

# The Fall of Ideology in Fraternal Socialism: *Sino-North Korean Divergence over the American Threat, 1965–1966*

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## Abstract

*North Korea's relationship with China had always been complex and ambivalent, ostensibly bound by common ideology but potentially fractured by nationalism. Regardless, Pyongyang refrained from openly opposing Beijing until 1965–1966. The standard interpretations have primarily cited the Cultural Revolution and differences about the Soviet Union as main reasons for the degeneration of their bilateral relations. The previous emphasis on the disruptive impact of the Cultural Revolution and the Soviet Union, however, has obscured a new source of contention emanating from their divergence about the American threat. During this time, North Korea assessed Beijing's efforts to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States over Vietnam, coupled with the dominance of anti-Sovietism, as evidence of China's growing disregard for fraternal solidarity and unity of alliance. Consequently, Pyongyang redefined Beijing for the first time as an impediment to the joint struggle against American imperialism and a doubtful asset in the pursuit of militant strategy towards South Korea. Accordingly, an explicit criticism of China underpinned Pyongyang's accelerated promotion of independence from 1965–1966, which was advanced as clearly more anti-American and theoretically principled position than Chinese policy towards the United States.*

**Keywords:** Sino-North Korean relations, Kim Il-sung, Mao Zedong, Vietnam War, fraternal socialism, independence, militant strategy.

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the Cold War era, North Korea had a very special relationship with China. What made it so special, however, was not its particular closeness. Rather, the relationship has been defined by its complexity and ambivalence. From the time of the anti-Japanese struggle in the 1930s and 1940s, throughout the Korean War and its aftermath in the 1950s, and the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, Kim Il-sung and Mao Zedong headed movements that were historically inseparable yet potentially fractious. While a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an anti-Japanese guerrilla activist, Kim Il-sung remained mistrustful, particularly after thousands of Koreans in Manchuria were purged by the CCP as pro-Japanese sympathizers during the Minsaengdan Incident (Armstrong 2003; Han 1999). North Korean leaders often described their ties with China as being “sealed in blood,” but their collaboration during and after the Korean War was far from harmonious (Kim 2012; Shen and Li 2011). China funded a significant portion of Pyongyang’s post-Korean War reconstruction efforts, but its influence in North Korean internal affairs was loathed profoundly (Armstrong 2013; Choi 2008; Scalapino and Lee 1972; Seo 2005; Suh 1988; Shen and Xia 2012).

What held this relationship together, despite the “inherent weakness of socialist alliance relationships stemming from the dilemma between internationalism and national interests” (Shen and Li 2011, 251), was ideological unity built on a common perception of enemy (Westad 1998, 180). However reluctant it might have been, China’s decision to enter the Korean War had a strong ideological component (Chen 2001), and the decision was accordingly judged by American authorities as evidence of an intensifying ideological partnership in the newly forged Sino-Soviet alliance (Jervis 1980; Stueck 1995). Likewise, it was the doctrinaire focus on anti-Americanism that prompted North Korea to assume for the first time a position of alignment in the Sino-Soviet split and join Beijing in a public attack against Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s (Buzo 1999; Szalontai 2005). During this time, Sino-North Korean propaganda stressed that the basis of their friendship was the ideological unity of the revolu-

tionary peoples.<sup>1</sup>

Starting in the mid-1960s, however, ideological unity based on unmitigated anti-Americanism between North Korea and China began to unravel. From 1965–1966, Pyongyang adopted an unprecedented public posture of hostility towards Beijing. The North Koreans began to denounce dogmatism, an indirect reference to China, with added frequency. More significantly, it began to promote a new theme in its assessment of Chinese policies, that it was beginning to seek compromises with the United States against the backdrop of escalating conflict in Vietnam. Why did North Korea publicly portray China as compromising with American imperialism *despite* substantial evidence to the contrary? What aspect of Chinese policy led Pyongyang to raise an explicit dissent precisely at a time when the crisis in Vietnam called for more fraternal solidarity? What can North Korea's disagreement with China over the American threat tell us about the nature of Sino-North Korean relations, and particularly the role of ideology in this supposedly "lips and teeth" alliance during the height of the Cold War in the 1960s?

Previously, scholars have focused on the impact of the Cultural Revolution and the disparate attitudes toward the new leadership of the Soviet Union after the fall of Khrushchev in 1964 in explaining the degeneration of Sino-North Korean relations from 1965–1966 (Chung 1978; Koh 1969; Scalapino and Lee 1972; Suh 1988; Szalontai 2005). Without negating the basic soundness of standard interpretations, two problems may be raised. First, the previous scholarship has tended to treat North Korean alignment with and estrangement from its major allies throughout the long history of the Sino-Soviet split as a mere function of a "pendular movement" between China and the Soviet Union (Hiraiwa 2010, 116). This approach provided a good description of the state of North Korea's bilateral relationship with the Soviet Union and China at a given time. However, it was not as effective in establishing the precise cause of the alignment as well as estrangement

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1. "Excerpts from the Report of the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang, 'Some New Aspects of Korean-Chinese Relations in the First Half of 1965,'" Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (AVPRF), f. 0102, op. 21, p. 106, d. 20, ll.14–27, June 5, 1965, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110503>.

regarding an adequate issue-specific analysis and periodic distinctions.

