective of North Korea's foreign policy, like most other countries, is preservation of national security, which in the context of the volatile division in the Korean peninsula includes reunification.⁵⁵ As the North Korean government regards South Korea and the United States as "its foremost enemies," North Korea considers the South Korean-American alliance the principal threat to its national security and the survival of its regime.⁵⁶ Due to this constant and proximate threat, "maintaining its military alliances with China and the Soviet Union" as counteraction was an essential part of North Korea's foreign policy throughout the Cold War.⁵⁷

However, for North Korea, there was another important foreign policy goal: "to gain international recognition as the one and only lawful state in the Korean peninsula."⁵⁸ This goal can be understood as similar to the pursuit of "prestige," which in the context of North Korea's "rivalry" with South Korea—as was the case for East Germany with West Germany—became a much more important objective than in other countries.⁵⁹ North Korean political leaders have historically claimed that North and South Korea are "not two independent nations but two separate parts of a single nation," and until reunification can be achieved, only North Korea can be "recognized as the lawful political regime to represent the Korean people."⁶⁰ As illustrated by the following excerpt from a *Pyongyang Times* article published in February 1989, North Korea was unwilling to compromise on this policy:

There is only one state representing the whole Korean people on the Korean peninsula, that is, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The south Korean puppet regime is nothing but a despicable tool of outside forces, which has no sovereignty at all and cannot represent the interests of the nation.⁶¹

In accordance with this outright rejection of South Korea's sovereignty, the North Korean government strived not only to be seen as the only legitimate government in Korea, but also to actively "isolate South Korea."⁶²

The changes that took place among North Korea's communist allies during 1989 and 1992 posed a significant challenge to the achievement of this crucial foreign policy goal, especially because of South Korea's active pursuit to become recognized by the newly reformed communist governments, a policy known as "*nordpolitik*" or northern diplomacy. Modeled after

⁵⁵ Se Hee Yoo of Hanyang University states that the concept of national security entails "the protection of territorial integrity, the nation's independence from foreign power's direct intervention in domestic politics and the maintenance of the political system's stability" for most countries including North Korea; Se Hee Yoo, "Change and Continuity in North Korea's Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Relations of North Korea During Kim Il Sung's Last Days*, ed. Doug Joong Kim. (Seoul: The Sejong Institute, 1994): 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Yoo, "Change and Continuity," 10.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Hwang Gi Hong, "Lame Excuses," *Pyongyang Times*, February 25, 1989.

⁶² Yoo, "Change and Continuity," 11.

West Germany's *ostpolitik*, it began as a measure to promote "trade contacts" with China, USSR, and Eastern Europe, but as stated by President Roh in a speech delivered to the Hungarian National Assembly, northern diplomacy was changed to a "diplomatic policy aimed at opening relations with socialist countries [...] pursuing exchanges, cooperation and improved relations."⁶³ The goals of this policy were best articulated in South Korean Foreign Minister Choi Ho-Joong's proposal for a joint meeting with his counterparts in the Soviet Union and China. Choi stated that this policy "primarily [aimed] to reduce tension on the peninsula and improve inter-Korea relations through the establishment of formal ties with socialist countries."⁶⁴ These socialist countries included the Eastern European countries, but Choi emphasized that "establishing official relations with the Soviet Union and China remain the quintessential element of South Korean Government's northern diplomacy."⁶⁵ This focus is not surprising in that these two countries were the most powerful allies supporting North Korea.

For North Korea, the policy of northern diplomacy was seen as an extension of the U.S. policy of "two Koreas." A 1989 article by Sok Choe provides a good illustration of North Korea's interpretation of this diplomatic strategy: "Now that the attempt to create 'two Koreas' by means of the 'simultaneous admission of the north and south to the UN' collapsed, the US imperialists came forward with the 'cross recognition' formula as a variety of the former."⁶⁶ The article explains that the "cross recognition" formula was first devised by Kissinger, who proposed that if the Soviet Union and China recognized South Korea, then the U.S. and Japan would do the same for the North. However, for North Korea, this was simply a plan that was "intended to have south Korea, a US colony, accepted as 'an independent state'" and to block "the road to unification."⁶⁷ Choe stated that the South Korean president's "northern policy" was an extension of this "cross recognition" formula with the same objectives:

[Northern policy] is another form of 'cross recognition' proposal. Legalization of 'two Koreas' by means of 'exchange and trade' in the relations between the north and the south and 'cross contacts' and 'cross recognition' in the international arena—this is the leitmotif of the 'July 7 declaration.'⁶⁸

As it went directly against the main principles behind North Korea's foreign policy goals, the North Korean leadership strongly opposed South Korea's northern diplomacy. However, as will be seen later, the success of this policy forced a fundamental change in North Korea's foreign policy goals and conduct.

⁶³ "Address by President Roh Tae Woo, Delivered to the Hungarian National Assembly, 'Partners for a New Era of Harmony,' Budapest, November 23, 1989," full text supplied by KOIS, vol. 13 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1990): 816.

⁶⁴ "Proposal for Foreign Ministers' Meeting with the Soviet Union and China, Issued by ROK Foreign Minister Choi Ho-Joong in an Interview with KBS, Seoul, February 15, 1990," *Korean Herald*, February 16, 1990, vol. 14 of *Korea and World Affairs*, ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1990), 187.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁶⁶ Sok Choe, "'Cross Recognition' Formula," *Pyongyang Times*, July 7, 1989.

⁶⁷ Choe, "'Cross Recognition' Formula," July 7, 1989.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

A subset to this larger goal of legitimization was North Korea's efforts to prevent South Korea from entering the United Nations (UN) separately. During the late 1980s, an important foreign policy priority for South Korea was to receive UN membership, even if it was through unilateral admission.⁶⁹ As expected, the North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman denounced South Korea's efforts to enter the UN separately, calling it a "treacherous act" which would "legalize the permanent division of the country."⁷⁰ The statement also stated that "separate entry into the United Nations [was] a variant of 'simultaneous entry into the UN,'" and that North Korea would oppose any similar strategies under the "principled stand that Korea must enter the United Nations with one nomenclature and one seat after it is reunified."⁷¹ This issue was an important diplomatic battle ground for North Korea, and it relied upon the support from its allies: "we hope that all the forces of the world supporting [North Korea's] cause will manifest understanding and support for the just stand concerning the problem of [south Korea's] entry into the UN."⁷²

1989: Signs of Change in North Korea's Geopolitical Conditions

With this background in mind, the following section will examine articles published in *the Rodong Sinmun*, *Kulloja*, and the *Pyongyang Times* between 1989 and 1992, which describe and analyze the collapse of the communist regimes in order to investigate the North Korean government's reactions to the changes taking place in the world. 1989 is the logical point in time to begin an examination of North Korea's reactions to the changes that led to the collapse of East European and Soviet communist regimes. Although there were changes in North Korea's foreign policy prior to 1989, its goals remained consistent and its alliances with other communist regimes had stayed intact despite the move towards reform in some communist regimes.⁷³ Articles written before the year 1989 reveal that North Korea had good relations with China and the Soviet bloc, all of which strongly supported North Korea's foreign policies, such as the opposition to diplomatic normalizations with South Korea or entering the UN as separate nations. However, from 1989 signs of change in the international situation began to appear. By late 1988 and early 1989, Hungary was already undertaking reform and moving away from communism. The changes taking place in Hungary were clearly disturbing to the North Korean government, but the real problem began when the Hungarian government recognized the South Korean government. This tide of change began to spread, and although the North Korean government was still receiving diplomatic support from the Soviet Union and China, the reformed governments of Eastern Europe began to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea, undermining North Korea's central foreign policy objective.

⁶⁹ "Address by ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs Choi Ho-Joong on Korea's Foreign Policy Agenda in the 1990s, Regarding the Entry of Both South and North Korea into the U.N., San Francisco, July 21, 1989," excerpts supplied by the North America Division of ROK Foreign Affairs Ministry, vol. 13 of *Korea and World Affairs*, ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1989): 588.

⁷⁰ "DPRK FM Statement Regarding the Entry of South and north Korea into the U.N.," *Pyongyang Times*, August 26, 1989.

⁷¹ "DPRK FM Statement Regarding the Entry of South and north Korea into the U.N.," August 26, 1989.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Yoo, "Change and Continuity," 1.

On February 1, 1989 the Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn and his South Korean counterpart Choi Ho-Joong signed the protocol establishing an ambassadorial-level diplomatic relationship. This historic event marked the first diplomatic recognition of South Korea by an Eastern bloc and Communist nation, and for North Korea it marked a serious challenge to its critical foreign policy goal of limiting South Korea's presence in the international arena. The event was also a great triumph for South Korea's northern diplomacy, and marked the beginning of a diplomatic battle over this issue of expanding versus containing diplomatic recognition of South Korea. The North Korean government did not waste any time or show any restraint in its criticism of this development. By the next day, North Korea's Foreign Ministry notified the Hungarian government of its decision to downgrade existing diplomatic relations from the ambassadorial level to *charge d'affaires*.⁷⁴ Also, by February 18, *Rodong Sinmun* published an article condemning Hungary's recognition of South Korea. Calling it "treacherous," the author claimed, "we can hardly find an iota of national self-respect and class stand in the act of Hungary prostituting itself for a few dollars thrown by the puppets."⁷⁵ The author went on to accuse the Hungarian government of "encroaching upon the fundamental national interests of our people" in establishing the diplomatic relationship and in "opposing reunification."⁷⁶ Of course, this development could not have been a complete surprise, as South Korea and Hungary had already established permanent missions by September 1988. However, the outright diplomatic recognition of South Korea was a shock for the conservative and hard-line North Korean government, and the article's aggressive reaction to Hungary's "betrayal" reflects the government's strong hostility and concern over this new development.

