

February 15, 1968

Report from East German Ambassador to North Korea, 'Some Aspects of the Political Line of the Korean Workers' Party after the January Events'

Citation:

"Report from East German Ambassador to North Korea, 'Some Aspects of the Political Line of the Korean Workers' Party after the January Events", February 15, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Translated for NKIDP by Vojtech Mastny.

<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/113196>

Summary:

Ambassador Holub analyzes the historical context underlying North Korea's military adventurism in 1968.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Czech

Contents:

Translation - English

Pyongyang. 15 February 1968

To the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague

Some Aspects of the Political Line of the Korean Workers' Party after the January Events

Political Report No. 12

[written by] B. Schindler

As happened at the time of the recent 20th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army, when the Korean comrades did all they could to trace not only the ideological but also the organizational origins of the army to the 1930's, the Korean Workers' Party has recently tried all the more to prove a direct and uninterrupted line in the development of the Korean Workers' Party from the 1930's to the present. Both in memoirs and in historical literature, great effort has been made to ignore and distort the period comprising approximately World War II. Recent speeches of Kim Il Sung himself arguing continuity between the 1930's and the origins of the DPRK, show that some historical factors from the years antedating the liberation and the origins of the Korean Democratic People's Republic have not ceased to be effective and are still problems that are being addressed internally by the Korean party.

The core of the present and past leadership of the Korean Workers' Party was formed mainly from among active fighters against the Japanese fascists, organizers of and participants in the anti-Japanese resistance. Considering that this resistance was centered mainly in the territory of Manchuria outside of occupied Korea, the far from negligible factor of separation from one's own people was inevitably in effect already before the liberation of the Korean people. Although a Korean minority used to live and is still living in the territory of Manchuria, we believe that this fact in no way undermines the hypothesis that during the period of anti-Japanese resistance before World War II, contacts between guerilla groups and the people in Korea itself were not extensive. Indeed, Korean historical sources identify all the localities where clashes with the Japanese occupiers took place as being in the northern parts of Korea and in Manchuria, thus showing that even the Korean sources cannot show an influence of the struggle of the guerilla groups on the entire Korean people.

The internal development of the guerilla movement during World War II amounts to further and deeper separation of the guerilla movement and its leaders from the Korean people. This factor began to take effect in several stages from the very origins of the Korean Democratic People's Republic onwards and is to a certain extent one of the reasons why the Korean Workers' Party today maintains "independent" positions precisely in the fundamental questions of war and peace, the international communist movement, and so on.

In the period of its consolidation from 1945-1956, the young Korean Workers' Party had to cope with many phenomena that are historically rooted in the fact that a portion of the party leadership—the very segment whose importance and power kept increasing—was bound by its various historical experiences to China and the Soviet Union more than it was bound by the experience of the struggle of the Korean people. The long absence from the country played a role in the thinking of these leaders.

This first period culminated in 1956 when certain internal measures taken by the party began to create tendencies leading to the diminution of "dependence" on the Soviet Union and China. In this year, the first strike against some of the former anti-Japanese fighters took place, leading to their removal and the formation of the basis for all the main ideological and practical theses and methods that currently determine the line of the Korean Workers' Party. Once the disagreements between the CPSU and CPC became evident, the Korean Workers' Party first, as is well known,

openly supported the Chinese views. Later on, when events in Indonesia, Ghana, and other countries exerted their influence on the KWP, the KWP began to distance itself from direct support of the Chinese leadership and came closer to the CPSU and the fraternal parties of the European socialist countries. To what extent this change may have been prompted by subjective factors within the KWP and to what extent objective factors played their role is impossible to tell exactly. In any case, however, the process of the KWP's rapprochement with the USSR and the European socialist countries was closely connected with the internal economic problems of the DPRK and the awareness of the sinister effects of the Chinese ideas on the national liberation struggle.

As evident in 1966, and from the extensive personnel changes in the following year, the problems of so-called pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet tendencies within the KWP are far from having been resolved. On the contrary, influenced by the rise of the cult of personality of Kim Il Sung, they have been accentuated and have led to the removal of the leading personalities in the party, who—regardless of whether they might later be branded by Korean historians as kowtowing to this or that—represented the more cautious forces beneficial for the development of Korean unification. Therefore, they inevitably had to clash with all that represents today a cross-section of the Korean Workers' Party—an extraordinarily strong cult of personality in all of its manifestations, adventurism, striving for even greater isolation in the thinking of the DPRK's population, and especially of the membership of the Korean Workers' Party, ignoring of new factors in world development, and so on. In the end, they have become so much of an obstacle that they have been purged from the party leadership, thus erecting another barrier marking retreat from the October 1966 conference of the KWP in the key question of the country's unification.