Second, it overplayed the significance of aberrant episodes, such as the Cultural Revolution, in their bilateral relationship. While the disruptive impact of the Cultural Revolution was undeniable, it represented an isolated phenomenon in Sino-North Korean relations (Cheng 2010, 191). By contrast, North Korea's critical appraisal of China's policy towards the United States in and over Vietnam from 1965–1966 had a more profound long-term impact on Pyongyang's perception of Beijing. Previously, North Korea generally viewed China as its closest partner in the joint and primary struggle against American imperialism. From 1965–1966, however, Chinese prestige in North Korea was sharply undercut, as it was *perceived* to have assigned a bigger weight to anti-Sovietism rather than anti-Americanism. There are two main reasons for this reassessment. First, North Koreans believed that their Chinese comrades, despite the “fighting with two fists” formulation, actually began to place a near exclusive focus on countering the Soviet Union rather than the United States. Second, Pyongyang judged Beijing's efforts to avoid a direct military confrontation with Washington in or over Vietnam as an unprecedented retreat from the anti-American struggle (Hershberg and Chen 2006; Lawson 1984; Rogers 1976; Zagoria 1967; Zhai 2000). Consequently, North Korea for the first time identified China as an impediment to the united front against American imperialism and unlikely to support the militant strategy towards South Korea, which the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) had begun to pursue vigorously starting in 1965.

A novel development in this relationship, the Sino-North Korean divergence over the American threat from 1965–1966 led the KWP leadership to question the essence of China's revolutionary commitment. In this process, the KWP leadership promoted self-reliance and independence from 1965–1966 as clearly more anti-American and theoretically principled positions than Chinese policy towards the United States. As the rhetorical foundation of North Korea's militant strategy, self-reliance and independence for the first time had a publicly articulated and predominantly anti-Chinese component from 1965–1966.

The present study will conduct a comprehensive historical analysis of

the unprecedented decline of ideology in Sino-North Korea relations. By scrutinizing North Korea's critical interpretation of Chinese cautiousness towards the United States and its focus on anti-Sovietism, the study will trace how Pyongyang for the first time came to redefine Beijing as an impediment to fraternal unity and a doubtful asset for its militant strategy. In this examination, North Korean policy formulations and official statements appearing in *Nodong Sinmun* and *Kim Il-sung Work*, coupled with documents from the North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP) and the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) established at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, will be closely examined.

### **Divergence over the American Threat: The First Signs, 1965**

For North Korea, the expansion of American military intervention in Vietnam, coupled with normalization of South Korea's relations with Japan and the reinvigoration of the ROK-US alliance following Park Chung-hee's decision to support Lyndon Johnson's More Flags Campaign, underscored the imperative of forming the *broadest* possible united front against American imperialism. In this connection, Pyongyang, starting in 1965, consistently advanced the formulation that one's attitude in helping the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was the true measure of one's commitment to Marxism-Leninism. By this standard, Beijing became an increasing disappointment for Pyongyang because of the perceived ambiguity of its policies towards the Vietnam War and the extreme anti-Soviet nature of the Cultural Revolution.

In reality, Chinese policy was fundamentally revolutionary, and Beijing provided substantial aid to Hanoi. From 1965–1969, over 320,000 Chinese engineering and antiaircraft artillery forces were directly engaged in Vietnam, the peak year in 1967 at 170,000 (Chen 2001, 225–229). Chinese deterrence was a “partial success in determining both the pace and limits of escalation, since it was predicated on avoiding the threshold of likely Chinese response” (Whiting 1975, 35–37). However, China was also deeply

anxious about being dragged into war with the United States. Therefore, Beijing took cautious steps to minimize the chances of a direct confrontation with the United States even as it risked war by sending extensive support (Zhai 2000, 135–137). As the Johnson administration escalated involvement throughout 1965, avoiding a direct military confrontation increasingly took precedence over other concerns. To that effect, the CCP leadership counseled the strategy of guerilla warfare and self-reliance to its Vietnamese counterparts.<sup>2</sup> The basic Maoist position established throughout 1965 was that the “threat from the United States could be contained and that rapprochement with the Soviet Union was unnecessary” (Lawson 1984, 139).<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai all believed that the “struggle with revisionism at home and abroad should take priority over everything else, including the war in Vietnam and struggle against the United States” (Zagoria 1967, 69).

China’s cautiousness towards the United States during the war, coupled with its near exclusive focus on anti-revisionism, led the KWP leadership to question the true essence of Beijing’s revolutionary commitment. As noted by the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang at the time, Kim Il-sung was “obviously talking about Chinese leaders” in his reference to those “who just talk about being against American imperialism but in fact do not take any specific steps to curb aggression” (Person 2009, 25). From this standpoint, North Korea in 1965 began to publicly criticize Chinese obstruction of the united front against American imperialism. Its official rationale for denouncing the incorrectness of Chinese policy revolved around the concept of *independence in the struggle against modern revisionism*, a theme

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2. Many of the conversations between the CCP and the VWP leadership appear in the collection of documents made available by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, such as the Vietnam War digital archive collection, <http://digitalarchive.wilson-center.org/collection/87/vietnam-war/3>.