In October of 1989, the *Rodong Sinmun* published another article directly cautioning the East European governments that had begun to develop better relations with South Korea, revealing its growing alarm over South Korea's northern diplomacy. The article criticized the South Korean government as "the launch pad for the American imperialist's political, ideological, and cultural infiltration of the socialist countries" that was ultimately aimed at creating "divergence of opinions that will weaken the unity and class solidarity of the socialist countries."⁷⁷ North Korea had every reason to feel threatened, as other Eastern European countries began to follow Hungary's example. By November 1, the Polish People's Republic had also established diplomatic relations with South Korea and signed an agreement on bilateral economic cooperation. Once again, the *Rodong Sinmun* reacted rapidly to criticize Poland. Characterizing Poland's decision as "humiliating and pathetic," the article claimed that as capitalists are inherently exploitative, Poland should not expect to benefit economically from the

⁷⁴ "Major Events," vol.13 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1989): 225.

⁷⁵ The "we" in the article is unspecified as with many of the articles; as the *Rodong Sinmun* is an official publication of the Worker's Party of Korea it most likely means the Party, but as is customary of Koreans to refer to all Koreans as "we", it could have been used to refer to the North Korean public; Hong, "Lame Excuses by Those Without Honor," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 25, 1989.

⁷⁶ Hong, "Lame Excuses," February 25, 1989.

⁷⁷ Jin Sik Hwang, "미제의 반동적 평화책략을 짓부셔버려야한다," [The American Imperialist's Anti-revolutionary Peace Scheme Must Be Crushed] my translation, *Rodong Sinmun*, October 22, 1989.

West or South Korea.⁷⁸ Another alarming event took place on June 9, 1989 when Kim Young Sam, the President of the Reunification Democratic Party and future President of South Korea, visited the USSR. As the first South Korean political leader to visit the USSR, Kim's visit and the promise to "continue the comprehensive association" and expand "the sphere of socio-economic relationship" marked the first step toward rapprochement.⁷⁹ Although there was no mention of any formal recognition of South Korea, this new relationship raised considerable concern in North Korea. With signs that its primary diplomatic goal was in jeopardy, the North Korean government focused its attention on preventing the success of South Korea's northern diplomacy.

However great the threat, before 1990 North Korea maintained close relationships with other communist countries and it could still count on its allies for diplomatic support. This was especially true of the Soviet Union and China. In an article titled "the Invincible Soviet-North Korean Friendship" that appeared on July of 1989, Jung Ok Kim stated that the "brotherly Soviet Union [was] providing us with strong support and solidarity in our policies and achievements."⁸⁰ Similarly *Rodong Sinmun's* April 25, 1989 issue dedicated to China and North Korea's "invincible alliance formed by blood and combat" expressed a strong confidence in the "mutual support and respect" for each other's policies.⁸¹ Although East European countries were moving towards normalization and informal talks had begun between the Soviet Union and South Korea, North Korea could feel reassured that it could still have contained this phenomenon from threatening its foreign policy goals through the Soviet Union and China's promises that they would not recognize South Korea diplomatically. The joint communiqué on the Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's visit to North Korea on December 24th 1988 shows that the Soviet Union was still completely supportive of North Korea's most important goal of limiting South Korea diplomatically, which included the opposition to a separate entry into the United Nations. In expressing the Soviet Union's "undivided support" for North Korea's foreign policy objectives, the Soviet Foreign Minister emphasized his support for North Korea's goals:

The Soviet side confirmed that there was no change in its principled stand toward south Korea and opposed the moves of the United States and south Korean authorities to perpetuate the division of Korea by creating 'two Koreas' through the so-called 'cross recognition,' 'simultaneous entry into the United Nations' and 'separate entry into the United Nations.' The Soviet Union would not recognize south Korea officially or seek to establish political and diplomatic relations with it.⁸²

⁷⁸ Chul Su Kang, "부당한 처사" [Unjust Conduct] my translation, *Rodong Sinmun*, November 3, 1989.

⁷⁹ "Text for Interpretation of Joint Communiqué Issued by IMEMO and RDP, as Prepared by RDP and Acknowledged by IMEMO, Moscow June 9, 1989," text was obtained from the Secretariat of the RDP President, vol.13 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1989): 586.

⁸⁰ Jung Ok Kim, "불패의 조쏘친선," [The Invincible Soviet-North Korean Friendship] my translation, *Rodong Sinmun* July 2, 1989.

⁸¹ Political Correspondent, "중국공산당 중앙위원회 총서기 평양 도착" [General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Arrives in Pyongyang], my translation, *Rodong Sinmun* April 25, 1989.

⁸² "Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze Visits North Korea," *Pyongyang Times*, December 31, 1988

This passage shows that at this point North Korea still relied on the use of its formal diplomatic channels to pursue its foreign policy goals. This was also true in North Korea's relationship with China. During the talks held between Kim Il-sung and the Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang on April 25, 1989, Zhao confirmed "Beijing seeks no diplomatic relations with Seoul."⁸³ This statement was reconfirmed as late as June 7, 1991 when a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry of China stated, "China's stand that it will not have any official relations with south Korea is steadfast and remains unchanged."⁸⁴ Although Hungary's recognition of South Korea posed a critical threat to North Korea's foreign policy, the North Korean government was able to and did react to this peril by using conventional channels and relying on the support of its allies: in other words, it did not have to make any fundamental changes to its long term foreign policy objectives nor the means to achieve these goals.

1990 - 1991: Crisis in North Korea's Diplomacy

It was clear for North Korea that the trouble involving the communist bloc countries that started with Hungary's recognition of South Korea was developing into a full blown crisis by 1990 when most countries in Eastern Europe had established diplomatic relations with South Korea or were in the process of doing so. Nevertheless, the greatest threat to North Korea was when its trusted ally, the Soviet Union, started talks with South Korea. As seen in the multiple *Rodong Sinmun* articles on the Soviet-South Korea relationship, including the especially harsh criticisms shown in the October 5, 1990 article, the North Korean leadership was indeed in a state of shock when the Soviet Union formally recognized South Korea and established diplomatic relations on September 30, 1990. This was a major defeat for North Korea's diplomacy, and articles between 1990 and 1991 reflect the state of fear and anger at the changes that had taken place during these two years. This section will show what the articles published during these two years reveal about the North Korean leadership's reactions to these changes, and how they explain the changes that occurred in North Korean foreign policy.

The years of 1990 and 1991 were filled with defeats for the North Korean diplomatic front. From December of 1989 through April of 1990, four more former communist allies of North Korea established diplomatic relations with South Korea, negating North Korea's earlier characterization of this situation as the result of a couple of deviant and treacherous nations.⁸⁵ Perhaps as evidence of the North Korean government's acceptance of the compelling reality that this was a region-wide phenomenon, the North Korean media no longer published any articles criticizing each country after the establishment of diplomatic relations. Although it is impossible to know for sure why the media stopped its criticisms, one can surmise that the leadership did not want to convey to the readers the impression that communism was about to collapse and that the leadership was unprepared to react to these rapid changes. However, as illustrated by the intense

⁸³ "Major Events" *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee, (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1989): 393.

⁸⁴ "'China will not establish any official relations with s. Korea,' Chinese FM spokesman declares again," *Pyongyang Times*, June 16, 1990.

⁸⁵ Following Hungary (February, 1989) and Poland (1989), the following countries established diplomatic relations with South Korea during this period: December 27, 1989 Yugoslavia; March 22, 1990 Czechoslovak; March 23, 1990 Bulgaria; March 30, 1990 Romania; September 30, 1990 Soviet Union.

North Korean reactions in 1991, it is safe to say that it was not due to a lack of interest or an acceptance of defeat that the government and the media stayed quiet on these developments.

The North Korean media was soon shaken out of this period of silence by the Soviet Union's increasing engagement with South Korea. The value of the Soviet Union's support for the North Korean government cannot be understated. Ever since the founding of the North Korean government, the USSR's support was one of the fundamental bases for North Korea's diplomatic activities, not to mention the source of economic, military, and moral support.⁸⁶ Allowing the South Korean government to be recognized by the Soviet Union would not only cripple North Korea's foreign policy, but also threaten the fundamental legitimacy of the regime.

During another visit to Moscow, on March 21, 1990, Kim Young-Sam, now the co-leader of the ruling Democratic Liberal Party, proposed a Roh Tae Woo⁸⁷-Gorbachev summit during talks with Alexander Yakovlev, a Soviet Politburo member.⁸⁸ The *Rodong Sinmun* responded rapidly to this grave threat by characterizing it as Kim Young-Sam's exaggerations and political self-promotion. Throughout the article the focus of criticism is on Kim; the Soviet Union is not criticized even once. Along with the criticism that Kim was "promoting the legitimization of the 'two Koreas' policy" with the goal of "perpetuating the division" between the North and the South, the author also claims that Kim is a "political prostitute" who "makes a living off of lies" and suggests that this was likely to be just Kim "pestering" the Soviet government in order to "raise his price."⁸⁹ By attacking Kim's character, the North Korean media tried to discredit Kim and the South Korean presses' claims that there was a breakthrough in the relationship with the Soviet Union. Also, the article states that "it [was] hard to think that the Soviet Union [would] go against its fundamental principle and 'recognize' south Korea and participate in the 'two Koreas' policy" because "the Soviet Union was the first country to recognize the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as the only legitimate country" and because the two countries were "closely bonded by an alliance treaty."⁹⁰ Although the author concedes that parts of Kim's claim may have been true, as shown by this passage, the North Korean government still firmly believed that the Soviet Union would be supportive of North Korea's foreign policy goals despite the changes taking place in the Soviet Union.

