

1996

Excerpts from Recollections by the Former Soviet Ambassador in North Korea Aleksandr Kapto

Citation:

"Excerpts from Recollections by the Former Soviet Ambassador in North Korea Aleksandr Kapto", 1996, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Aleksandr Kapto, Na Perekrestkakh Zhizni: Politicheskie Memuary (Moskva: Sotsialno-Politicheskii Zhurnal, 1996), pp. 433-436. Translated by Sergey Radchenko.
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/121977>

Summary:

Aleksandr Kapto reflects on the Soviet Union's normalization of relations with South Korea, and the consequential fallout in relations between North Korea and the USSR. According to Kapto, North Korea threatened to develop nuclear weapons and withdraw from the NPT as a result of Soviet-South Korean rapprochement.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Hyundai Motor Company

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Gorbachev, in spite of promises, which he had personally given to Kim Il Sung, not to establish relations with South Korea, sharply changed his position and, during a meeting with Roh Tae-woo in San Francisco, gave him green light to expedite this process. This is what the South Korean President wanted.

Reaction of Pyongyang was definitely negative, and, moreover, emotional to the highest degree. There was an additional circumstance that added fuel to the raging fire, which I am still surprised about. [Eduard] Shevardnadze flew to Pyongyang to "consult" with Kim Il Sung after the Soviet leadership had already made a positive resolution on the South Korean problem. Therefore, when the North Korean counterpart learned from the Kremlin's envoy that the "consultations" are taking place under the conditions, when in practical terms all questions on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Seoul had already been predetermined, there was a real explosion right in the middle of the conversation.

The talks took place in a very tense setting. They were broken up several times: the Foreign Minister of the DPRK [Kim Yeong-nam] had to leave in order to consult with Kim Il Sung. It even went as far as Shevardnadze saying to his interlocutor that had he known that he would be received like this in Pyongyang, he would have never come, but would have instructed the Ambassador to inform the North Korean side about the decision that had been taken, and this would be it. Kim Yeong-nam, implementing the line of his leadership, was uncompromising. All of this ended with, in effect, a political scandal. Kim Il Sung refused to receive Eduard Shevardnadze. This was perhaps the first and the last time that he received such a snub in his foreign political activities. The talks finished ahead of the scheduled time. Offended Soviet minister flew to Japan, where he was immediately received by the Japanese emperor.

And Kim Yeong-nam carried out the promise that he gave during the talks and handed to Shevardnadze a written memorandum, read out on the second day of the talks, which recounted Pyongyang's positions in connection with the conflict that had appeared between it and Moscow. The essence of these positions was as follows:

First, Moscow's decision to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea is a serious violation of the promises given by the Kremlin to North Korea at different times. Concrete facts were mentioned. Thus, Gorbachev, during the Korean-Soviet talks in October 1986, said: "We will under no circumstances change our principled position with regard to South Korea." Shevardnadze during the talks in December 1986 during his visit to the DPRK said: "I confirm that there is no intention to establish political, diplomatic and state relations with South Korea." Moreover, in order to disperse the doubts of the North Korean interlocutors, he confirmed the official opinion with a personal argument, having stated: I give a Communist's word. And the published communique clearly pointed out that "the Soviet Union has no intention to officially recognize South Korea, [and] establish political and diplomatic relations with it."

Second, as the North Korean minister stated, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and South Korea by itself leads to the cancellation of the Korean-Soviet treaty of alliance, which was signed in July 1961. It was directly stated that the Soviet side systematically violated the Korean-Soviet treaty of alliance.

In this case, the North Korean argumentation was presented as follows. The third article of the Treaty presupposes that the parties to the agreement, wishing to hasten the strengthening of peace and security, jointly discuss all important international problems, connected to the interests of both countries. But, Kim Yeong-nam said, the Soviet side in September 1988 declared an important change with regard to South Korea without any consultation with the DPRK ahead of time. Further, fundamental change of the policy of the Soviet Union towards North Korea - the holding of Soviet-South Korean talks at the highest level in San Francisco - was also not

accompanied by consultations with the DPRK. The conclusion: the Soviet Union does not pay attention to the Korean-Soviet treaty of alliance, and therefore the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and South Korea by itself annuls the Treaty of Alliance between the DPRK and the USSR.