3. The United States understood that during this time, the Soviet Union increasingly came to “rival the U.S. as a dominant problem for Chinese foreign policy.” See “Communist China’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXX, China, Document 85*, May 5, 1965, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v30/d85>.

that would be promoted with added intensity throughout 1965.

The notion of independence in itself, otherwise expressed in concepts such as *jaryeok gaengsaeng*, *jajuseong*, or *juche*, had been a strong component of North Korean ideology since 1948. Aimed at denouncing Soviet influence in domestic affairs, Kim Il-sung made an open reference to self-reliance for the first time in 1955 in a major speech given to KWP propagandists. More explicitly, self-reliance was emphasized throughout 1962–1964 as North Korea geared up for militarization in the context of an intense campaign against Khrushchev's revisionism (Szalontai 2005).

What was remarkable about the accelerated promotion of independence in 1965 was that it was used for the first time to distance itself from the ideological position of China with which North Korea until that time had shared relative unity. By emphasizing *hyeondae sujeongjuui-e daehan tujaeng-eseoui jajuseong* (independence in the struggle against modern revisionism), Pyongyang raised a fundamental dissent to Beijing's continued attacks on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) even after the fall of Khrushchev and refusal to cooperate with the Soviet Union's united action plan for aiding the DRV. In this connection, Kim Il-sung stated in April 1965:

Our party has always maintained an *independent stand in its approach to the international communist movement and, likewise, in its struggle against modern revisionism in particular*. We are resolutely fighting against modern revisionism, and this fight is invariably conducted on the *basis of our own judgment and conviction and in conformity with our actual conditions*. We consider that only by holding firmly to such a stand can we correctly wage the struggle against revisionism and make substantial contributions to the defense of the purity of Marxism-Leninism and the strengthening of the unity of the international communist movement (Kim 1984, 257–258).

Accordingly, Soviet diplomats in Pyongyang assessed the promotion of independence in the international communist movement as a criticism of China:

The worsening of the situation in Vietnam in connection with the expanding American aggression have forced the Korean leadership to make certain corrections in its policy in general and in *Sino-Korean relations in particular*. . . . *The idea of the independence of KWP policy began to again be stressed with special force*. . . . North Koreans come out in favor of united actions by all anti-imperialist forces, *including the USSR*, all socialist countries, countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas the North Koreans stressed the imperative of a broad united front against the expanding American threat in Vietnam, the Chinese leadership began to intimate caution towards the United States. Evidence of this trend appeared in early 1965 and continued with added frequency as the American intervention widened. In his interview with American journalist Edgar Snow published in the *New Republic* on February 26, Mao Zedong implied the possibility of improved relations with the United States in the long run. The Chairman stated, “Naturally, I personally regret that forces of history have divided us and separated the American and Chinese peoples from virtually all communications during the past fifteen years. Today the gulf seems broader than ever. However, I myself do not believe it will end in war and one of history’s major tragedies.”<sup>5</sup> Asked by Snow whether there was hope for improvement in Sino-American relations, Mao Zedong was quoted as saying that there was hope although it would take a long time. In this connection, Mao Zedong stressed the need for restraint in Vietnam, confirming that China would fight the United States only in China:

China’s armies would not go beyond her borders to fight. That was clear enough. Only if the United States attacked China would the Chinese fight. Wasn’t that clear? The Chinese were very busy with their

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4. “Excerpts from the Report of the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang, ‘Some New Aspects of Korean-Chinese Relations in the First Half of 1965,’” AVPRF, f. 0102, op. 21, p.106, d. 20, ll. 14–27, June 5, 1965, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110503>.

5. The actual date of the interview was January 9, 1965. Edgar Snow, “Interview with Mao,” *New Republic*, February 26, 1965, accessed March 2, 2012, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/89494/interview-mao-tse-tung-communist-china#>.

internal affairs. Fighting beyond one's own borders was criminal. Why should the Chinese do that? The Vietnamese could cope with their situation.<sup>6</sup>

Several days after the statement, the CCP Central Military Commission issued directives to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) not to attack American aircraft that intruded into Chinese airspace (Radchenko 2009, 143). As the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder in March raised the chance of direct military confrontation with the Americans, China placed priority on the need to keep the war limited to Vietnam. No Chinese military intervention resulted any time during the escalation, even though the systematic American bombing attacks openly defied Beijing's threat that "aggression against the DRV is an aggression against China" in its official statement on February 9" (Whiting 1975, 178).<sup>7</sup> On March 28, Foreign Minister Chen Yi issued a statement indicating China's willingness to send volunteers: "The Chinese people will exert every effort to send the heroic south Vietnamese people the necessary material aid, including arms and all other war materiel, and stand ready to dispatch their men to fight shoulder to shoulder with the south Vietnamese people whenever the latter so require."<sup>8</sup> As one study noted, however, this statement was "highly qualified and ambiguous" because, among other reasons, the Chinese *people* rather than the Chinese government made the offer (Rogers 1975, 298). On March 26, North Korea issued its own statement of support, in which the *government*, as opposed to the people, offered "all forms of aid including arms."<sup>9</sup>

Assigning an indirect and secondary role in this struggle, the Chinese leadership began to issue statements warning the United States to not expand

6. Edgar Snow, "Interview with Mao," *New Republic*, February 26, 1965, accessed March 2, 2012, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/89494/interview-mao-tse-tung-communist-china#>.