This belief in the Soviet Union's support turned out to be misleading as Gorbachev and Roh met at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco on June 4, 1990 for the first-ever summit meeting between the two governments. The conference was a great success, and going against its earlier promise, President Gorbachev agreed with President Roh that "the effort for

⁸⁶ Kyung Su Noh of Seoul University states that the Soviet Union was of critical importance for North Korea, providing a nuclear umbrella; trading over 60~70% of all North Korean goods; providing military and economic aid in energy and steel; as well as diplomatic support in foreign policy; for more information please read Kyung Su Noh's "North Korean Foreign Policy Issues and Direction" and Yong Chul Ha's "North Korea's Soviet Policy" in *North Korean Foreign Policy* ed. Yang Sung Chul and Kang Sung Hak (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1995).

⁸⁷ Roh Tae Woo was the South Korean President at the time.

⁸⁸ "Major Events" vol.14 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1990); 420

⁸⁹ Editorial Board, "김영삼의 모스크바행각을 논함" [Discussing Kim Yong Sam's Moscow Travels] My translation, April 6, 1990.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

normalization of South Korean and Soviet relations [had] already begun” and that they would “continue their efforts so that their relationship will develop into a complete diplomatic relationship, meaning full diplomatic relations, in the non-distant future.”⁹¹ Finally on September 30, 1990, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Republic of Korea established diplomatic relations, despite the continued objections from North Korea. The North Korean leadership could no longer stay quiet on the issue and was forced to accept that the changes occurring in Eastern Europe and the USSR were very real and very serious. Various articles appeared between 1990 and 1991 in the *Rodong Sinmun* and *Kulloja* regarding this issue, revealing the North Korean elites’ reactions to these changes: opposition to reform, fear of external pressure, and concern over growing isolation.

The North Korean government’s opposition to internal reform and liberalization set the overall framework for its understanding of the changes taking place during this time and limited the possible options to respond to the changes. Resistance to reform meant that any possibility of structural or ideological alterations in the Kim Il Sung regime were suppressed and the changes in the geopolitical situation were considered within the context of preserving the existing regime. However this was not always the case. As late as July 1989, the *Rodong Sinmun* articles revealed that North Korea was supportive of the reforms taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In the article denouncing the Hungarian government in February 1989, criticism of the Hungarian government’s reform policies were visibly absent. Also an article that appeared in July of the same year revealed that the North Korean government was apparently still supportive of the Soviet Union’s reform efforts. Kim Jung Ok stated, “today in the Soviet Union, reform efforts to improve the socioeconomic development and pull socialism up to a new level have become more intense” and included “the reduction of nuclear weapons as well as the general military.”⁹² Kim further stated that “the North Korean people [were] truly happy with the progress that the brotherly Soviet people [had] accomplished,” showing that the North Korean leadership was supportive of perestroika. It is hard to determine whether this article reflected a genuine support of the Soviet Union’s reform efforts, or if it was simply customary support of its communist ally’s policies, as was usually the case before 1988. Whatever its actual views on reform were before July 1989, by November, the North Korean leadership had changed its position on reform.

The November article criticizing Poland’s recognition of South Korea provides a good example of this change; instead of praising progress, the author blamed reform policies for causing problems in the socialist countries:

As everyone knows, there was a change of power in Poland recently due to the ideological and cultural infiltration of the imperialist and the anti-socialist forces

⁹¹ “Summary of Discussions at the Summit Meeting between President Roh Tae Woo and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, San Francisco, June 4, 1990,” full text release by the Foreign Press Division of the KOIS and presented Lee Soo-jung, spokesperson for President Roh at Fairmont Hotel press briefing June 4, 1990, vol. 14 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1990): 397.

⁹² Kim, “불 패의 조쑤친선,” July 2, 1989.

in league with them. This has led Poland to face serious political confusion and economic bankruptcy, plunging her into a grave crisis.⁹³

Similarly, the article criticizing the Soviet Union claims that “the Soviet Union [was] going downhill to ruin, floundering in chaos and confusion in the vortex of ‘perestroika,’” repeating the idea that reform was the cause, not the solution, for these problems in the socialist countries.⁹⁴ Whether the North Korean leadership believed this or not, the articles definitely show that the leadership had a very negative opinion about reform and was unlikely to alter its internal structure.

The *Rodong Sinmun* article “*Juche* Ideology is the Source of Our Socialism’s Superiority and Effectiveness” published on August 21, 1990 further illustrates this firm opposition to reform. Arguing that the North Korean Socialism based on the *Juche* ideology is “the most superior and effective socialist system,” Kim Hong Geun claimed that North Korea’s “socialist mission [would] not be deterred by any obstacle, and we [would] continue to march towards victory while upholding our *Juche* ideology.”⁹⁵ Kim also expressed a strong distrust of the liberal reforms taking place in the rest of the world:

However they glorify capitalism, the freedom and democracy that the imperialists are promoting is not the real peace and democracy for the people [...] Following this false propaganda and allowing infiltration of the capitalist ideology is tantamount to surrendering to the imperialists.⁹⁶

It is clear from the article that the North Korean regime had no intention to alter its “superior” ideology or internal structure according to the principals of capitalist or liberal ideologies. Similarly, in a *Kulloja* article, Yang Hyung Sup criticized socialist countries that were adopting a multiparty system. Yang wrote that “today imperialists and the bourgeois class are separating the working class from its leadership position and reducing it to a weak opposing party,” and as multiparty systems were “created by capitalist countries to thoroughly benefit the capital owners,” the opposing worker’s party [could not] truly represent the workers.⁹⁷ Yang stated that since this was the case, “advocating a multiparty system in a socialist society [was] an act of surrender to imperialism, an act of treachery to socialism, and a path of self destruction.”⁹⁸ This article illustrates that the North Korean leadership also had no intentions to reform the regime according to their East European models. Kim Il Sung’s 1992 new year’s address illustrates that this hostility to reform and adherence to the *Juche* ideology became a well established policy in North Korea: “Our general direction in socialist construction at the present time is to establish *Juche* principle more firmly in politics, economics, and culture, so that we may actively provide

⁹³ Kang, “부당한 처사,” November 3, 1989.

⁹⁴ Commentator’s Article, “‘Diplomatic Relations’ Bargained for Dollars,” October 6, 1990.

⁹⁵ Hong Geun Kim, “주체사상은 우리 사회주의의 우월성과 위력의 근본원천,” [*Juche* Ideology is the Source of Our Socialism’s Superiority and Effectiveness] My translation, *Rodong Sinmun* August 21, 1990.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Hyung Sup Yang, “사회주의정치는 근로인민대중의 의사를 집대성한 민주주의정치,” [Socialist Politics is Democratic Politics that Reflects the Opinions of the Working People] My translation, *Kulloja* 594 (1991): 18.

⁹⁸ Yang, “사회주의정치는 근로인민대중의 의사를 집대성한 민주주의정치,” 18.

against the rapidly changing situation.”⁹⁹ This passage confirms that adopting internal reform was clearly not an option for the North Korean government.

Another part of this resistance to reform included criticism of increased engagement with the United States and its allies. The first revelation of North Korea’s attitude regarding the détente is shown in the August 10, 1989 *Rodong Sinmun* article “The American Imperialist’s Anti-revolutionary Peace Scheme Must Be Crushed.” Hwang Jin Sik states that “in socialist countries the Party created by the working class is the executive of revolution and development, and the leader of the party is the guarantee for the victory of the socialist undertaking” and that “efforts to weaken and soften” the Party are anti-revolutionary.¹⁰⁰ Hwang claimed that these efforts were the result of the imperialist’s manipulative “peaceful evolution” strategy, which aimed at “subordinating and exploiting” the countries once their Party became weakened.¹⁰¹

The editorials in the *Kulloja* also show similar disapprovals of increased engagement with the capitalist countries. Jung Dong-Ook’s article, published in July 1991, provides a good example. Jung defined the reform in Eastern European countries as the “treacherous behavior of certain socialist countries,” and accused them of cooperating with the American imperialists.¹⁰² Jung stated that “those who believe that the American imperialists [were] ‘comrades’ or [hoped] that cooperation with them [would] bring peace” were victims of the American imperialist’s “disguise,” and that “those who [sold] the fundamental interests of the revolution or their national independence to cultivate a good relationship with the American imperialists” were “engaged in a revolting act of treachery.”¹⁰³ These criticisms of reforming countries demonstrate that the North Korean elites were initially strongly opposed to cooperating with the capitalist countries.

However, the most prominent reaction that the North Korean media conveyed between 1990 and 1991 was a clear sense of fear within the leadership; especially the fear that the fall of important communist regimes, including the Soviet Union, would lead to increased international pressures for reform, or even removal, of the existing communist regime. This sense of fear was one of the first reactions that the North Korean government showed regarding these new developments. In the October 22, 1989 *Rodong Sinmun* article, Hwang stated that “at this time more than ever the imperialists [were] using devious schemes” to “subjugate and exploit smaller

⁹⁹ The speech was quoted in the article by Dong Su Kim’s “The General Direction of Socialist Construction in Korea” *Pyongyang Times*, January 18, 1992.

