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OCTOBER 5, 2017

A Revolutionary State: North Korea's Support of Non-State Actors, Past Policies and Future Issues

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Abstract

Forged in the blood and strife of the anti-Japanese struggle during the colonial era, the North Korean revolution, with Kim Il-sung at its core, was built on the ethos of the guerilla fighter. After independence, Kim Il-sung's band of guerilla fighters purged competing factions and consolidated their power. Although the days of fighting Japanese colonialists in Manchuria were far behind them, the guerilla experiences from the 1930s continued to inform and shape the North Korean leadership's worldview. As dedicated anti-imperialists, Pyongyang applied guerilla ethos to its foreign policy and established, what this paper terms "guerilla internationalism." This strategy prioritized solidarity with radical regimes and non-state actors around the world and balanced revolutionary fervor with brutal pragmatism. Guerilla internationalism was built on the principles of guerilla fighting, such as deception, unpredictability, secrecy, and disruption. From training African rebels in the 1960s and 1970s to supporting "Che Guevarista" revolutionaries in Sri Lanka, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung assisted non-state actors in their own liberation struggles and thus instigated international instability during the Cold War. Although Kim Il-sung died in 1994, guerilla internationalism continued during the Kim Jong-il era. From helping Hezbollah build tunnels in the early 2000s to providing arms to the Tamil Tigers, Kim Jong-il continued to aid revolutionary non-state actors. As Kim Jong-un continues to develop North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the risk of Pyongyang transferring its nuclear technology to non-state actors would seem to increase. However, Kim Jong-un's policy towards non-state actors is substantially different from that of his father and grandfather with implications for Pyongyang's current foreign policy.

Key Words: *North Korea, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, DPRK foreign policy*

Introduction

North Korea's isolation is an outlier in a globalizing world. Due to the information blockade imposed on its citizens and its outdated system of government, North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is often described as Orwellian or Stalinist. These Cold War terms, although useful at times, neglect a fundamental part of the North Korean worldview. After the consolidation of Kim Il-sung's power in the 1960s, the North Korean government was committed to the ethos of guerilla fighting and assisting non-state actors in their own struggles for sovereignty and independence. This strategy, what this paper terms "guerilla internationalism," combines revolutionary fervor and brutal pragmatism. During the Cold War, North Korea fomented revolutionary fervor by training and providing military equipment to communist guerillas and anti-colonial liberation movements. After the collapse of the Communist Bloc, North Korea turned its attention to assisting Islamist militants such as Hezbollah and Hamas. This commitment to assisting non-state actors opened spaces for the Kim family regime to sell weapons, earn hard currency, and undermine its chief enemy, the United States. However, Kim Jong-un has shifted away from this tradition of assisting non-state actors and now focuses on selling arms to various nation-states through front companies. This suggests Kim Jong-un does not share his forefathers' revolutionary idealism and that brutal pragmatism primarily guides his policymaking decisions.

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Kim Il-sung

North Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung, built his reputation as a Korean nationalist during the anti-Japanese guerilla movement of the 1930s. These experiences fighting the Japanese in the mountains of Manchuria undeniably shaped and informed the young Kim Il-sung's anti-colonial worldview. After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the Soviets installed Kim Il-sung as the leader of the DPRK.[1] Kim soon surrounded himself with partisans from his anti-Japanese guerilla days and later purged the pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions from the DPRK government.[2] This led to the creation of a "guerilla band state" in the 1960s, in which the leadership applied characteristics of guerilla warfare to DPRK government policy.[3]

The anti-colonial experiences of the DPRK's leadership, with Kim Il-sung at its center, also molded their foreign policy and explains why a small, developing, and geographically isolated communist state assisted liberation fighters around the world during the Cold War. Unlike other small Soviet client states, such as Bulgaria, North Korea devoted a large number of resources to aiding guerilla fighters in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

While there is no single watershed event that signals North Korea's entry into the world of revolutionary assistance, the 1966 Tricontinental Conference of African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples, held in Havana, Cuba, stands out as a call to arms for nonaligned leftist regimes around the world.[4] Delegations from eighty-three countries, including the DPRK, attended this conference. At this meeting of Third World nations, delegations agreed that subversion in the internal affairs of other countries, whether it was by peaceful means or political violence, was permissible. A resolution at the conference also called for the establishment of training schools for foreign revolutionaries.[5] This break from communist orthodoxy gave Third World nations the green light to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations to further the anti-imperialist cause. Thus, this Tricontinental Conference had far reaching reverberations around the world, especially in Pyongyang.

