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North Korea and Support to Terrorism: An Evolving History

Author Biography

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Abstract

The DPRK's (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or North Korea) support for terrorism began as an ideologically-based policy financed by the Soviet Union that eventually led to a policy designed to put money into the coffers of the elite in Pyongyang—in short, a "proliferation for hire" policy. This article articulates a brief history of the North Korean regime, the rise to power of Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il, and North Korea's persistent support to terrorist groups around the globe.

North Korea and Support to Terrorism: An Evolving History

By Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr.¹

Introduction

The DPRK's (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or North Korea) support for terrorism began as an ideologically-based policy financed by the Soviet Union that eventually led to a policy designed to put money into the coffers of the elite in Pyongyang—in short, a "proliferation for hire" policy.² This article articulates a brief history of the North Korean regime, the rise to power of Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il, and North Korea's persistent support to terrorist groups around the globe.

North Korea's Beginnings and Kim Il-sung's Rise to Power

The history of the present North Korean regime began during World War II (WWII). During that war, there were several partisan groups that fought with and under the command of both Soviet and Chinese military forces. One of these groups was led by Kim Il-sung, a young commander picked by the Soviets to help lead his new nation (North Korea) following the end of WWII. The DPRK in its infancy was closely supervised by Soviet "advisers," and largely subsidized by the Soviet Union. Its military forces also utilized Soviet doctrines in their operations and training.³

During the Korean War, which was initiated by North Korea based on a plan drawn up with the advice and supervision of Soviet advisors, Kim Il-sung developed a relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC came to his aid following a near collapse of DPRK forces after the battle of Inchon and the ensuing push north of American-led United Nations (UN) forces in 1950. The PRC dedicated large numbers of military forces to the war at the request of Stalin—who provided funding, logistics, and military equipment to both the PRC and North Korea. Eventually, more than a million Chinese troops were fighting in the Korean theater of operations by war's end.⁴ This was the beginning of a relationship that Pyongyang would have with both the Soviet Union and the PRC until the end of the Cold War.

Kim Il-sung's Consolidation of Power

Kim was formally "appointed" the leader of North Korea by the Soviets in 1948 (but had been the de facto Soviet appointed leader from 1945 on), and "elected" as the "Premier of the Republic" during the same time frame.⁵ Despite the backing of his Soviet supporters, from 1945 until the late 1950s, Kim Il-sung had anything but a complete consolidation of power. Of course, the Korean War limited his complete control of the country, but perhaps equally as importantly, Kim was also faced with both pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions in his own Supreme People's Assembly and other key governmental institutions. Between 1955 and 1958, Kim Il-sung purged all or most of those in both the pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions within the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and all other aspects of government and society. By 1958 all Chinese troops had been withdrawn from North Korea.⁶ These events finally left Kim in complete control of the country, its economy, government, society, and military forces. The legacy of totalitarianism continues today through his son, Kim Jong-il.

The elder Kim's rise to power reflected the traditional isolationism of Korean society for hundreds of years and its resistance to outside influence.⁷ It also reflected a Confucianist tradition of absolute loyalty to an individual leader—which was the end result by 1958. North Korea continued to receive massive amounts of aid from Moscow, and to a lesser extent, from Beijing—but neither of these nations had a significant impact on how the country was run.⁸

North Korea's Foreign Policy Goals and Support for Terrorism: 1960–1988

North Korea from 1948 until the end of the Cold War could be described as a nation-state that fell within the Soviet sphere of influence. But it was also a nation that was far more isolated in every way than even other communist states—including countries like China and Cuba. It was this isolationism that kept the Stalinist government of Kim Il-sung "pure," and allowed him to completely dominate all aspects of government and society in North Korea. This North Korean philosophy, formally defined by Pyongyang as "juche," (self-reliance) is what kept the DPRK an active communist state, but also avoided its dominance by larger, more powerful sponsors or neighbors like the Soviet Union or the PRC.⁹

Despite the fact that Kim Il-sung was free to pursue a policy that suited his perceived needs of a militarily-strong North Korea, a Stalinist-Juche government, and the unification of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea

simply could not afford to focus on these issues without external support. The entire country, for example, was completely subsidized by the Soviet Union until 1990 and continues to require substantial outside resources to this day. These resources include the majority of foodstuffs, oil for its industry and cities, and even the maintenance of the national electrical grid. North Korea is a country that is seventy percent mountainous, and thus has been incapable of agrarian self-sufficiency.¹⁰ In addition, it does not have enough coal or oil to sustain its economy—and struggles to garner finances for fossil fuels needed to sustain its economy. These conditions led to one of the most profound and threatening aspects of the Cold War—proxy operations.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union both engaged in proxy operations, where each nation targeted each other, but on the soil of other nation-states. Occasionally, these proxy battles involved non-state actors and terrorist groups. Thus, North Korea's support for terrorism and terrorist groups during the 1960s–1980s allowed it to maintain its sovereignty and independent policy goals while still "paying back" Moscow for massive subsidies that kept its government afloat.¹¹