¹⁰⁰ Hwang, “미제의 반동적 평화책략,” August 10, 1989.

¹⁰¹ Hwang, “미제의 반동적 평화책략,” August 10, 1989; Peaceful evolution (평화적이행), also known as peaceful transition or heping yanbian in China, literally translates as “peaceful evolution,” or “peaceful implementation.” The origins of this idea can be traced to a statement by John Foster Dulles during the Korean War, which explicitly proposed “the use of peaceful means” to “shorten the expected life span of communism.” Essentially, the “peaceful evolution” strategy was viewed as the West’s attempt to “undermine the values of socialism through the political, economic, and cultural penetration.” In the later era, this idea was associated with the “Western economic assistance and commerce,” which were regarded “as a bait to induce socialist countries such as China to abandon Marxism-Leninism.” For more information, please read Russell Ong’s “Peaceful Evolution’, ‘Regime Change’ and China’s Political Security,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16 (2007): 717-727.

¹⁰² Dong-Ook Jung, “미제의 세계제패전략과 교활란 량면전술,” [American Imperialism’s Plan for World Domination and its Devious Two-Sided Strategy] My translation, *Kulloja* 591 (1991): 95.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

sovereign nations,” and although the “south Korean proxy [was] holding up a sign of peace, it [was] really trying to divide Korea forever” and “light the fuse of nuclear warfare in this peninsula.”¹⁰⁴

The reasoning behind this fear can be seen in Jung Dong Ook’s earlier introduced *Kulloja* article. Jung’s article begins by reminding the readers about the goals of American Imperialism:

As seen throughout its history since the Second World War, American Imperialism has been dreaming about world domination and it has enacted endless schemes for its realization. Today, the American Imperialism’s reckless world domination strategy is being executed much more viciously and in a more dangerous form.¹⁰⁵

Jung emphasized that this historical strategy was still existent and that the United States actually renewed its efforts to fulfill this goal, as seen in President Bush’s speeches about a “New World Order.” Jung stated that, when touring Europe, President Bush remarked that he hoped for more countries to enter the free world: “During his speeches, President Bush also remarked that it was a ‘golden opportunity’ to create ‘a new world order’ and that the US must be more aggressive in its offense against socialism.”¹⁰⁶ Jung claimed that this revealed the American imperialist’s “vile efforts to finally eliminate communism and absorb the socialist countries into the ‘new world order’” where “there is no socialism and only capitalism exists, a world that is dominated by class exploitation and ethnic oppression.”¹⁰⁷

The recognition that there was a clear collapse in the balance of power only intensified North Korea’s concern. Stating that “recently in international relations, there has been a collapse in the balance of powers and a series of changes have taken place, especially the reduced tensions between the US and the USSR and the implementation of so called ‘liberalization’ and ‘open policy’ in certain Eastern European countries,” Jung argues that these changes have made “the ‘peaceful evolution strategy’ more effective.”¹⁰⁸ The author’s interpretation of this strategy reveals the sense of heightened insecurity felt by the North Korean elite during this period:

Today American imperialists are salivating over the transformations taking place in limited regions and countries, believing that the strategy of ‘peaceful evolution’ can succeed, and that they can destroy socialism internally. American imperialists are invading on the ideological and cultural front to paralyze the people’s conscience, create political chaos [...] and ultimately use their ‘strategy of power’ and military warfare to invade and subjugate the entire globe.¹⁰⁹

The author elaborates how this is especially true in the case of North Korea. He wrote that three U.S. policies confirm that the U.S. only appeared to be peaceful as a front for its ultimate goal of invading and subjugating the North Korean regime. The first policy was the strengthening of the military as confirmed by the “increase of its military budget to astronomical levels, including the budget to increase its nuclear arsenal”; the second policy was the “continuation and

¹⁰⁴ Hwang, “미제의 반동적 평화전략,” October 22, 1989.

¹⁰⁵ Jung, “미제의 세계제패 전략,” 91.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Jung, “미제의 세계제패 전략,” 93.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 94.

strengthening of the NATO” despite the “dismantling of the Warsaw Pact,” which he cited as evidence of the ambitions to not only dominate all of Europe, but “also the Asian region, including the Korean Peninsula”; and lastly the policy to continue stationing US troops in South Korea, which Jung interpreted as clear preparations to invade North Korea.¹¹⁰

Kim Yong Soon’s article, published in the August 1991 issue of *Kulloja*, also illustrates this sense of fear and insecurity. Arguing for increased Asian regional solidarity, the article focuses primarily on the US’s increased international powers and how it emboldened the US. The author cited two reasons for why all the sovereign nations in Asia, including North Korea, were now facing greater dangers. The primary reason given by Kim was that the U.S. leadership had been “empowered” by the lack of opposition in the world, and that left alone it would become “the primary impediment to the sovereign development of the Asian countries.”¹¹¹ Another reason that Kim presented was the United States’ success in the Gulf War. The author wrote that “after the Persian Gulf War, the US [had] become more arrogant and brazen,” becoming directly involved in other countries’ affairs, and as Asia was “within the sphere of influence of the United States,” the Americans would “invade and interfere with the security and interests” of all Asian Countries.¹¹² Kim concluded that these evidences suggest that the U.S. would become more invasive in the region, “infringing upon the peace and security of Asia.”¹¹³

The fear of outside pressure was not limited to just the U.S. After the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with South Korea, North Korea no longer viewed the Soviet Union as an ally, but as a potential source of external pressure. Cho Nam-Su’s *Rodong Sinmun* article published on December 25, 1990 illustrates this opposition to possible Soviet involvement in North Korean affairs. Written as a response to President Roh’s trip to the Soviet Union, it reported that Roh “requested that the Soviet Union exercise its ‘influence’ to ‘induce’ [North Korea] into ‘openness’” and “act as a ‘stepping stone for the road to Pyongyang.’”¹¹⁴ Retorting that “if Roh [wanted] to come to Pyongyang, he should come directly through Panmunjeom” and not through Moscow, Cho claimed that this request was “evidence of the south Korean authority’s ‘Unification through Absorption and Victory Over Communism’ strategy.”¹¹⁵ The author further argued that Roh’s request and the insistence on “pressure and influence” over “peace and cooperation” would lead to “intensification and aggravation of the North-South relationship,” revealing that the North Korean government resented and resisted Soviet interference.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Yong Soon Kim, “자주적이고 평화롭고 번영하는 새 아세아를 건설하는 것은 아세아 인민들의 공동의 위업” [Constructing a sovereign, peaceful, and prosperous new Asia is the common task of all Asian peoples] My translation, *Kulloja* 593 (1991): 24

¹¹² Kim, “새 아세아 건설,” 23.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Nam-su Cho, “본색을 드러낸 반통일 반평화 행각” [Revealing the True Colors of Anti-unification and Anti-peace] My translation, *Rodong Sinmun*, December 25, 1990.

¹¹⁵ Panmunjeom is the Joint Security Area connecting North and South Korea on the Demilitarized zone (DMZ); Cho, “본색을 드러낸 반통일 반평화 행각,” December 25, 1990.

¹¹⁶ Cho, “본색을 드러낸 반통일 반평화 행각,” December 25, 1990.

The most direct expression of this sentiment can be found in the surprisingly candid *Rodong Sinmun* article quoted in the beginning of this paper:

When the establishment of ‘diplomatic relations’ with south Korea by the Soviet Union is viewed from another angle, no matter what their subjective intentions may be, it, in the final analysis, cannot be construed otherwise than openly joining the United States in its basic strategy aimed at freezing the division of Korea into ‘two Koreas,’ isolating us internationally and guiding us to ‘opening’ and thus overthrowing the socialist system.¹¹⁷

It is evident from this passage that the North Korean leadership now viewed the Soviet Union in collusion with the United States. Besides the belief that the establishment of ‘diplomatic relations’ had isolated North Korea internationally, there is also a clear sense of fear and imminent threat. The passage reveals that the Soviet Union tried to guide North Korea into “‘opening’ and thus overthrowing the socialist system,” which clearly indicated that the North believed that the newly reformed Soviet government would intervene in its domestic policies to encourage reform, thereby bringing down its government, as was the case for Eastern European communist regimes. In fact, the editorial also claimed that the Soviet Union was “making ‘friends’ with Uncle Sam, meekly accepting whatever he demands and winning his favour,” no longer “stand[ing] against the United States in support of its ‘ally,’ the DPRK concerning the Korean issue but [trying] to subordinate the DPRK to its strategic plan, hand in hand with its ‘companion’ the United States.”¹¹⁸ These articles reveal that the North Korean government’s main reaction during this time was that of apprehension due to the loss of countering forces against the U.S. influence in the world. As North Korea believed that there were no longer any obstacles in the U.S.’s goal to establish a “New World Order,” it is not hard to see why the North Korean government assumed external pressure against its regime was inevitable and imminent.