After 1966, North Korea's role in international revolution grew significantly, particularly in Africa and Latin America. For example, during the late 1960s, North Korea covertly trained and supplied anti-government rebels in northern Chad with weapons.[6] Paradoxically, the North Koreans were also trying to establish an embassy in Chad around the same time. Chadian President Francois Tombalbaye met with North Korean officials in 1969 and urged them to stop aiding rebels.[7] The North Koreans denied the charges and cautioned Tombalbaye "to be wary of 'American imperialists' who forge and spread various documents against 'democratic peoples.'" Meanwhile, U.S officials urged the Chadian President to keep his distance from the duplicitous North Koreans and warned of "the danger of inviting the wolf into the house." Tombalbaye told the North Koreans "that since [the] documents found on rebels implicated North Koreans, it was up to them to provide a full and clear response before proceeding further in relations between the two countries."[8] This seemingly hypocritical policy to establish closer diplomatic ties with a foreign government while also funding rebels was representative of its guerilla internationalist foreign policy during the Cold War.

The DPRK later conducted similar operations in Ethiopia. Beginning in the early 1970s, the DPRK trained Ogadeni and Somali guerillas, which saw the Ethiopian government as illegal occupiers of the Ogaden region. The North Koreans also supported Eritrean separatists during the 1970s.[9] Despite these attempts to subvert the Ethiopian government, North Korea also sought to establish diplomatic relations with Addis Ababa. However, Addis Ababa said that their official ties with Pyongyang depended on the DPRK's "conformity with international law," which "was code for stopping the training of rebels and guerillas in East Africa."[10]

The Ethiopian Foreign Minister Dr. Minassie said in August 1972 that North Korea's "hostile" and "anti-African" policy of training insurgents in Africa deterred Addis Ababa from considering the establishment of diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. Explaining to the North Korean delegation why he called its training of rebel groups "anti-African," he said, "All African states contain tribal minorities and argument for border rectifications along ethnic lines could be made everywhere in continent. [The] Pandora Box aspects [of[this problem [are] so widely understood, however, that African chiefs of state convened in Cairo under OAU (Organization of African Unity) auspices had decided to stick with inherited frontiers. North Korea's encouragement to those [who] would reopen this issue [are] therefore bound [to] be considered throughout continent as [an] anti-African policy."[11]

Civil wars and conflicts opened spaces for Pyongyang to sell weapons and improve their own military tactics and capabilities. Also, by covertly doing so, the North Koreans simply denied any accusations and continued their military assistance programs around the world. The Angolan Civil War, which became a proxy

war for Cold War superpowers, is the best representation of this in Africa. Officially, North Korea was never involved in this conflict. In May 1978, Kim Il-sung told Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu, "On the occasion of the beginning of the clashes between the three national liberation groups in Angola, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea broke relations with all three of them. Later the relations were started again with Neto's government, with which diplomatic relations were also established." Kim even scolded the Cubans for getting involved in Angola and told Ceausescu, "The Cubans were actually waging war in Africa for someone else and with the support of someone else. The participation of the (colored) Cuban military in the battles in Africa was not helping the nations on this continent at all." Kim added, "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea declared itself against such actions. The African states should be left alone to solve the problems between them by themselves."[12] However, according to ROK Foreign Ministry reports and secondary sources, the DPRK assisted all three major warring groups—the MPLA, UNITA, and FNLA—of the Angolan Civil War at different points during the twenty-seven year conflict.[13] The duplicitousness of North Korean actions in Angola even earned them a reputation amongst foreign diplomats in Pyongyang. Zairean diplomats told Erik Cornell, a Swedish diplomat based in Pyongyang from 1975 to 1977, that North Korean military instructors based in Zaire suddenly changed sides during the Angolan Civil War and began fighting with the MPLA against the Zairean government-assisted FNLA.[14]