As a key part of fitting into the Soviet sphere of influence and "pulling their weight" among Moscow's allies, the North Koreans actively supported communist and Marxist movements. Key among these operations was the long-lasting war in Angola, where by 1984 there were 3,000 North Korean regular troops and 1,000 advisors. North Korea also operated training camps in Angola for guerrillas of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO). Both organizations were trained in terrorist tactics at these camps. But North Korea operated far more guerrilla and terrorist training camps within its own borders. Between 1968 and 1988, North Korea built and operated at least 30 special training camps within its borders, specializing in terrorist and guerilla warfare training. Reports at the time indicated that over 5,000 recruits from some 25 nations visited these camps to take part in various courses lasting anywhere from three to 18 months.¹²

Support for nation-states engaging in terrorist tactics was not the only activity that the North Koreans engaged in at their camps up until the late 1980s. In fact, Pyongyang supported a number of terrorist groups—particularly in the Middle East. According to National Security analyst Barry Rubin, "Up until the late 1980s, North Korea trained Palestinian terrorists, both those belonging to the PLO and from Syrian and Libyan-backed groups." Rubin further states:

"In Lebanon during the 1970s and in Libya and Syria from the 1980s down to the present, North Korean soldiers have also trained terrorists for many groups including the Basque Spanish ETA, Palestinian Abu Nidal organization, Irish Republican Army, Italian Red Brigades, Japanese Red Army, Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines, Turkish radicals, and others. While many of these links have lapsed, in the 1990s, North Korea added Hizbollah and the anti-Turkish Kurdish PKK group to its roster of clients."¹³

According to reports from French press sources, several key Hizbollah operatives spent time in North Korea. They included (but were probably not limited to) Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hizbollah; Security and Intelligence chief Ibrahim Akil; and Mustapha Badreddine, head of counter-espionage operations.¹⁴ On April 30, 1996, during a special press briefing given at the U.S. State Department, Ambassador Philip C. Wilcox, U.S. Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State stated, "In the 1970s and '80s, North Korea had a very serious record of committing very serious acts of international terrorism."¹⁵

North Korea has also been involved with the Japanese Red Army (JRA) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In their book, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Stéphane Courtois and Mark Kramer say:

"Created at the end of the 1960s, when student radicalism in Japan was at its height and Maoism was in the air, the JRA quickly made contact with North Korean agents (the Korean community is quite large throughout the Japanese archipelago). The Korean agents passed instructions to their cadres and brought the arms the JRA was lacking, but they were unable to prevent a split in the group in the early 1970s, which resulted in a bloody conflict between the dissenting and orthodox factions. Accordingly, some of the cadres simply defected to North Korea, taking refuge in Pyongyang, where they remain as businessmen and intermediaries with the West. The other faction decided to internationalize its affairs even further, and joined up with Wadi Hadad. As a result of this alliance, three members of the JRA acted on behalf of the PFLP in killing 28 people at Tel Aviv's Lod airport in May 1972."¹⁶

The evidence chain connecting the North Korean Government to the PFLP is further cemented by proof that its leader, Dr. George Habash, made a visit to North Korea during September of 1970—a trip where he was reportedly able to procure both weapons and funding.¹⁷

The reasons for North Korean support of state and non-state actors during the Cold War were actually twofold. First, it confirmed North Korea's position as a stout ally within the Soviet sphere of influence and was one of the factors that kept the enormous subsidies coming. Second, it was an active element in North Korea's policy at the time (and now) to actively support state and non-state actors who, like Pyongyang, were hostile to the United States and its allies. One cannot forget that North Korea then—and now—regarded the United States as its primary enemy and its main threat to national survival. The PFLP targeted Israel, one of Washington's key allies and its most important ally in the Middle East. Thus, supporting terrorist groups that targeted Israeli citizens and Jews from other nations was an important element in keeping Washington's efforts focused on these terrorist acts—and not on North Korea. North Korea continues to follow this policy, as described in the next section.¹⁸

North Korea's Continued Support of Terrorism

Hizbollah

According to sources in both the American and Israeli press, North Korea supervised the building of underground facilities for Hizbollah in southern Lebanon. According to several reports, all or most of Hizbollah's underground facilities were built primarily under the supervision of North Korean instructors in 2003–2004. The facilities were quite extensive and included dispensaries for the wounded, food stocks, and arms dumps.¹⁹ It seems likely that North Korean assistance to Hizbollah served as a key factor in the challenges that Israeli military forces faced when they conducted combat operations against Hizbollah during the 2006 conflict. Israeli reporter Lenny Ben-David in 2007 stated that, "Hizbollah's military bases, armories, bunkers and communications networks were much more extensive than Israel's intelligence services estimated on the eve of the 2006 war." Ben-David also reported that the tunnel building operations were under the control of the Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation (KMDTC). KMDTC is a company that has been officially sanctioned by the United States for its illicit activities.²⁰