7. "China is (Well-prepared) to Assist D.R.V. against U.S. Aggression," *Peking Review*, February 12, 1965, 7-8.

8. "Aiding Vietnam is China's Sacred International Duty" (Chen Yi's Reply to Xuan Thuy), *Peking Review*, April 2, 1965, 10-11.

9. "Joseon minjujuui inmin gonghwaguk jeongbu seongmyeong" (Statement of the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea), *Nodong Sinmun*, March 26, 1965.

the war while emphasizing Vietnamese self-reliance. On April 2, Zhou Enlai sent a three-point message to the United States conveying the intent to keep the war limited to Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> China's military aid to the DRV, the details of which were finalized in April 1965, likewise was intended to signal its limited intentions; as one Chinese author noted, "the very fact that China restricted its contribution to such aid [anti-aircraft units, railway units, defense work engineering units, and road building units] and support roles reassured American officials that China did not contemplate full-scale military intervention" (Yang 2006, 82). This duality in Chinese policy, one of supporting the Vietnamese struggle yet limiting its involvement in order to deter the United States, bred suspicions on the part of the North Vietnamese and North Koreans. One GDR envoy to the Soviet Union, in his note of conversation with a Soviet Vietnam specialist, observed the following changes in Vietnamese and North Korean attitudes towards China at this time.

Given the Chinese policy that *promises much in words and does little in reality*, Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and other leading comrades are more and more convinced of the view that the Chinese are ready to fight the last Vietnamese but otherwise are content to be left alone by the Americans. *Not only the Vietnamese, but also the Korean comrades, have drawn these conclusions from the attitude of the Chinese.*<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the spring of 1965 there emerged a considerable degree of divergence between Pyongyang and Beijing over the correct way to address the growing American threat. The North Koreans were now saying that the expanding American threat in Vietnam required the widest possible anti-imperialist front and suspension of ideological polemics regarding modern revisionism. The Chinese argued, however, struggling against modern

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10. The Diplomatic History Research Office of the People's Republic of China Foreign Ministry (1993, 445), April 2, 1965, accessed March 24, 2013, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113057>.

11. "Note by the East German Envoy to Moscow, Rossmeisl, on Talks with Unnamed Soviet Vietnam Specialists," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PAAA-MfAA. Minister Kiesewetter, Microfiche A 17445, August 19, 1965, accessed March 2, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117719>.

revisionism constituted the very essence of anti-imperialism and called for a clear line of demarcation from the CPSU: “What we mean by unity against the enemy is a slogan which draws a clear-cut line of demarcation between enemies and friends: it is a revolutionary slogan. The unity of the international communist movement can be achieved only on the basis of adherence to Marxism-Leninism and opposition to modern revisionism.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike the first priority North Korea placed on the significance of the Vietnam War for distinguishing a true revolutionary versus opportunistic stand, the Chinese statement did not have a specific reference to the Vietnam War. Rather, it made a broad reference to the anti-imperialist struggles of the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and focused on the imperative of anti-revisionism. A major editorial in *Renmin Ribao* 人民日報 and *Hongqi* 紅旗 published in June entitled “Carry the Struggle against Khrushchov Revisionism Through to the End” placed priority on the need to counter revisionism in order to fight imperialism.

The question confronting the Chinese communists today is whether to carry the struggle against Khrushchov revisionism through to the end or whether to stop halfway. . . . Revisionism has always been a prop of imperialism, a force serving imperialism. To combat imperialism, and above all U.S. imperialism, it is imperative to carry the struggle against Khrushchov revisionism through to the end. Revisionism has invariably engaged in splitting against Marxism-Leninism and the revolutionary people, has invariably been a force serving revolutionary unity. To safeguard the unity of the international communist movement on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism and to safeguard the unity of the revolutionary people of the world, it is imperative to carry the struggle against Khrushchov revisionism through to the end.<sup>13</sup>

As the CCP leadership took its anti-Soviet radicalism to extreme heights while intimating caution in its policy toward the United States throughout

12. “Comrade Peng Zhen’s Speech at Aliarcham Academy in Indonesia,” *Peking Review*, June 11, 1965, 10–11.

13. “Carry the Struggle against Khrushchov Revisionism through to the End,” *Peking Review*, June 18, 1965, 8–9.

1965, North Korean leaders became increasingly critical of these positions. At a mass rally commemorating the birth of Lenin, North Korea's Minister of Education stated, "The unity of the socialist camp and the international communist movement must be achieved *not by words but actual anti-imperialist, anti-American struggle*. There must be actual practice in opposing imperialism and colonialism and supporting the revolutionary struggles of exploited and oppressed people".<sup>14</sup> In a conversation with the Soviet ambassador on May 3, Kim Il-sung stated, "we do not share the point of view of some people, who continue open polemics at the present time."<sup>15</sup> In his report to the Fourth Session of the Third Supreme People's Assembly on May 21, KWP's Central Committee Vice Chairman Kim Gwang-hyeop stated, "countries of the socialist camp cannot stand idly when American imperialists are waging a war of invasion against Vietnam."<sup>16</sup> During his speech marking the 20th anniversary of the founding of the KWP on October 10, Kim Il-sung reiterated the theme that the KWP conducted its own struggle against modern revisionism from an "independent and principled position," and stressed that "one's attitude towards the struggle against imperialism, particularly, American imperialism, was what distinguished the revolutionary stand from the opportunist stand."<sup>17</sup> According to the testimony of Pak Kil-ryong, North Korea's former first Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, these remarks were intended to censure the Chinese, given the sour state of Pyongyang's relations with Beijing at the time