In addition to Chad, Ethiopia, and Angola, the North Koreans also supported non-state actors in southern Africa. However, this was for a far nobler cause as the North Koreans trained and supplied anti-Apartheid forces, such as the Southwest African People's Organization (SWAPO) and the African National Congress (ANC).[15] North Korea's backing of the SWAPO and ANC showcases the intersection of ideology and pragmatism in Kim Il-sung's foreign policy. In a 1986 speech, Kim Il-sung said, "The South African racist regime pursues the vicious policy of apartheid, of racial discrimination, and the policy of brutal repression. It is trampling underfoot even the basic freedom and rights of the South African people and is keeping them subjugated to the white people, who are the minority."[16] This further emphasizes that Kim Il-sung based his Africa policy on solidarity with anti-colonial movements and the idealistic hope for a unified global anti-imperialist front. However, Kim was also pragmatic and understood that insurgents could overturn African governments overnight. Supporting rebel groups was a means to both help the North Korean government's bottom line and its diplomatic presence on the continent.

In addition to Africa, Kim Il-sung also supported anti-government forces in Latin America, especially in Uruguay and Mexico. In 1966, a (North) Korean-Uruguayan Cultural Institute was established in Montevideo although there were no diplomatic relations between the two nations at the time. The South Korean embassy in Montevideo believed this Cultural Institute served as a hub for the dissemination of DPRK propaganda in Uruguay and as a transfer point for sending money to local subversive groups. According to the U.S. State Department, three or four Uruguayans associated with the Cultural Institute visited the DPRK on a yearly basis.[17] From 1965-1973, North Korea funded radical leftist elements of the Uruguayan Socialist Party to the amount of $343,000.[18]

More egregiously, the North Korean government trained fifty-three members of the Mexican Movement for Revolutionary Action (MAR) from 1969 to 1970 in the DPRK. The Mexican revolutionaries had initially approached the Cubans but Havana did not want to damage relations with the Mexican government. However, the Cubans introduced the MAR to the North Koreans.[19] The DPRK government quickly brought the Mexican revolutionaries over to Pyongyang via the Soviet Union. In North Korea, the MAR members learned taekwondo in military training camps and underwent rigorous physical training, such as running five hours at night with heavy sandbags over treacherous terrain.[20] After the arrest of nineteen MAR members in February 1971, the North Korean connection was exposed to the Mexican public and quickly hit the front pages of Mexican newspapers.[21] In response, the Mexican government denied DPRK requests to establish a diplomatic mission in Mexico City.[22] The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the incident revealed North Korea's "wanton disregard of international peace and order [that] deserves condemnation by all freedom and peace loving peoples throughout the world."[23]

In addition to the Mexican case, the most publicized North Korean support of rebels was in Sri Lanka. In April 1971, a North Korean-funded and supplied dissident organization, known as the People's Liberation Front, attempted to overthrow the Sri Lankan government. The North Korean embassy in Colombo supplied the rebels with money, arms, and explosives. This group, which the local Sri Lankan press described as "Che Guevaristas" and

"Maoists," aimed to establish a "pure Socialist government" on the island. The uprising failed and the North Korean connection was quickly uncovered. The Sri Lankan government took immediate action and ordered the closure of the North Korean embassy.[24] However, the chaos of the insurrection caused an island-wide school shutdown and curfew.[25]

After the instances of North Korean subversion in Mexico and Sri Lanka were discovered, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement that said, "It is now common knowledge that North Korea has become the hatchery and distributor of the so-called people's guerilla war. They have trained more than 2,000 foreigners of various nationalities for guerilla warfare and exported them to more than 30 countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America."[26] North Korea's covert support of rebels abroad was now out in the open. North Korea's risky practice of assisting radical movements proved detrimental to Pyongyang's international standing. According to a telegram from the U.S. embassy in Colombo, "Sri Lankan officials said that North Korea would not be permitted to re-open [their] embassy and 'that trials by the criminal justice commission of captured insurgents will reveal facts that would be highly embarrassing to North Korea.'"[27] The DPRK's delicate balance of revolutionary fervor and brutal pragmatism was openly contradictory at times. At the same time as establishing diplomatic relations with newly independent countries in the Third World, Kim Il-sung's regime was also actively undermining stability and order in many of these same countries.