In case of the cancellation of the Korean-Soviet treaty of alliance - it was then stated - we will have to look for ways to resolve many questions on our own. And as South Korea hosts US nuclear weapons, it is necessary to follow the road of development of weapons to counteract the aforesaid weapons. In this case, the DPRK will have to depart from the Treaty of Nuclear Non-Proliferation.

The development of the situation in this direction on the Korean peninsula - Kim Yeong-nam continued - will intensify the nuclear arms race, sharpen to the utmost extent the situation in Korea, and bring unexpected consequences to the general development of the situation. And then Shevardnadze was addressed with the following words: "You know better [than I] what fate awaits the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if we, willingly or unwillingly, quit this Treaty."

Third, as Pyongyang believed, actions by the USSR cannot be understood in a way other than joining in the "scheming" by the USA and South Korea against the DPRK. With this, the North Korean side declared that the strategy of the USA and the rulers of South Korea is to implement "peaceful transition", aimed at isolation and weakening of the DPRK in political, economic, and military terms, "leading us to 'open doors' and to overthrow the socialist regime in our country." With this, it was reminded that during the Soviet-South Korean talks at the highest level in San Francisco Roh Tae-woo turned to the Soviet side with a special request so that it helps him in the quickest "opening of doors" of the North.

In the North Koreans' opinion, this was also discussed during the talks between Shevardnadze and Baker in Irkutsk, when the US State Secretary asked the Soviet side to persuade the North so that it "opened the doors" more widely. Therefore, in this situation the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and South Korea would not be confined to the establishment of ordinary diplomatic relations.

This cannot be viewed in any other way as joining the common conspiracy with the USA and South Korea. If this is what happens, then I think, Kim Yeong-nam said, that the current North-South dialogue is "confrontation in the presence of dialogue," "competition in the presence of dialogue." [sic, meaning unclear in the original, grammatical style retained] The South Korean rulers, referring to the fact that the USSR joined their side, will boastfully and insolently try to unite and annex the DPRK along the German lines. This, in the end, would lead to a break in the dialogue and would create even greater confrontation between the North and the South.

The responsibility for this would of course rest on the USSR as well. With this, there was a reminder that the USSR is responsible, alongside the USA, for having partitioned Korea along the 38th parallel.

The minister also stressed that because Moscow was discarding Korean-Soviet allied relations "like worn-out shoes," the DPRK will have to introduce serious corrections in its foreign policy. As countermeasures, [he] cited DPRK's intention to recognize the independence of Soviet republics, which were then declaring their "state sovereignty," and establish appropriate diplomatic relations with them. The argument was: because you created a precedent for "recognizing reality" of the split of "two Koreas," there will not be any reason to reproach those who "recognize" the "reality" of the split of the USSR. Under such conditions, he stated, we will have to search out ways so that the Asians become the masters of Asia and would live independently, having taken the initiative in their hands. On the basis of this point of view, we will take a new approach to the coordination of questions that occur in relations with

Japan.

Having reminded that in view of allied relations with the USSR, North Korea conducted work of containing Japan in some of its claims to the USSR, Kim Yeong-nam said that changes will be introduced here as well, i.e. the DPRK will build its relations with Japan separately from allied relations with the USSR and that, in this case, the DPRK cannot help but support Japan's demands to return the "northern territories."

The rejection of "Yalta agreements" in Europe gave cause to reject relevant agreements in Asia as well. The North Korean minister added in conclusion: "frankly, the USSR has actively encouraged the policy of 'perestroika' inside the GDR, as a result of which the environment changed sharply, and a situation occurred whereby the GDR was annexed by the FRG." And he further stated: "the situation in Korea will not turn out the way the USA and South Korea want, and it will not develop in the way you expect." [...]