Another prominent and related reaction is North Korea’s desperation over the growing international isolation brought on by the changes in the Soviet bloc. This idea was briefly introduced in the above-mentioned article criticizing the Soviet Union. With one of its greatest allies now colluding with South Korea and the United States, the North Korean government felt that it had been abandoned and isolated. As mentioned earlier, in late 1988 the Soviet Foreign Minister had reconfirmed that it would not normalize relations with South Korea. The October 5, 1990 article reveals the deep anger that the North Korean leadership felt towards the Soviet Union’s violation of its earlier promise and the de facto collapse of the alliance:

Today, the Soviet Union threw all these unequivocal commitments into the dustbin and decided to establish ‘diplomatic relations’ with south Korea. Can this be described as anything else other than as betrayal? The Soviet Union has ignored and systematically violated the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.¹¹⁹

In addition to losing an ally, the article goes on to claim that the establishment of diplomatic relations was part of a deliberate attempt to isolate North Korea.

¹¹⁷ Commentator’s Article, “‘Diplomatic Relations’,” *Pyongyang Times*, October 6, 1990.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

There is nothing strange even if [the Soviet Union] were rewarded for its joining and cooperating with the United States in the latter's 'two Koreas' policy after betraying an old friend. This means the formation of a US-Soviet Union-south Korea three-way collusion surrounding Korea and it will be a link in the chain of encirclement designed to disorganize socialism in Asia according to the 'peaceful transition' strategy.¹²⁰

This imagery of the "encirclement" is representative of North Korea's fear of isolation in international affairs.

In the article "Supporting and Fulfilling the Party's Policies are the Foundational Guarantee to Bringing Glory to Our Type of Socialism," Choi Moon Sun confirmed this fear of isolation:

Imperialists are enacting economic embargoes, issuing military threats, and implementing the infiltration of the bourgeois ideology like madmen. Especially the American imperialists are encouraging the puppet south Korean government and rallying together the world imperialist forces to focus their attacks on our country, and isolate our republic.¹²¹

Choi's claim that the South Korean government was trying to "isolate" North Korea clearly illustrates the growing concern over the marginalization of the North Korean government in the international arena due to South Korea's successful northern diplomacy. This fear of isolation can also be seen in the increased calls for solidarity against the U.S. and other "imperialists." Jung's article cited earlier ends with a plea to strengthen "the alliance among anti-imperialist sovereign powers."¹²² As Jung believed that in employing the peaceful evolution strategy, American imperialists were deliberately "creating conflict among the states advocating for sovereignty," he stated that an alliance was the "basic condition for the guarantee of sovereignty" against the forces of imperialism, and a necessity at this challenging time.¹²³

The examination of *Rodong Sinmun* and *Kulloja* articles from 1990 and 1991 show that the North Korean government was resistant to reform and that it believed its geopolitical environment was deteriorating. The unwillingness to reform its current regime meant that the government had limited options in what it could do internally to ensure its survival. Unable to maintain control of both its internal and external environment, North Korea focused on improving its external relations to ensure the survival of the regime. The next section will show North Korea's policy decision at this critical juncture and how it brought support for the regime.

¹²⁰ Commentator's Article, "'Diplomatic Relations'," *Pyongyang Times*, October 6, 1990.

¹²¹ Choi Moon Sun, "당의 로선과 정책을 철저히 옹호관철하는것은 우리 식 사회주의를 빛내이기 위한 근본담보" [Supporting and Fulfilling the Party's Policies are the Foundational Guarantee to Bringing Glory to Our Type of Socialism] My translation, *Kulloja* 595 (1991): 19.

¹²² Jung, "미제의 세계제패 전략," 92.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

1992: The Evolution of North Korea's Foreign Policy

Beginning in the second half of 1991, there was a visible change in the North Korean government's foreign policy, shifting from criticism and competition to compliance and cooperation with the regional powers. North Korea's decision to join the United Nations as a separate member state under the South Korean "simultaneous entry" plan best illustrates this shift in foreign policy. As introduced earlier, the terms of UN entry were a critical diplomatic battleground between the two Koreas. North Korea had strongly opposed separate entrance on the grounds that the North Korean government was the only legitimate regime on the Korean peninsula. The February 1991 *Rodong Sinmun* article (reprinted in the *Pyongyang Times*) shows that North Korea had no intention to follow South Korea's simultaneous UN entry policy. Criticizing South Korea's decision to "push for unilateral UN membership" as a "partitionist scheme of the south Korean authorities to block the way of reunification and legitimize and freeze the division of the country into 'two Koreas,'" the article claims that "whether it is simultaneous entry or unilateral entry into the United Nations" North Korea can "never keep step with the south Korean authorities in their sinister plot of national division."¹²⁴ This shows that as late as February 19, 1991 the North Korean government had no intentions of accepting this proposal. In fact, the article goes on to threaten South Korea that unilateral entry into the UN will bring "confrontation between the north and the south to a more acute phase" and "inevitably pose a greater threat to the unstable situation of the Korean peninsula," which will expose the Korean people "to the danger of a disastrous war."¹²⁵ As shown by this article, it seemed unlikely that the North Korean leadership was going to compromise on the UN issue. However, on September 17 of the same year, both South and North Korea were admitted to the United Nations simultaneously and separately at the 46th session of the General Assembly, North Korea becoming the 106th member and South Korea, the 161st. In a short period of time, North Korea had made a move that went completely contrary to its earlier stance on the issue and to its broader policy objective of being the only legitimate government in Korea. What had happened?

The statement by the North Korean Foreign Ministry on the decision to apply for membership issued on May 27, 1991, reveals the reasoning behind this decision. The Ministry stated that the North Korean government deemed that the South Korean side's "'unilateral U.N. membership' [was] inalterable and left no room for any compromise" and that the South Korean side was "taking advantage of the rapid changes in the international situation"; as this was the case, "the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [had] no alternative but to enter the United Nations at the present stage as a step to tide over such temporary difficulties created by the south Korean authorities [...] under unavoidable circumstances."¹²⁶ As apparent from the statement, North Korea admitted that it was compromising and adopting the earlier South Korean position of "simultaneous entry," as the international situation had turned

¹²⁴ "Traitors Will Be Held Responsible for Division before History and the Nation," *Pyongyang Times*, February 23, 1991.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ "Statement of the North Korean Foreign Ministry on the Decision to Apply for Membership of the United Nations, Pyongyang, May 27, 1991," full text obtained from the United Nations Division of the Republic of Korea Foreign Ministry, vol.15 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1991): 342.

unfavorable to North Korea and the worse alternative of unilateral admission of South Korea was a real possibility. Scholars agree that it was the loss of Soviet support in the U.N. which compelled North Korea to follow the South Korean policy in the fear that South Korea may have become the only UN recognized country in the Korean peninsula.¹²⁷

Another reason behind North Korea's decision was revealed in the September 18, 1991 statement by the Foreign Ministry of DPRK. The Ministry explained that "as the attempts have become apparent recently to perpetuate and legalise the division of the country by capitalizing on the international leverage of UN membership, we have taken the decisive measures to join the United Nations in an effort to avert the serious consequences."¹²⁸ This shows that the North Korean government was also afraid of increased isolation and loss of legitimate foreign policy channels if South Korea became the only country to receive UN membership. In stating the desired outcome of its decision, the article reveals that the choice was strongly influenced by North Korea's fear of its growing international isolation:

The UN membership will enable our Republic to develop the relations of friendship and cooperation with a greater number of countries in the world on the principle of independence, equality and mutual benefits and to strive for world peace and security.¹²⁹

This passage confirms that a significant factor for the North Korean government's foreign policy transformation was its desire to counter the increased international isolation that it faced due to the loss of its communist allies.

However, the most striking evidence of the change in North Korea's foreign policy can be found in the near absence of criticism of China's decision to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea. As presented earlier, China was another important ally that had promised not to recognize South Korea. China had become as important as, or perhaps even more significant than, the Soviet Union in providing diplomatic support for North Korea, especially after the Sino-Soviet fall out.¹³⁰ When the Soviet Union was in the process of normalization with South Korea, the North Korean media reacted violently, accusing South Korea and the Soviet Union of legitimizing the division in Korea and intensifying tensions in the peninsula. Since the first article in April 1990, a total of five articles were published by the *Rodong Sinmun*, which condemned the improving relationship between the Soviet Union and South Korea.¹³¹ This was not the case when China began engaging South Korea; not a single *Rodong Sinmun* article was

¹²⁷ The President of the Korean Association of International Studies (KAIS) Yang Sung Chul states that North Korea's decision to simultaneously enter the UN with South Korea was greatly influenced by the changes in the international situation, especially the loss of Soviet support; Yang's book *The Foreign Policy of North Korea* ed. Yang Sung Chul and Sung-Hack Kang (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1995) has more information on this issue.

¹²⁸ "DPRK FM Statement on UN Membership" *Pyongyang Times* September 21, 1991.

¹²⁹ "DPRK FM Statement on UN Membership," September 21, 1991.

¹³⁰ Professor Lee writes that as China lacked the sophisticated weapons and economic aid that the Soviet Union was providing, China focused on "giving stronger political support to the North Korean Rulers and their official position on the Korean questions, which can be summarized as a 'one Korea' policy." Hong Yung Lee, "China's Changing Relationship with North Korea," *Foreign Relations of North Korea During Kim Il Sung's Last Days*, Ed. Kim, Doug Joong (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 1994): 272.

¹³¹ Articles critical of the improving ROK-USSR relationship were published on April 6, 1990; June 6, 1990; August 3, 1990; October 5, 1990; and December 25, 1990.

published denouncing the process or the actual diplomatic recognition of South Korea. Realizing that it no longer had any reliable allies, the North Korean government changed its foreign policy tone to befriend its neighbors and establish a favorable geopolitical environment.