North Korea's increasingly recognized role as a supporter of subversive groups in the Third World worried foreign governments and hampered the DPRK's diplomatic outreach. The U.S. government also used it as leverage to warn Third World governments of the dangers of establishing diplomatic relations with the DPRK. In March 1971, the Mauritanian Foreign Minister Gaetan Duval met with the U.S. ambassador and discussed North Korea's recent support of Mexican revolutionaries as a North Korean delegation had recently visited Port Louis. According to a U.S. Embassy Port Louis telegram, "After the U.S. ambassador explained to Duval the recent press reports of the [Mexican] incident, Duval joked that his government had 'lost' the North Korean delegation for one hour while they were visiting the country."[28] However, some countries took the North Korean threat very seriously. For example, a Bolivian newspaper *El Diario* published a 1971 editorial on a visit by a North Korean delegation and accused the DPRK of "international subversion and espionage in India, Mexico, and Ceylon." The editorial also noted, "North Korea is one of the principle centers for the training of insurgents for Latin America" and ended with a warning, "North Koreans do not engage in tourism for itself. Their trips are for other objectives: subversion."[29] This warning was well warranted as North Korea reportedly provided $280,000 to anti-Bolivian government leftist forces from 1965-1975.[30]

During the Cold War, North Korea also hosted and trained many foreign revolutionaries. A 1974 report from the Canadian Ministry of External Affairs warned, "North Korea is a strong supporter of third world national liberation movements and probably provides more aid to these groups, in the form of training courses in revolutionary tactics and ideology, than any other country including Cuba."[31] The CIA also stated, "North Korea has, in fact, both copied and competed with China in the training of guerilla movements. Although no comparative figures of Chinese and North Korean assistance to these groups are available, Pyongyang apparently found that the training of guerillas is a relatively cheap and easy undertaking in which a small country can compete on fairly even terms for influence among radical groups."[32] Perhaps the most notable example of this are the nine members of the Japanese Red Army Faction (JRAF) who went to North Korea in 1970 and were used to publicly embarrass the Japanese government, indoctrinated with the ideas of Kimilsungism, and later used to help kidnap Japanese citizens.[33] However, North Korea's domestic training camps for foreign revolutionaries seem to have ceased with the collapse of the Communist Bloc in the early 1990s.

During the Cold War, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Ho Chi Minh earned recognition around the world for being revolutionary leaders. Although Kim Il-sung's role was less well known in the world revolutionary movement, the DPRK's role as a supporter of radical groups did not go unnoticed by foreign governments. The DPRK's leadership, under the command of Kim Il-sung, applied guerilla tactics and techniques to its foreign policy. Naturally, this extended to assisting other guerilla fighters around the world. By sowing discord and revolution abroad, Pyongyang enhanced its reputation as an anti-imperialist stalwart and defender of anti-colonial peoples. The North Korean government was willing to risk breaking bilateral relations with newly independent Third World governments as it prioritized leftist revolution over international stability. While Soviet communism disappeared

into the "dustbin of history" shortly before Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, the DPRK's revolutionary foreign policy and support of non-state actors continued under Kim Jong-il's rule.