North Korea also reportedly exported arms to Hizbollah that were used to inflict casualties on Israeli troops and civilians. An article written by South Korean scholar Moon Chung-in asserts that the Israeli intelligence service *Mossad* has clear evidence that Hizbollah was able to hit the outskirts of Tel Aviv with short-range missiles containing components supplied by North Korea. According to Moon's report, the missile components first went from North Korea to Iran. The Iranians assembled

the missiles and then transported them to Hizbollah via Syria.²¹ There are also reports of arms shipments originating in North Korea that ended up in the hands of Hizbollah. The "Reform Party in Syria" (RPS), an opposition group, reported in 2008 that Hizbollah had acquired chemical warfare (CW) agents from North Korea. According to RPS, mustard and nerve gas were acquired from Pyongyang, with Syria acting as a conduit. The CW agents can reportedly be weaponized and mounted on Hizbollah's short-range missiles that target Israel.²²

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

North Korea's ties to Hizbollah began in collaboration with yet another organization identified by the U.S. State Department as an entity supporting terrorism—the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).²³ According to a 2008 Congressional Research Report, the North Koreans collaborated with IRGC operatives (including active duty military generals) in Hizbollah operations that included everything from the shipment of short-range missiles and artillery, to the building of underground facilities.²⁴

Tamil Tigers

North Korea also has had connections to insurgents and terrorist groups in South Asia. In 2000, a video of an attack by the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) on a Sri Lankan navy ship showed speedboats that appeared to be of North Korean origin. The video showed that the rebel group was also using a North Korean variant of a Russian (and later Chinese) 107mm Katyusha rocket launcher.²⁵ A Jane's Intelligence Review article claimed that the armaments being used by the LTTE were of North Korean origin:

"In the video, LTTE Sea Tigers can be seen using a variant of the 107mm Katyusha rocket, fired from a lightweight tripod, in pairs. This is believed to be a variant of the Chinese Type 63 107mm launcher. The Chinese produce a single tube version called a Type 85 fired from a man-portable tripod, but the North Koreans produce a double version. This is quite a rare weapon...."²⁶

The North Koreans also attempted to provide the LTTE at least one shipment of 152mm and 130mm artillery shells and 120mm mortars during 2007. The Sri Lankan Navy interdicted the shipment. The Sri Lankan Navy also seized an LTTE boat that was equipped with a 14.5mm machine gun that was also assessed to be connected with North Koreans.²⁷ North Korean merchant ships carrying arms to the LTTE were intercepted by the Sri Lankan Navy on three different occasions in October 2006, Febru-

ary 2007, and March 2007. On several occasions the North Korean merchant ships fired on the Sri Lankan vessels, and the Sri Lankan Navy reportedly sank two of the North Korean ships. The Congressional Research Service issued a report in 2008 citing the *Sankei Shimbun* in Japan, which states the Sri Lankan Government filed an official protest with the North Koreans.²⁸

Conclusion

North Korea has demonstrated throughout its history the intent and capability to support terrorism. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the North Korean leadership both fears and resents the Government of the United States and its allies. Proliferation of training, weapons, and technology to non-state actors who engage in terrorist acts against America's allies in the Middle East (particularly Israel) is perceived by Pyongyang to be an effective way of ratcheting up contentious issues with Washington. Second, economics has played an important role in Pyongyang's motivations for supporting terrorism, largely because North Korea's stability originally depended on subsidies from the Soviet Union. Support for terrorism also provides the badly-needed hard currency for Pyongyang's elite. Containing and combating North Korea's support for terrorism will continue to be a foreign policy dilemma for the United States as long as the current regime is in place.

About the Author

Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., is a former intelligence officer with the Defense Intelligence Agency and a retired Marine who has lived and worked in Korea. He received his Ph.D. from the Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio, and currently serves as Professor of International Relations at the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College. In addition to being author of *Red Rogue: The Persistent Challenge of North Korea* (Potomac Books, 2007) he has written nearly two dozen articles dealing with Korean security issues in peer-reviewed journals to include the *Korea Observer*, the *International Journal of Korean Studies*, *Comparative Strategy*, *Pacific Focus*, the *Air and Space Power Journal*, the *East Asian Review*, and the *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*. He is the author of the forthcoming book, *Defiant Failed State: The North Korean Threat to International Security*, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2010, forthcoming).

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