All internal propaganda of the KWP and the DPRK is aimed at fully ignoring some new developments in South Korea that entail for the DPRK the loss of its economic lead over South Korea. Today's South Korea is in effect depicted as if it were Syngman Rhee's South Korea of years ago. This is a serious mistake, however, which means departure from one of the tenets of the conference, namely, the building of a Marxist-Leninist party in South Korea, and posits in effect forcible unification as the only way.

This shows not only that the leadership of the Korean party is fully aware of the DPRK economically lagging behind South Korea, in the sense that the economic growth in the South corresponds to economic stagnation in the North. Accordingly, among others, attempts have been made to stop South Korea's economic growth by cutting its main lifeline—the influx of foreign capital into South Korea. Already in the last year, the interests of investors from the capitalist world has sharply decreased thanks to the armed sabotage in South Korea, as the increased danger of a new war on the Korean peninsula temporarily had a negative effect on the influx of capital. The situation had become stabilized until the events of the first of January 1968 again created the possibility of a war breaking out. It is no longer possible to speak of attempts to influence adversely the economic development in South Korea, but about a more dangerous effort to come to terms with the adverse economic development in the two divided parts of the country, which favors the South. The January events have shown that the Korean Workers' Party has given up on the possibility of making the DPRK into an economic model for South Korea and has fully entered a path close to the Chinese ideas. Retreat from the path of [becoming] an economic model and [of pursuing] peaceful unification had also been foreshadowed by giving new content to the old policy of parallel development of the DPRK's economy and defense. The whole economy is being effectively subordinated to armament requirements—an area in which the DPRK has a lead over South Korea, which only plans to build its first armament plants this year. The current tendencies in the Korean Workers' Party confirm the continued validity of some factors that have effectively influenced it from its origins until today, and that have exerted their influence on the frame of mind of the party leadership. One of these factors is, in our opinion, the fact that from the beginning until the present time, the KWP has been intimately linked with all military

matters, with the tradition of struggle against Japan, with the Korean War, and with the whole postwar development. It therefore put military issues in first place. Before and during World War II, Korea had been a brutally exploited Japanese colony in which the brutality of the occupiers exceeded that of the German fascists; the KWP never had any experience of bourgeois democracy, of struggle for the economic rights of the workers, and, in our opinion, is therefore not ready at the present time to either understand or influence the economic struggle of the South Korean workers. The only path in which it is richly experienced is the military one, the path of arms.

The Korean Workers' Party has no experience with democratic centralism within the party. If there had been any possibilities in that direction, they are now fully blocked by the monstrous cult of Kim Il Sung's personality. More than ever before, the situation within the Korean Workers' Party prevents criticism and self-criticism from becoming a dynamic force in party life. Military experiences, which in the past were always closely interconnected with party work, have grown into a system of organization that resembles military organization and discipline. All this has become characteristic, even before the recent events, not only of party life but also of the economic and public life of the country.

Are there forces within the party that might evaluate and correct this situation? There is no class or group of people in the DPRK who would have concrete experiences with democracy in the country and the party. Moreover, the KWP has been doing all it could to block the entry of such ideas into the country and the working class and the peasantry have never had such experiences. Finally, the proletarianization of the intelligentsia, which is part of the KWP's policy, along with the strictly regulated flow of information, prevents any such ideas from appearing in any coherent form. And even if they appeared, there would be no possibility for them to be published, affirmed, or explained. There are so many slogans used by the Korean Workers' Party (kowtowing before great powers, Juche, with our own forces, and so on) that the application of even one of these slogans would amount to a total failure of any such [democratizing] attempt.

This entire development leads to further a deepening of the differences between the North and the South on the Korean Peninsula. Even if we consider that many representatives of the armed forces [army and police] are represented in the highest political and governmental organs in both the DPRK and South Korea, the one-sided military orientation of the KWP is all the more conspicuous in comparison with the economic effort of the South. Quite apart from the fascist repression, which, however, is incomparably more lenient than under the Syngman Rhee regime, that effort has been creating an economically unfavorable situation for the DPRK, not to mention the political consequences of South Korea's economic successes for the way of thinking of the South Korean people and the consequences for their standard of living.