The pattern of improving relations between China and South Korea was not too different from the Soviet Union case. Around the time of the Seoul Olympics, attended by both China and the USSR, there were informal contacts regarding free trade and travel between the two countries with trade offices set up in each other's capitals on October 20, 1990. However, formal dialogue only began a year later when the South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Sang-Ock held talks with the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen for the first time. In April 1992, Lee held his third round of talks with Qian, and finally on August 24, 1992, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea established diplomatic relations. In the joint communiqué regarding the event, the two governments agreed to "develop the enduring relations of good neighborhood, friendship and cooperation" in the belief that the establishment of the diplomatic relations would "contribute to the improvement of the situation and stability on the Korean Peninsula."¹³² The most notable clause was China's pledge to "support" the South Korean government's efforts in the reunification process, illustrating a clear shift in China's policies.¹³³

In a statement issued on the same day, President Roh described this event as "the beginning of the end of the Cold War in East Asia" in that "the last external constraint for a peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula [was] now removed."¹³⁴ He also claimed that the normalization of relations between South Korea and China had brought a "successful conclusion to the policy of Northern Diplomacy."¹³⁵ Despite such cries of victory on the part of South Korea and China's reneging on its earlier promise to North Korea, the North Korean media remained silent throughout the whole process. Even after the joint communiqué was issued, the only response was on September 27, 1992 when the North Korean leadership, through a commentary aired over the North Korean Central Broadcasting Station, criticized "some socialist countries" for "abandoning socialism and returning to capitalism."¹³⁶ Unlike those directed at the Soviet Union, this response was "unofficial and in an indirect form" with no specific mention of China.¹³⁷ Clearly, the North Korean government and its media had changed greatly.

This silence can be interpreted as the North Korean government's grudging acceptance of defeat and recognition of the new international order, in which it could no longer rely on the

¹³² "Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of the Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China, Beijing, August 24, 1992," full text supplied by KOIS; vol.16 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1992): 544.

¹³³ "Joint Communiqué," August 24, 1992," 544; Interestingly, the communiqué also included South Korea's acceptance that there is only "one China and Taiwan is part of China," severing diplomatic ties with its old ally in the fight against communism.

¹³⁴ "President Roh Tae Woo's Special Statement on the Occasion of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the People's Republic of China, Seoul, August 24, 1992," full text supplied by the Foreign Press Division of the KOIS, vol.16 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1992): 548-550

¹³⁵ "President Roh Statement," August 24, 1992," 548.

¹³⁶ "Chronicle of Major Events in South and North Korea (September-October 1992)" vol.16 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1992): 770.

¹³⁷ "Major events," *Korea and World Affairs*, 770.

alliances forged by the communist ideology.¹³⁸ The lack of the usual invective manifested what Oh described as North Korea's shifting focus, "becoming more concerned about its own survival and less concerned about defeating South Korea."¹³⁹ Plainly put, "extremely isolated in international politics, North Korea could not afford to alienate Beijing by condemning its establishment of diplomatic ties with Seoul."¹⁴⁰ Fearing isolation and external pressures after its closest ally had recognized its rival, instead of criticism, there was a silent acceptance of the need to build regional support for the struggling regime.

By 1992, the North Korean government had completely shifted from its earlier criticism of the Eastern European countries' engagement with the capitalist countries and had adjusted its own foreign policy to cooperate with the United States and its allies. The most visible change was North Korea's increasing willingness to establish a relationship with the South Korean government. The first sign was shown in North Korea's acceptance of the South-North high-level talks, which were first proposed by South Korean Prime Minister Kang Young-Hoon on December 28, 1988. On September 5, 1990 the first round of the inter-Korean high-level talks took place with an emphasis on facilitating "the improvement of south-north relations through closer consultations and contact."¹⁴¹ However, the talks did not lead to an agreement due to the North's opposition to certain points. The issues of contention included an article pledging to desist any "attempts to overthrow the other regime" and the clause that stated, "the two sides shall endeavor together to transform the present state of armistice into a solid state of peace."¹⁴² Dong-Won Lim states that North Korea was strongly against both points, but was especially unwilling to compromise on the latter clause, which it opposed almost to the end, as conceding on that point would challenge its "longstanding logic calling for conclusion of a 'peace agreement' with the United States" as well as the "One Korea" policy.¹⁴³

However, by the conclusion of the fifth round of talks in December 1991, North Korea had conceded on both points and they were adopted as Article Four and Article Five in the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North. The successful adoption of the agreement in December 1991 and its implementation on February 1992 was significant not only in itself, but also in that it served as a

¹³⁸ However, Professor Lee points out that unlike the Soviet Union, China was careful in assuring North Korea that it was expanding relations with Seoul. He interprets the "muted silence" as indication "that Pyongyang was aware of the impending announcement." However, Professor Lee also acknowledges that "instead of publicly criticizing Beijing's decision, Pyongyang seems, at the moment, although grudgingly to have accepted China's de facto two-Korea policy" because China was the "most important" and really the only remaining ally. Although China's care may have been a factor, it remains that North Korea's awareness of its geopolitical position was the main reason behind the silence; Lee, "China's Changing Relationship with North Korea," 281, 289.

¹³⁹ Oh, "North Korea Through the Looking Glass," 171.

¹⁴⁰ Lee, "China's Changing Relationship with North Korea," 289.

¹⁴¹ "Text of Keynote Speeches by Prime Minister Kang Young-Hoon of South Korea and His North Korean Counterpart Yon Hyong-Muk during the first Session of the Inter-Korean Prime Ministers' Conference," reprinted from *The Korea Herald*, September 6, 1990. vol. 14 of *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1990): 570

¹⁴² Dong-Won Lim, "Inter-Korean Relations Oriented toward Reconciliation and Cooperation," *Korea and World Affairs* ed. Sang-Woo Rhee (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, 1992): 217.

¹⁴³ Lim, "Inter-Korean Relations," 217.

precedent that led to the rapid improvement of relations between the two Koreas after 1992. With the North Korean government presenting itself as a negotiable and willing partner, the two sides became much more engaged and built the foundation for the first historic inter-Korean summit meeting between President Kim Dae-Jung and Chairman Kim Jong Il in June 2000.¹⁴⁴

Perhaps most striking is North Korea's strong desire to engage with its sworn enemy, the United States. This shift towards friendlier relations was expressed by Kim Il Sung himself in a rare face-to-face interview with Josette Shiner of the *Washington Times* on April 15, 1992.

President Kim Il-sung of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, for 43 years the most implacable foe of the United States, says he is ready to 'bury the hatchet' and seeks an American embassy in his showcase capital of Pyongyang 'as quickly as possible.' [...] President Kim said that improved relations with the U.S. are 'the order of the day' with the collapse of the Cold War. 'There is spring between the people of our country and the people of the United States, spring begins,' he told *The Washington Times*. 'My wish is to establish [a U.S. embassy] as quickly as possible. We are ready.'¹⁴⁵

This interview illustrates that in light of the collapse of the Cold War, the North Korean leadership realized that enhancing its relations with the United States was 'the order of the day.' Demands for increased engagement with the United States appeared frequently in the *Rodong Sinmun* in the year 1992, revealing the urgency and determination of the North Korean government to improve relations with the U.S. On June 25, 1992 a *Rodong Sinmun* editorial stated that,

there [was] an urgent and not-to-be-delayed need that the North Korea-U.S. relationship should be normalized by clearing up the disgraceful North Korea-U.S. history. If the U.S. [did] not present unjust preconditions and if it [made] an effort to improve the North Korea-U.S. relationship, we also [would] try to improve relations without considering past history.¹⁴⁶

In using the official name of the United States instead of its customary label "American imperialist," the editorial illustrates that the North Korean regime was willing to tame its rhetoric against the U.S. and forget the hostile history in order to break out of its isolation and adjust to its changed geopolitical condition. The North Korean efforts to reach out to the United States and its promise to concede on the nuclear weapons issue led to the October 21, 1994 Agreed Framework between the North Korean and U.S. governments, which aimed to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo, "The Korean Peace Process: Problems and Prospects After the Summit," *World Affairs* 165 (2002): 79.

¹⁴⁵ Josette Shiner, "Kim Il-sung asks for thaw in ties with the U.S.," *Washington Times*, April 15, 1992.

¹⁴⁶ "North Korea Seeking Improved Relations With U.S., June 25, 1992," reprinted in "Major Documents and Statements," *Foreign Relations of North Korea During Kim Il Sung's Last Days*. Ed. Kim, Doug Joong. (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 1994): 523.

¹⁴⁷ Morgan, "New Security Arrangements," 168.

These overtures for improved relations with the neighbors became quite frequent, and part of a larger trend, in what Huh called “southern diplomacy.”¹⁴⁸ As mentioned before, the Japanese government had a more favorable view of the North Korean regime compared to the United States. Once South Korea began making headway in its northern diplomacy and started to encircle the North Korean regime, the North Korean government turned to Japan to enhance its geopolitical environment. The best representation of North Korea’s move to engage the Japanese government can be found in the second and third points of the joint declaration issued by the Liberal Democratic Party, the Japan Socialist Party, and the Workers’ Party of Korea on September 28, 1990:

2. The three parties acknowledge that the two countries should resolve the abnormal situation existing between the two countries and establish diplomatic relations at an early date.
3. The three parties acknowledge that the two nations should promote exchanges in political, economic and cultural fields in order to improve bilateral ties.¹⁴⁹

By November of the same year, Pyongyang and Tokyo opened talks for establishing full diplomatic relations. Although the talks were stalled due to the compensation issue and North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, the seven rounds of talks still presented an improvement from earlier relations, as the North Korean regime proved to Japan that it was a legitimate and rational nation.