Kim Jong-il

The successor to Kim Il-sung's rule, Kim Jong-il, experienced a radically different upbringing from his father. While the young Kim Il-sung forged his reputation through anti-Japanese resistance activities in 1930s Manchuria, Kim Jong-il lived his childhood in relative secrecy. Raised in North Korean palaces, Kim Jong-il experienced little hardship as a child and lived the life of a young royal. Unlike his father, Kim Jong-il was no guerilla fighter. Nonetheless, Kim Jong-il was a masterful propagandist who, beginning in the 1970s, traced the genealogy of the North Korean revolution back to the 1930s anti-Japanese guerilla struggle in Manchuria. This pleased the aging North Korean leadership, which enjoyed watching Kim Jong-il's revolutionary musical operas that focused on the exploits of the anti-Japanese guerillas.[34] After gaining the respect of his father's old fighting buddies, Kim Jong-il secured his position as successor to Kim Il-sung and worked to increase his control over the military via managing the shadowy "Organization and Guidance Department," which is widely seen as the administrative center of the Korean Workers' Party and the Korean People's Army.[35]

In addition, the DPRK leadership continued to be primarily comprised of former guerillas. At the Sixth Korean Workers' Party Congress in 1980, Kim Jong-il was announced as a member of the Politburo. He was the youngest member of the nineteen-member committee, which included only former guerillas, with the exception of Oh Kuk-yol whose father was a guerilla fighter.[36] Despite Kim Jong-il not being a guerilla fighter himself, the guerilla tradition and its brand of guerilla internationalism continued to shape and inform DPRK government policy during his reign. From the importance placed upon the 1930s anti-Japanese guerilla struggle in North Korean propaganda to the longstanding leadership of former guerillas in the Politburo, the DPRK continued to adhere to the ethos of the guerilla fighter during Kim Jong-il's rule. Rather than adapt to a globalized and interconnected world, the North Korean government continued the path of a guerilla state. Thus, trickery, banditry, denial, and a paranoid fear of the outside world defined Kim Jong-il's foreign policy.

However, a substantial shift occurred in the international arena of non-state actors. Gone were the days of communist guerillas and freedom fighters opposing colonial regimes; the new firebrands on the global stage were religious radicals. However, Kim Jong-il's regime was selective in assisting such groups. Rather than indiscriminately supplying any group with arms that could pay them in hard currency, the North Korean government primarily chose to assist groups with self-determination aims, such as the Tamil Tigers and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Thus, multinational jihadist groups with apocalyptic visions of establishing Sharia law around the world—such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and later the Islamic State—received little, if any, attention from the North Koreans. Even the North Koreans had limits.

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After the failed 1971 insurrection by DPRK-assisted rebels on Sri Lanka, the North Koreans continued to exert pressure on the Sri Lankan government to re-establish diplomatic relations. As U.S. archival documents explain, the Sri Lankan government had little interest in re-establishing ties with Pyongyang.[37] Nonetheless, the North Koreans persisted and later re-established a presence on the island via its support of a separatist organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (hereafter Tamil Tigers), which sought to form an independent, ethnically Tamil and religiously Hindu state in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka. According to Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, the North Koreans started selling weapons to the Tamil Tigers in 1997.[38] While information on this relationship is hard to come by, journalist Tom Farrell's firsthand account of the Sri Lankan Civil War suggests that North Korean weapons, such as rockets, specialized maritime equipment, surface-to-air missiles, greatly assisted the Tamil Tigers during their liberation struggle.[39] This bloody conflict, which lasted from 1983-2009, killed more than 70,000 people.[40]

In addition to assisting the Tamil Tigers, Kim Jong-il's regime also began supplying another liberation group in southern Asia, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with arms in the 1990s. This organization, seeking to create an independent state in the Philippines' Mindanao region for the Moro people, first began buying weapons from the North Koreans in 1999. According to confiscated MILF documents, the arms agreement between the two parties was worth around $2.2 million, which primarily consisted of rifles and grenades. The MILF rebels later tried to purchase a submersible vessel from North Korea but the deal never took place as Filipino security authorities were alerted.[41]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the DPRK leadership had to find new sources of income to fund their nuclear program and extravagant lifestyles. Groups, such as the Tamil Tigers and MILF, provided vital amounts of money to the DPRK leadership's slush funds. However, it is important to note that the North Koreans never conducted arms deals directly with multinational jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda. The North Koreans preferred making deals with groups that had less ambitious goals, such as what both parties perceived as rightful self-determination. Thus, North Korea viewed the Tamil Tigers and MILF rebels as acceptable partners in the worldwide struggle against colonialism and imperialism.