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14. "Widaehan Lenin 95-junyeon pyeongyangsi ginyeom daehoe-eseo han kim ik-seon dongji-ui bogo" (Comrade Kim Ik-seon's Report to the Pyongyang Rally Commemorating the 95th Anniversary of the Birth of Great Lenin), *Nodong Sinmun*, April 22, 1965.
  15. "Excerpts from the Report of the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang, 'Some New Aspects of Korean-Chinese Relations in the First Half of 1965,'" AVPRE, f. 0102, op. 21, p. 106, d. 20, ll. 14-27, June 5, 1965, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110503>.
  16. "Mije-ui chimnyak-eul bandaehaneun wollam inmin-ui jeongui-ui tujaeng-eul jeokgeuk jiwonhalde daehayeo" (On Actively Supporting the Vietnamese People's Just Struggle Opposing the Invasion of American Imperialism), *Nodong Sinmun*, May 21, 1965.
  17. "Joseon rodongdang changgeon 20 junyeon-e jehayeo gyeongchuk daehoe-eseo han kim il-seong dongji-ui bogo" (Comrade Kim Il-sung's Report at the Commemorating Rally Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Korean Worker's Party), *Nodong Sinmun*, October 11, 1965.

(Pak 1994, 75).

As 1965 drew to a close, the divergence of North Korean and China over the question of anti-imperialism widened further. In September, Lin Biao issued a major policy statement on the Vietnam War, entitled “Long Live the Victory of Peoples’ War!” Upon its publication, American policy makers viewed the article as a Chinese *Mein Kampf*, alarmed by its aggressiveness, bellicosity, and expansionist tone (Zhai 2000, 145–146). At the same time, however, one of the prevailing themes of this essay was to establish anti-revisionism as the essential step towards countering imperialism: “To win the struggle against U.S. imperialism and carry people’s wars to victory, the Marxist-Leninists and revolutionary people throughout the world must resolutely oppose Khrushchov revisionism.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, it established Vietnamese self-reliance, and thereby, avoidance of Sino-American confrontation, as official Chinese policy toward the Vietnam War (Mozingo and Robinson 1965, 18–20). The United States, for its part, understood the implications of China’s emphasis on self-reliance and Mao Zedong’s strategy of “people’s war” as intended to deter the United States. A National Intelligence Estimate dated March 10, 1965 observed the following:

The Chinese Communists continue to proclaim the military doctrine of Mao Tse-tung which stresses self-reliance, the dominance of men and politics over weaponry, and the concept of a protracted ‘people’s war.’ This doctrine, deemed applicable to ‘wars of national liberation,’ is also applied to a potential conflict with the United States. Communist China is apprehensive regarding the possibility of a U.S. nuclear attack followed by a large-scale invasion, but holds that in such a case China could accept nuclear devastation and still overwhelm the invaders in a protracted ‘people’s war.’ The Chinese leaders hope that this prospect will deter the United States.<sup>19</sup>

18. “Long Live the Victory of Peoples’ War!” *Peking Review*, September 3, 1965, 30.

19. “Communist China’s Military Establishment,” Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXX, China, Document 80, March 10, 1965, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v30/d80>.

Mao Zedong likewise counseled protracted guerilla warfare to Kim Il-sung. Predictably, Kim Il-sung opposed, citing the fact that the “many coastal lines, barren mountains, relatively advanced modes of transportation and the stationing of American forces in South Korea make it difficult to conduct guerilla activities” (Yi 2000, 174).

By the year’s end, Pyongyang’s defiance of Beijing became more explicit. In December, *Nodong Sinmun* editorialized at length the ways in which China obstructed the united front against American imperialism. In addition to the standard line of opposing “modern revisionism and dogmatism from an independent and principled position,” which had been used throughout the year as a critique of Chinese policy, Pyongyang began to accuse China of actually “compromising” with the United States:

Struggling against American imperialism is the most important and urgent revolutionary task of the parties and communists for peace, democracy, national independence, and the victory of socialism. . . . Maintaining the anti-imperialism struggle as a principle in opposing imperialism headed by the United States is the foremost measure of distinction between revolutionaries and opportunists. . . . *Just talking about opposing imperialism but in reality currying favor with imperialism and even being afraid of uttering the word imperialism, or talking about opposing imperialism but internally striking a compromise with imperialism should not occur.* The revolutionary position of communists should be included in the resolute position of opposing imperialism headed by American imperialists and *actual struggle against it.* . . . Taking into account the revolutionary interests of our country and the interests of international revolution, *our party has always opposed modern revisionism and dogmatism from an independent and principled position* and resolutely struggled to safeguard the purity of Marxism-Leninism and will continue make the same argument in the future.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the year, the North Korean leadership came to make a clear

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20. “Modeun hyeongmyeong ryeongnyang-eul danhaphayeo banje tajaeng-eul deouk gangnyeoki jeon-gaehaja” (Let us Strengthen the Unity of Revolutionary Forces and Further Intensify the Struggle Against Imperialism), *Nodong Sinmun*, December 6, 1965.

distinction between Chinese words and deeds in the struggle against American imperialism. During this time, the foundation of Sino-North Korean ideological unity progressively weakened due to, among others, their disagreement on the nature and urgency of the American threat.