[...a discussion of developments in South Korea, as a result of which North Korean policy does not meet with a favorable response from South Koreans]

It is almost certain that the leadership of the Korean Workers' Party is very well aware of all of this. In the current economic situation in the DPRK, when the standard of living of its population is stagnating, its propaganda has been promising an increase of the people's standard of living after the forthcoming unification. In our opinion, in the current situation, when the cult of personality has reached unprecedented dimensions, however, the liquidation of the cult and all its consequences would be necessary before inaugurating a more realistic policy. Such a policy, however, would preclude an early reunification precisely because of the economic problems of the DPRK and its overall fixation on military issues.

In that case, in our opinion, the possibility of following the counsel of desperation as a

result of such a realization cannot be fully excluded. In any case, we might expect further strengthening of the military way of thinking in the KWP leadership that has become the only prescription for the solution of the Korean situation.

A new propaganda theme—comparing a revolutionary situation in South Vietnam with a revolutionary situation in South Korea—would seem to suggest that the comparison of the situation in these countries, whose revolutionary situations are quite different, insinuates the same approach to the situation, in accordance with the thesis of “binding the Americans by hands and feet.” The Korean comrades, however, do not view the greatest obstacles in terms of the objective situation on the Korean peninsula, in a realistic assessment of not only the South Korean but also the American armed forces in the Far East, which are not yet actively involved in the Vietnamese conflict. Instead, they see [the obstacles] above all in the unwillingness of the European socialist countries to create a similar tense situation in Europe, thus forcing the Americans to disperse their forces to Europe as well. This is, in our opinion, the main point of disagreement [between us and the North Koreans], resulting from an altogether different approach to the questions of war and peace in the age of weapons of mass destruction, an approach which is very close to, if not identical with, the Chinese views. In our opinion, therefore, the Korean comrades will try to strengthen at least those economic relationships that could further strengthen the military power of the DPRK while at the same time distancing themselves ideologically from other fraternal parties. It cannot be determined whether the Korean Workers’ Party presently counts on the participation of the USSR and PRC in the possible military confrontation on the Korean peninsula. Since, however, the leadership of the Korean party is most experienced in a military solution of problems, it must have considered these questions and pondered the possibility of luring other countries into the possible armed conflict, as had been the case in the last Korean war, which the KWP constantly plays up, regardless of the considerable change in the world situation since that war.

[...a discussion of personnel within the party leadership with recent military experience]

If it is true that military experiences influence all the leading officials of the party and the state, they must pay attention to all of the consequences of the January events in South Korea. [describes the increase in South Korean armed forces, creation of territorial defense, building of armament industries, growing hostility to communism] If the theory of the Korean Workers’ Party about the growing revolutionary movement in South Korea and its armed manifestations were correct, and corresponded to reality, it would be in our opinion impossible for the South Korean regime to afford to place weapons in the hands of such a large number of the working people.

[...if the South Korean economy suffers from these measures, the people can easily blame it on the North]

The January events of this year have marked in several respects defeats in the current policy of the Korean Workers’ Party. Although it is still impossible to make final conclusions, it is already certain that the Seoul incident of 21 January could not be superseded by the effects of the internment of the Pueblo and that, on the contrary, that incident is becoming more dangerous in its consequences than the Pueblo case has been. The Seoul incident has demonstrated that there are no coordinated and organized forces in South Korea today that would be able to take political action against the existing regime, much less overthrow it. South Korea is now doing its best to turn this incident into a condemnation of the DPRK, with the main goal of driving a wedge between the DPRK and most developing countries. And, judging from the very cautious reaction of the developing countries to the Pueblo incident, it is not to be excluded that the South Korean generals and politicians would be successful in this effort.

[...the demonstrations in South Korea may be indicative of rising anti-communism]

The Korean Workers' Party has been obviously disappointed not only by the world's reaction to the Pueblo case, but also by the reaction of the majority of the socialist countries. It is still impossible to tell today to what extent the attitude of the Korean Workers' Party will be influenced by all these factors—the actual situation in South Korea, the situation in the world, the DPRK's assessment of its own forces, support for the DPRK by the socialist and developing countries, and so on. It is nevertheless certain that recent statements by some leading representatives of the DPRK and its press have been showing tendencies indicative of a retreat from excessively sharp formulations. It is impossible to tell, however, whether this would also apply to all those sharp tendencies that have been the foundation of the Korean Workers' Party's policy.

Ambassador Holub