The North Koreans also established close ties with Hezbollah and Hamas, via their allies in Tehran and Damascus, during Kim Jong-il's reign.[42] The two groups needed weapons and the North Koreans were willing to supply them to organizations that sought to destroy Israel, a close ally of the United States. While the DPRK's Israel policy is little researched, the North Koreans have been virulently anti-Israel and pro-Palestine since the inception of the Israeli state in 1948.[43] The North Koreans also provided tunnel-building expertise to Hezbollah and Hamas, developed from years of digging under the Demilitarized Zone. According to the U.S. court case, *Chaim Kaplan et al vs. Hezbollah*, "prior to July 12, 2006, North Korea provided Hezbollah with…assistance in building a massive network of underground military installations, tunnels, bunkers, depots and storage facilities in southern Lebanon."[44] Meanwhile, Israeli military commanders believe North Korea helped Hamas build tunnels that allowed Hamas fighters to pass quickly and undetected in and out of Gaza.[45]

While fostering chaos in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and the Middle East proved to be profitable ventures for the DPRK government, Kim Jong-il had loftier ambitions for disturbing international order. Using high quality presses, the DPRK government started producing counterfeit U.S. currency, infamously known as "supernotes," in the late 1970s. It is no coincidence that North Korea's counterfeit currency scheme began at the same time as Kim Jong-il's rise to power.[46] The U.S government long suspected the North Koreans were behind the sudden appearance of the "supernotes" that were nearly indistinguishable from real U.S $100 bills. As the U.S treasury later unveiled during its investigation, the North Korean government used members of subversive groups, namely Official Irish Republican Army's (OIRA) Chief of Staff Sean Garland, to distribute the currency in Europe during the 1990s. According to a North Korean chemist, who made the original design of the "supernotes" and later defected to South Korea, the goal of the operation "was to make money, but the secondary motive was inspired by anti-Americanism."[47] Predictably, the North Koreans denied any connection to the counterfeit money and called it a "vicious and mean smear campaign" by the United States government.[48]

The mutually beneficial goal of bolstering the Korean Workers' Party's coffers while also disturbing international stability and the U.S economic system characterized Kim Jong-il's regime as evidenced by the above cases. Unfortunately, the North Korean people felt the greatest impact from this renegade foreign policy, experiencing a horrific famine that killed more than 600,000 people in the 1990s.[49]

In his book, *The Last Days of Kim Jong-il*, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., a former intelligence officer at the U.S Defense Intelligence Agency, subscribes to the "pay-to-play" argument to explain North Korea's non-state actor policy during the Kim Jong-il era. He states that North Korea is "willing and able to support any non-state actor that chooses to engage in terrorism—that is, as long as it can pay."[50] However, as scholar Balazs Szalontai alludes to in his review of Bechtol's book and in this section on Kim Jong-il's regime, the money-centered argument does not fully explain North Korea's non-state actor policy.[51] Surely, money did play an important role in Kim Jong-il's decision to assist non-state actors. The economic landscape of the post-Cold War world was dramatically different from the climate that Kim Il-sung faced. Thus, the funds from these groups partially filled the massive void left by the collapse of the communist bloc. Nonetheless, the guerilla legacy inherited from his father pressed Kim Jong-il to continue a policy of guerilla internationalism.

Kim Jong-un

After Kim Jong-il's sudden death in 2011, a period of optimism ensued. Would the new North Korean leader continue his family's brutal rule? Or would he be different and open North Korea to the world?[52] Six years has passed since Kim Jong-un took power and it is clear to most observers that Kim Jong-un is similar, if not worse, than his father in terms of repression. There appears to be no substantial changes in domestic policy under Kim Jong-un besides the state begrudgingly accepting the reality of a black-market system that emerged during the famine in the 1990s.[53] However, one of the major foreign policy changes under Kim Jong-un has been the discontinuation of direct support to non-state actors.