### **The End of the Joint and Primary Struggle Against American Imperialism, 1966**

Having established that Beijing was hiding behind high-sounding phrases about the battle against imperialism but being in fact obstructive, the North Korean leadership now regarded doubtfully previous assurances that China “will always share both sorrow and joy” with the Korean people.<sup>21</sup> As such, Pyongyang took a firm public position of independence in an unprecedented open critique of Beijing in 1966. The KWP hierarchy issued two seminal statements in this reformulation of China: first, *Nodong Sinmun*’s editorial “Let’s Safeguard Independence” in August, and second, Kim Il-sung’s report to the Second KWP Representative’s Conference in October. The North Koreans increasingly perceived the Chinese to be neglecting the joint and primary struggle against American imperialism because of the continued signals to avoid direct confrontation with the United States, coupled with the extreme anti-Sovietism of the Cultural Revolution launched in the summer of 1966. This period in Sino-North Korean relations warrants a closer examination because it was the first time Pyongyang openly contested China’s ideological principles in earnest.

The onset of the Cultural Revolution did not radically alter China’s policy towards the Vietnam War and the United States. China and the United States kept on airing their respective positions through the Warsaw talks and sought to avoid misperceptions. The signaling to avoid confrontation also continued in 1966. In this context, top-level officials in the

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21. “First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korean Reports on Sino-Korean Relations in 1966,” History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive AVPRF, f. 0102, op. 22, 109, d. 22, ll. 38–49, December 2, 1966, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114591>.

Johnson administration concurrently began to promote a new policy towards China known as “containment without isolation” (Goh 2005; Iriye 1968; Lumbers 2004), which involved “bridge-building” measures, such as lifting travel and trade restrictions. While Chinese leaders generally dismissed such steps as insincere, they nonetheless did not altogether preclude future relations with the United States. A *Renmin Ribao* article on March 27, “Old Tune, New Plot,” indicated openness to future exchanges and stressed that Mao Zedong had always made a distinction between U.S. imperialism and the American people.

Chairman Mao Tse-tung has said: “The Chinese people know that United States imperialism has done many bad things to China and to the whole world as well; they understand that only the United States ruling group is bad, while the people of the United States are very good.” There is a profound friendship between the Chinese and American peoples. We Chinese people understand full well the American people’s desire for resuming contact with us, but, we will not, and we cannot, allow the U.S. ruling group to exploit this justified desire of the American people for its own sinister ends. We are convinced that some day the Chinese and American peoples will smash the schemes of the U.S. reactionaries, sweep away all obstacles and truly establish close contact so as to bring about a tremendous growth of the friendship between our two peoples.<sup>22</sup>

Following this statement, Beijing continued to indicate its intent to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. On April 10, Premier Zhou Enlai made a four-point statement on China’s policy toward the United States in which he reiterated that China would not take the initiative to provoke a war.<sup>23</sup> By the time Foreign Minister Chen Yi summoned British *chargé d’affaires*, Donald Charles Hopson, on June 6 to convey the four-point message to Washington, China was convinced that it “would not face the prospect of a direct military confrontation with the United States over Vietnam” (Hershberg and Chen 2006, 237). There were even indications that

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22. “Old Tune, New Plot,” *Peking Review*, April 1, 1966, 15.

23. “Premier Chou’s Four-Point Statement on China’s Policy Towards U.S.,” *Peking Review*, May 13, 1966, 5.

China began to focus more on issues specific to Sino-American bilateral relations, i.e., Taiwan, than the whole range of revolutionary movements, including the Vietnam War (Rogers 1976, 310). By September 1966, the CIA noted that despite the confusion and radicalization generated by the Cultural Revolution, Chinese foreign policy on Vietnam continued to be characterized by caution, and that the war did not receive priority consideration because of the focus on domestic politics.

*Caution is also being shown in foreign affairs, specifically on Vietnam. Concentration on the enemies within has resulted in a drop in press attention to Vietnam and to foreign affairs generally. China has not abandoned or even eased its stand on Vietnam, but it has pushed the matter to the back burner for at least the time being. Aside from some heavily qualified hyperbole about the Red Guards being ready to "fight a war at any time," the current upheaval has concentrated on domestic issues. We estimated recently that it was unlikely that the Chinese would intervene with their own forces in the Vietnam War. And we continue to believe this is the best judgment of Chinese policy.<sup>24</sup>*

To the Vietnamese, Chinese policies seemed ambiguous at best. One Soviet diplomat in Hanoi noted the following suspicions and negative assessments among the Vietnamese leadership: "The policy of the PRC appears suspicious in the eyes of the Vietnamese comrades. Before the bombing of the DRV started, the PRC boisterously claimed that it would consider each attack on the DRV as an attack against itself, [now] it has become more and more restrained while the escalation of American bombardments increase. Conversely, it pressures the DRV to continue the war."<sup>25</sup>

24. "Memorandum by the Board of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency," Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXX, China, Document 190, September 23, 1966, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v30/d190>.