Becoming more engaged with capitalist countries was described as a betrayal and the path to self-destruction in the North Korean newspapers in 1989 when the Eastern European countries were opening up their foreign policies. In less than three years, the North Korean government had changed its own conducts to pursue the very policies that it was criticizing. The North Korean leadership was especially focused on creating friendlier relations with former enemies such as South Korea and the United States, who could now determine the fate of the North Korean regime. Both the fear and realization of the possibility of international isolation brought on by South Korea’s northern diplomacy had convinced the North Korean regime that to break out of isolation and ensure its survival, it had to adapt itself to the new international order in which ideologically based communist solidarity was rapidly evaporating. In other words, the North Korean government realized that now it had to accommodate and actively engage the regional powers if it was going to avoid the fate of the Eastern European communist regimes.

However, this accommodating stance was not the only policy response to the new international situation. Unwilling to reform politically and unable to reform economically, the legitimacy of the North Korean government had suffered tremendously. Also, as the Soviet Union and China were no longer dependable allies against actual external threat, North Korea’s

¹⁴⁸ Huh states that “North Korea has been seeking to normalize or improve relations with Japan and the United States since the late 1980s, countering South Korea’s nordpolitik with its own ‘southern diplomacy.’” Although, southern diplomacy was not as successful as northern diplomacy, it did show the Japanese and American governments that the North Korean regime was willing to negotiate with its former adversaries and make necessary concessions; Huh, “External Policies and Relations,” 150.

¹⁴⁹ North Korea had demanded monetary compensation for the thirty six year colonial rule of Korea as part of the agreement; “Joint Declaration Issued by the Liberal-Democratic Party, the Japan Socialist Part and the Korean Workers’ Party, Pyongyang, September 28, 1990.” *Japan Times*, September 29, 1990.

sovereignty and regime survival was in question by 1992. Engagement with its neighbors reduced the security threat, but North Korea was distrustful of its neighbors, especially the “imperialist” United States, which refused to pledge that it would not use nuclear weapons or remove its forces from South Korea.¹⁵⁰ Also, unlike during the Cold War, there were no allies promising their support of the North Korean regime. This loss of legitimacy and insecurity were the main factors behind North Korea’s decision to develop nuclear weapons.

North Korea’s nuclear weapons program was not a contradiction to the accommodation policy, but an important complement that allowed North Korea to pursue the policy of engagement more successfully. Once the development of nuclear weapons became known, North Korea could project real military strength and bring its neighbors to the negotiation table on its own terms, as the surrounding countries could no longer ignore the North Korean government and wait for its collapse. Also, this projection of strength was important for the leadership and its *Juche* ideology, which emphasized independence and nationalism. With the loss of support from its allies, North Korea was forced to make concessions to its neighbors, which was weakening the *Juche* ideology that was critical in maintaining the regime. Overall, three main motivations can be identified for North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons: deterrence against external threat, bolstering international legitimacy; and reinforcing internal legitimacy.

The North Korean regime’s interest in a nuclear development program has a long history.¹⁵¹ Although there were concerns before 1992 that North Korea might be developing nuclear weapons capabilities, the North Korean government alleviated these concerns by joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, signing the ‘Joint Declaration on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula’ with South Korea in December 1991, and signing the Nuclear Safeguard Measures Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in January 1992.¹⁵² However, around the end of 1992 and the beginning of 1993, the North Korean government showed clear signs that it was using its nuclear facilities to develop nuclear weapons. The first signals of North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons can actually be traced to the Soviet Union’s recognition of South Korea. When the Soviet Union informed Pyongyang of its decision to establish diplomatic ties with Seoul, “then-Foreign Minister Kim Young Nam warned that North Korea had no choice but to facilitate the development of necessary weapons,” which Park Kyung-Ae states as “indicating a possible development of nuclear weapons.”¹⁵³ Kim’s threat was proven genuine on March 12, 1993, when North Korea declared its intentions to withdraw from the NPT, making it the first country to withdraw from the treaty.¹⁵⁴ The threat was reconfirmed in June 1994 when the Foreign Ministry stated that it

¹⁵⁰ Selig S. Harrison, “U.S. Policy Toward North Korea,” *North Korea After Kim Il Sung*, ed. Dae-Sook Suh and Chae-Jin Lee (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1998): 76.

¹⁵¹ The various events regarding North Korea’s nuclear program is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information regarding North Korea’s nuclear weapons program please check out *North Korea’s Second Nuclear Crisis and Northeast Asian Security* ed. Seung-Ho Joo and Tae-Hwan Kwak (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁵² Hakjoon Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” *Korea and World Affairs* (Summer 1994): 275.

¹⁵³ Kyung-Ae Park, “North Korea’s Defensive Power and U.S.-North Korea Relations,” *Pacific Affairs* 73 (2000-2001): 542.

¹⁵⁴ Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 277.

would “immediately withdraw from the IAEA” and “no longer accept any inspections.”¹⁵⁵ Clearly, North Korea was announcing to the international community that it was intent on possessing nuclear weapons.

Why was North Korea taking such actions just when it seemed to be becoming friendlier to its neighbors? The answer can be found in the North Korean leadership’s reactions identified earlier: the fear of external interference. As described earlier, North Korea believed that the loss of its allies enabled the U.S.-South Korea alliance to freely use its power in terms of diplomacy, economic sanctions, or even military invasion to meddle with North Korea’s affairs or force out the Kim dynasty. With the establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1990, the Soviet Union had “weakened” its military relationship with North Korea. Its successor state, Russia, “became even more anti-communist and [had] frankly revealed its sense of dislike for and even opposition to the Kim Il Sung regime,” and decided to “no longer offer modern weapons to North Korea”¹⁵⁶ China similarly “restricted its supply of modern weapons and equipment to North Korea” as it established diplomatic relations and expanded its economic and trade cooperation with South Korea.¹⁵⁷ This meant that in terms of conventional military strength, it became impossible for North Korea to follow South Korea’s military improvements and guarantee its security.¹⁵⁸ Under the suspicion that South Korea and the U.S. were applying a strategy of international encirclement of North Korea “in preparation for its absolute collapse and absorption by South Korea,” it is not surprising that the North Korean government chose to develop nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence against potential attacks against the regime.¹⁵⁹

However, this was not the only motivation behind the pursuit of nuclear weapons. This policy also strengthened the North Korean government’s ability to engage its neighbors and further break out of the encirclement and isolation that resulted from the success of South Korea’s northern diplomacy. In other words, North Korea’s nuclear option “was a way for Pyongyang to transform a vulnerability into creative diplomatic leverage to prevent it from being pushed into a geopolitical corner.”¹⁶⁰ According to Kim Hakjoon, behind North Korea’s nuclear weapons policy was the calculation that its “negotiation capability [would] naturally become very potent,” which was already “proven by the fact that North Korea [had] drawn the U.S. into

¹⁵⁵ “Statement Issued by the Spokesman for the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Its Intention to Withdraw from the IAEA, Pyongyang, June 13, 1994,” *North Korea News: A Weekly Newsletter* 740, June 20, 1994.

¹⁵⁶ Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 294.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁵⁸ Edward Olsen points out that although North Korea may have a numerical advantage that looks impressive on paper, “many mitigating strategic factors strongly suggest that North Korea’s conventional forces and their weapons systems are not enough to prevail over South Korea.” Also, Kim Hak Joon states that around this time, North Korea’s military expenditure was only half of South Korea’s. Due to the large disparity in the quality of North Korea’s military equipment, the actual difference was even larger. Additionally, the lack of oil and economic deterioration further reduced North Korea’s military capabilities. For more information on North Korea’s military, please read Edward A. Olsen’s “The Conventional Military Strength of North Korea: Implication for Inter-Korean Security” in *North Korea After Kim Il Sung* ed. Dae-Sook Suh and Chae-Jin Lee (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998): 147-164.

¹⁵⁹ Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 186.

¹⁶⁰ Olsen, “Conventional Military Strength,” 153.

talks [...] and was able to elevate the level of talks to negotiations on diplomatic exchange.”¹⁶¹ North Korea had expressed its desire for more engagement and diplomatic negotiations with the U.S. soon after the changes took place in Eastern Europe, but the first stage of high-level discussions with North Korea did not occur until June 1992 when Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gallucci and North Korean Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok Ju met to discuss the nuclear issue. Through these meetings, the U.S. “accorded recognition to the North Korean regime” and informed North Korea that the U.S. was “willing to assist in sustaining the regime,” including diplomatic recognition and economic support, if North Korea abandoned its nuclear development.¹⁶² Although both sides have not fulfilled their pledges, simply being able to enter into negotiations legitimately proves the effectiveness of the policy in breaking North Korea’s alienation. It is true that in the case of Japan, the nuclear issue surfaced as a major impediment to the negotiations for diplomatic recognition.¹⁶³ However, the Japanese government did not change its basic position, stating that “normalization is absolutely necessary.”¹⁶⁴ Clearly, in terms of diplomacy, the benefits of the nuclear development program have far outweighed the costs.