25. "Note on a Conversation with the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Comrade Sverev, on 8 July, 1966 from 11:00 a.m. to 12:40 p.m. at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PAAA-MfAA, VS-Hauptstelle, Microfiche G-A 321, 13-16. July 9, 1966, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117734>.

The focus on domestic politics in the previous document of course referred to the launch of the Cultural Revolution, the key aim of which was *fan xiu fang xiu* 反修防修, or opposing revisionism abroad and preventing it at home (Li 2012; Luthi 2008). The launch of the Cultural Revolution was officially proclaimed in the Communiqué of the 11th Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee issued on August 12. By this time, the centrality of *fan xiu fang xiu* produced an effective distinction between *declared* enemy number one (the United States) and *actual* enemy number one (the Soviet Union). The communiqué proclaimed an organizational break with the CPSU and exclusion of the Soviet Union from the anti-imperialist front.

The Plenary Session maintains that to oppose imperialism, *it is imperative to oppose modern revisionism*. There is no middle road whatsoever in the struggle between Marxism-Leninism and modern revisionism. A clear line of demarcation must be drawn in dealing with modern revisionist groups, with the leadership of the C.P.S.U. as the centre, and it is imperative resolutely to expose their true features as scabs. It is impossible to have 'united action' with them. . . . In order to isolate U.S. imperialism to the maximum and deal blows to it, the broadest possible international united front must be established against U.S. imperialism and its lackeys. *The Soviet revisionist leading group is pursuing a policy of Soviet-U.S. collaboration for world domination and has been conducting splittist, disruptive and subversive activities within the international communist movement and the national-liberation movement in the active service of U.S. imperialism. They cannot of course be included in this united front.*<sup>26</sup>

On the same day of the Chinese communiqué of August 12, the KWP issued its seminal statement on independence, “Jajuseong-eul onghohaja” (Let’s Safeguard Independence). In this editorial, Pyongyang went public with its repudiation of Chinese positions. North Korea expressed its profound disillusionment with China’s obstruction of the broadest anti-imperialist front

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26. “Communiqué of the Eleventh Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China,” *Peking Review*, August 19, 1966, 7–8.

and failure to focus *exclusively* on the American threat. Given that North Korea from 1965–1966 appraised Moscow’s policy towards Vietnam positively, Pyongyang’s criticism regarding intra-bloc disagreement and the fragility of the anti-imperialist front was essentially directed at China.

*There exists today a huge obstacle to the formation of an anti-imperialist joint action and united front. There exists a serious difference of opinion within the international communist movement heading the anti-imperialist struggle, precluding an agreement. The main question of divergence is whether one is struggling to oppose American imperialism and supporting the revolutionary struggle of the people of the world. The attitude toward this question is the basic measure by which each party’s position on Marxism-Leninism is judged. . . . Socialist countries are giving the people of Vietnam certain material aid. This shows that there exists an initial basis for joint action and united front in our struggle against anti-imperialism. Whether one opposes imperialism for real or not and whether one wants the struggle of the Vietnamese people or not will be proven and clarified in the actual struggle against imperialism. Action will be the measure of sincerity and distinction between Marxism-Leninism and opportunism.*<sup>27</sup>

To substantiate the claim that it concentrated exclusively on anti-imperialism and the Vietnam War, North Korea at this time even sent a small number of pilots to the DRV. The KWP leadership was displeased that the Chinese objected to sending volunteers to Vietnam from socialist countries and, despite the difficulties caused by Beijing, sent about 100 of their own pilots to the DRV posing as specialists to take part in military operations (Person 2009, 23). The Vietnamese Communist Party’s Central Military Party Committee, chaired by General Vo Nguyen Giap approved on September 21 an official North Korean request to be allowed to send a North Korean Air Force regiment to help defend North Vietnam against U.S. air attacks. Subsequently, the two sides reached an agreement stipulating that

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27. “Jajuseong-eul onghohaja” (Let’s Safeguard Independence), *Nodong Sinmun*, August 12, 1966.

the North Koreans would provide pilots for one North Korean Air Force regiment consisting of two companies (ten aircraft each) of MiG-17s and one company of MiG-21s while Vietnam would provide the aircraft and all necessary technical equipment, maintenance, and logistics support for the North Korean flyers.<sup>28</sup>

North Korea's opposition to Chinese policy toward the United States over Vietnam received the highest official endorsement in Kim Il-sung's report to the 2nd Representative's Conference of the KWP held from October 5–12. Granted, in the last four months of 1966, Moscow began to show a renewed interest in engaging Washington despite the ongoing conflict in Vietnam as relations with China plummeted to a new low following the official launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Furthermore, American promotion of "containment without isolation" fueled Moscow's suspicions of Sino-American collusion (Gaiduk 1996; Radchenko 2009; Zagoria 1967). But this reformulation of Soviet policy for re-engaging the United States and strategically containing China was not yet concretized in October 1966. Therefore, Kim Il-sung's report should be seen primarily as an anti-Chinese public statement, criticizing Beijing's lack of attention to the joint and primary struggle against American imperialism. Kim Il-sung hyperbolized the threat of American imperialism and the need for a broad united front against it in Vietnam, denouncing the "broad most *genuine* united front" promoted by Mao Zedong and his associates. Several passages from the report are of particular relevance for understanding these diverging views.