Another important motivation behind North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons was the issue of legitimacy. As seen earlier, North Korea had reluctantly given up its earlier claims to legitimacy through its rivalry with South Korea when it decided to pursue a much more accommodating foreign policy around 1992. However, maintaining legitimacy, especially in the face of communist collapse in the Soviet bloc and the abandonment of basic socialism in the rest of East Asia, was critical for the survival of the North Korean regime. By 1992, North Korea had stated that it did not wish to pursue reforms, and even if it wanted to, it would not have been able to reach the level of economic development achieved by South Korea.¹⁶⁵ This meant that legitimacy from economic success as in China and Vietnam was not an option. As was East Germany, North Korea had been competing with its counterpart in terms of economic prosperity, and by the early 1990s it was clear that the economic gap had become substantial enough to diminish the legitimacy of the leadership.¹⁶⁶ Also, the defeat in the diplomatic confrontations with South Korea had substantially reduced the international standing of North Korea, and cut into the rhetoric of independence and nationalism embedded in the governing *Juche* ideology. For the leadership to be supported by the North Korean elite and the public, it was critical for the government to “build a militarily powerful state or at least to be perceived as a militarily

¹⁶¹ Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 293.

¹⁶² Ibid., 280.

¹⁶³ Hong Nack, Kim “North Korea’s Policy toward Japan in the Post-Cold War Era,” *Foreign Relations of North Korea During Kim Il Sung’s Last Days*, ed Kim, Doug Joong, (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 1994): 160.

¹⁶⁴ Masao Okonogi, “Japan’s Policy toward North Korea: Diplomatic Normalization Talks and the Nuclear Inspection Issue,” *Foreign Relations of North Korea* ed. Doug Joong Kim (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 1994): 220.

¹⁶⁵ Kim Hakjoon states that “as North Korea’s economy continues to flag, it has already become too late for it to recover”; Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 294.

¹⁶⁶ Bazhanov reports that among the educated and young in North Korea, “the gap between the aspect of living and faith in communism is so substantial that people do not accept what is said by the leadership class seriously” and have started questioning the effectiveness of the *Juche* ideology; Natalie Bazhanov, “Russia’s Relations with North Korea” (paper prepared for the Northeast Asia and Russian Conference, Washington D.C., March 17-18, 1994): 13.

powerful state” in line with *Juche*.¹⁶⁷ In other words, both the internal and external legitimacy of the North Korean regime was in grave danger by 1992, threatening the survival of the regime.

The policy that restored this legitimacy was the development of nuclear weapons. Kim Hakjoo states that both issues of internal legitimacy and international recognition were behind North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons. First, he states that the pursuit of nuclear weapons allowed the “base of domestic control” to grow “stronger.”¹⁶⁸ As nuclear weapons can be seen as a projection of the “‘independent strength’ to firmly raise the defense capability for protecting the fatherland from ‘invasion by the imperialist nations’” in accordance to the *Juche* philosophy, nuclear weapons functioned “as a source of effective propaganda to offset to an acceptable level the increasing discontent of the people in North Korea with the Kim Il Sung regime.”¹⁶⁹ This meant that the North Korean regime could emphasize its ability to defend its people from external threat, an important source of any governments’ legitimacy. Secondly, Kim states that the North Korean government’s international legitimacy was also strengthened by the possession of nuclear weapons: “When a nation becomes a nuclear power as a result of having nuclear weapons capability, it is accorded dignified treatment[....] Adversary nations will have to deal prudently with a nation that is a nuclear power both diplomatically and militarily.”¹⁷⁰ This “dignified treatment” was exactly what North Korea had lost in adopting the new foreign policy conduct, and thus developing nuclear weapons was a reasonable choice, even taking into consideration the criticism from the international community for using nuclear weapons as a policy tool. By possessing nuclear weapons, North Korea could continue to engage its neighbors and foster a supportive geopolitical environment without appearing to be subservient.

As illustrated in this section, North Korea’s nuclear policy was far from irrational or contradictory to its new foreign policy conduct. North Korea’s decision to develop nuclear weapons had originated from its assessment of the changes taking place in the geopolitical environment and, more importantly, it was exactly what the North Korean regime needed in order to balance the negative effects of increasing its engagement with the capitalist countries and to draw its powerful opponents to the bargaining table.

¹⁶⁷ Park, “North Korea’s Defense Power,” 543.

¹⁶⁸ Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 294.

¹⁶⁹ Kim, “North Korea’s Nuclear Development Program and Future,” 294; Deriving legitimacy from the propaganda effects of nuclear weapons is part of a larger trend in North Korea. Olsen states that “the North increasingly uses military and paramilitary capabilities for a kind of psychological warfare” as a way to “ensure the survival of the DPRK state”; Olsen, “Conventional Military Strength,” 158.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

Conclusion: Understanding North Korea's Policies Today

In February 28, 2008 the media around the world reported with great optimism the New York Philharmonic's performance in Pyongyang. Remembering the success of "ping-pong" diplomacy with China, some optimists looked at this event as the first step in what they hoped would develop into the complete opening up of North Korea.¹⁷¹ However, by March 27, 2008 North Korea had expelled all South Korean officials from an inter-Korean industrial complex and by the next day they had fired ship based missiles into the sea. Also, in early April, the government stated that it needed its "nuclear deterrent" to ensure its survival, and labeled the South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak a "traitor."¹⁷² By June 27, 2008, the mood had changed again as the global media enthusiastically reported the symbolic demolition of the cooling tower at the reactor complex in Yongbyon as an affirmation of "the incremental progress that has been made in American-led multilateral efforts to end North Korea's nuclear weapons programs."¹⁷³ Furthermore, the U.S. government's October decision to remove North Korea from a list of state sponsors of terrorism following the North Korean government's agreement to a verification plan that would allow inspectors access to the Yongbyon nuclear facility seemed to signal that North Korea was ready to engage the world and make necessary concessions. However, by November of 2008, the North Korean government "confounded the rest of the world" once again when it threatened to shut down the inter-Korean industrial complex at Kaesong and announced that it would bar the international nuclear inspectors from taking soil and nuclear waste samples from the Yongbyon complex.¹⁷⁴ Which is the real North Korean foreign policy?

The answer is that they both are. Although it is true that there has been various changes in the geopolitical conditions after 1992, and that other important factors, such as economic or cultural conditions, have not been covered in this paper, it remains that the North Korean leadership is still very much concerned with the survival of its regime and maintaining this delicate geopolitical environment. It also still remains that the two basic foreign policy responses that are in place today are the ones that were formulated between 1989 and 1992.¹⁷⁵ What this research has proven is that the two seemingly contradictory North Korean policy responses of increased engagement with its neighbors and the development of nuclear weapons have actually been formulated under the same policy reactions that were shaped during the critical years between 1989 and 1992: resistance to internal reform, fear of external pressure, and concern over international isolation. Although the North Korean government has become more friendly to its neighbors and has moved towards increased engagement to ensure continued regional support for the regime's existence, it has consistently held on to its nuclear weapons program as the surest

¹⁷¹ Critics hold out hope that this updated version of ping-pong diplomacy will do much to transform North Korea. However, such exchanges have occurred before under Kim Jong Il with no real substantial changes to political life, and there little sign that the arrival of the New York orchestra signals a major shift in direction; Daniel J. Wakin, "North Korea Welcomes New York Philharmonic," *New York Times*, February 28, 2008.

¹⁷² "Rocket Man v. Bulldozer" *The Economist*, April 3, 2008, Asia Section, Print Edition.

¹⁷³ Sang-Hun Choe, "North Korea Destroys Tower at Nuclear Site," *New York Times*, June 28, 2008.

¹⁷⁴ Sang-Hun Choe, "North Korea Limits Tests of Nuclear Site," *New York Times*, November 12, 2008.

¹⁷⁵ Oh, "North Korea Through the Looking Glass," 45.

insurance in a world where it no longer has any dependable allies or real internal legitimacy. As long as the same dynastic rule by the Kims continues, this will remain the case.

The examination of the reactions that led to the formation of North Korea's dual policy of engagement and nuclear development has shown that North Korea will continue to pursue both strategies as they are complementary and inseparable, meaning that its neighbors cannot induce or coerce the North Korean leadership to move towards one strategy or the other. This, of course, does not mean that the only option is to allow North Korea to perfect its nuclear weapons program. What is needed is to fundamentally transform the North Korean leadership's perception of the post-Cold War geopolitical order. The United States must encourage China and South Korea to take a larger role in assuring the security of the North Korean regime through increased trade and investments, as well as to allow North Korea to break out of its isolation and become recognized as a legitimate actor and not simply a rogue regime that is on the verge of collapse. By shifting the focus away from simply the issue of nuclear weapons and concentrating more on increasing North Korea's participation as a legitimate global actor, the North Korean government will reduce its dependence on nuclear weapons for security and legitimacy.

As eccentric and irresponsible as the North Korean government may seem, the North Korean leadership is actually acutely aware and capable of understanding its geopolitical situation and making pragmatic policy responses for its survival; to ensure regional stability, its neighbors, including the United States, should treat it as such. There is a common saying in Korea: "a cornered mouse will even bite a cat."¹⁷⁶ Between 1989 and 1992, it became clear who was the mouse and who was the cat, and with nuclear weapons as the bite, one must be careful before it corners the mouse. A better solution will be to ensure the safety and legitimacy of the North Korean regime and eliminate its motivation for developing nuclear weapons. How best to achieve that assurance will be the next question that needs to be answered.

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궁지에 몰린 쥐는 고양이도 문다; similar meaning to "a stag at bay is a dangerous foe."

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