- (1) U.S. imperialism is target No. 1 in the struggle of the world peoples. It is the primary task of the socialist countries and the Communist and Workers parties to enlist and concentrate on the *broad anti-imperialist forces* in the struggle against U.S. imperialism. . . . In the present period the *attitude toward U.S. imperialism* is a major yard-

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28. "Signing of a Protocol Agreement for North Korea to Send a Number of Pilots to Fight the American Imperialists during the War of Destruction against North Vietnam," Vietnam Ministry of Defense Central Archives, Central Military Party Committee Collection, File No. 433, September 30, 1966, accessed November 30, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113926>.

stick for verifying the position of the Communist and Workers parties. The Communist should always hold fast to the principled position of opposing imperialism, *U.S. imperialism above all* (Kim 1971, 113).

- (2) It is really regrettable for Communists throughout the world that differences among fraternal parties have gone so far beyond ideological and theoretical bounds today that they can hardly be settled. But, however serious they may be, differences among fraternal parties are still an internal affair of the socialist camp and the international communist movement. *Differences among parties must not be developed into an organizational split*, but must on all accounts be settled by means of ideological struggle guided by a desire for unity (I. Kim 1971, 115).
- (3) *One should not put away any fraternal country on a par with the enemy* or push it away to the side of the imperialists, even if it has some negative aspects (Kim 1971, 114).
- (4) The basic strategy of the world revolution today is to direct the spearhead of attack at U.S. imperialism. We must *clearly distinguish a friend who has made an error from a foe*. The foe should be beaten, whereas the friend who has made a mistake should be criticized and guided to take the right path. We should in this way join efforts with all friends and *fight the main enemy* (Kim 1971, 134).
- (5) But whatever their motives, it is necessary to enlist all these forces in the anti-imperialist struggle. If there is one who would like to *rectify his past mistakes, at least in the Vietnam question*, this is undoubtedly a good, welcome thing (Kim 1971, 136).

The remarks by Kim Il-sung differed markedly from Chinese positions as publicly articulated since 1965. In passage 1, the North Korean leader reiterated first the urgency of the *broadest* united front against American imperialism, which includes the Soviet Union and second, an *exclusive* focus on the primary and joint struggle against the United States. As seen in the foregoing sections, however, the Chinese leadership had begun to distance themselves from these positions since 1965 in the lead up to the Cultural Revolution. In passage 2, Kim Il-sung stressed organizational unity among fraternal parties. However, the CCP had been advocating an

organizational break from the CPSU. In passage 3, Kim Il-sung opposed treating the Soviet Union as an enemy that parallels the threat of American imperialism. The Chinese, however, had begun to claim that opposing the Soviet Union had become as critical as opposing the United States. In passages 4 and 5, Kim Il-sung acknowledged the Soviet Union's past mistakes (during Khrushchev's era) but also recognized its current contributions to aiding the DRV. In contrast, the Cultural Revolution led Maoists to focus on disproving the efficacy and correctness of Soviet policies towards the Vietnam War and the whole revolutionary movement.

## **Conclusion**

The Sino-North Korean disagreement over the nature and urgency of the American threat from 1965–1966 did not preclude their eventual rapprochement. After the most radical phase of the Cultural Revolution had subsided at the end of 1968, a measure of normalcy began to return to their bilateral relationship. In the lead-up and during Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the CCP leaders went out of their way to reassure KWP counterparts and increase material assistance (Choi 2008, 275–302). In fact, the Chinese viewed their policy as fundamentally revolutionary and did not think that a rapprochement with the United States contradicted their revolutionary commitment (Shen and Li 2011, 221). Despite the unprecedented low point in 1965–1966, a semblance of camaraderie was restored by 1969.

Notwithstanding the amelioration of their bilateral ties, however, the experience of the mid-1960s taught the North Korean leadership that it would not be able to rely on Chinese backing for any militant designs to unify the Korean peninsula. As a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split, ideology became devalued, and anti-Americanism as its basic premise could no longer serve as the cohesive element that bound the otherwise highly nationalist movements of Kim Il-sung and Mao Zedong. The hierarchy of the KWP has been aware, particularly since this period, that the CCP would not be likely to support revolutionary radicalism at the risk of confrontation

with the United States.

Therefore, the foregoing history suggests caution in overplaying China's influence over North Korea or China's willingness to support North Korean assertiveness. Except for the Korean War, Beijing's policy towards Pyongyang has been conducted within the larger imperative of maintaining stability in the Sino-American relationship. The experience of 1965–1966 dispelled Pyongyang of any real hope that China would place itself back in the campaign to “resist America, aid Korea.” This realization, in hindsight, is one of the main reasons a second Korean War was not attempted. Regardless, North Korea has continued to propagate a perpetual war scare and vilify “American imperialists” on which it has justified authoritarian political control and a sustained military buildup. These defining characteristics of today's North Korea were historically shaped, in part, by its divergence with China over the American threat from 1965–1966.

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