Based on publicly available sources, it appears that North Korea has shifted away from assisting rebel groups and liberation movements. The lone exception is North Korea's continued assistance to Hezbollah through its contacts in Syria and Iran. The DPRK has indirectly sold Hezbollah, via Damascus, M600 series rockets, anti-tank missiles, and two Scud D platforms. In a fashion similar to his forefathers, Kim Jong-un has successfully taken advantage of foreign civil wars, especially the recent conflict in Syria.[54] North Korea still participates in international illicit networks, such as arms smuggling, but most of those transactions are now conducted through front companies in foreign countries.[55] There are three possible explanations for this shift.

First, groups are now aware that any association with Pyongyang will garner more negative attention than it is worth. North Korea is widely known for its affordable arms deals but the risks of conducting those deals may now outweigh the benefits for groups such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which seek international attention and sympathy for their cause. In addition, purchasing weapons from North Korea is a blatant violation of United Nations sanctions, which could derail the legitimacy seeking agendas of many non-state actors.[56]

Second, the international climate has changed. North Korea is aware that association with Islamist jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, or al-Qaeda, will bring the full force of the international community down on them. Traditional allies, such as China and Russia, face threats from radical Muslim insurgents in their own countries. If North Korea directly or indirectly assists any of these groups, those traditional allies may decide that North Korea has finally crossed the line and thus break off vital economic ties for Kim Jong-un's regime. In addition, the DPRK government no longer needs the funds from non-state actors due to a new form of guerilla internationalism: hacking. Hacking is less costly, easier to perform, and harder to trace back to North Korea than arms deals with non-state actors.[57] Hacking, in many ways, is 21st century guerilla warfare. It is quick, dangerous, and can be performed in a hit-and-run fashion. It allows impoverished states to disrupt the economy and stability of world superpowers, such as the United States. Hacking is one of the great economic equalizers for the regime in Pyongyang.

Third, Kim Jong-un has shifted away from his forefathers' emphasis on promoting global revolution to a focus on brutal pragmatism and achieving the "final victory" of Korean reunification under the DPRK flag. The removal of his uncle Jang Song-thaek from leadership and the assassination of his half-brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia with a WMD nerve agent are uncharacteristically brazen for Pyongyang and suggest that Kim Jong-un's initial focus was securing his grip on power within the North Korean leadership.[58] In addition, unlike his father at the time of succession, Kim Jong-un is not constrained to pleasing aging former guerillas. These men have mostly died and the Politburo is filled with many new members.[59] Kim Jong-un is not committed to any form of revolutionary assistance nor does the Politburo care about continuing guerilla internationalism. Kim Jong-un has successfully removed two potential sources of rivalry within the North Korean leadership and now seems determined to make North Korea into a nuclear weapons state, make the United States acknowledge it as such, and carry out the DPRK's "final victory" campaign of uniting the two Koreas under his rule.[60]

Instead of worrying whether North Korea will sell nuclear weapons technology or information to ISIS, the international community would be better served enforcing sanctions on Pyongyang, devising new ways to deal with Kim Jong-un's increasingly sophisticated nuclear arsenal, and exposing the dangers and potential sale of DPRK-made missiles and chemical weapons.[61] In 2004, Kim Yong-nam, President of the Presidium of the DPRK's Supreme People's Assembly, told American journalist Selig Harrison, "We're entitled to sell missiles to earn foreign exchange. But in regard to nuclear material our policy past, present and future is that we would never allow such transfers to al-Qaeda or anyone else. Never."[62]

While North Korea has thus far shown little interest in selling its nuclear technology to non-state actors, it has demonstrated that it is willing to sell chemical weapons to rogue states, such as the Syrian government.[63] This may be a thinly veiled attempt by Pyongyang to test the strength of their chemical weapons program via proxies. However, this North Korea-Syria military relationship dates back to the late 1960s and is not a new phenomenon.[64]

Syria and Iran, which have historically been some of Pyongyang's closest allies, remain close with the Kim family regime today. The most likely way North Korean-made chemical weapons end up in the hands of non-state actors, such as Hamas or Hezbollah, is via one of these two countries. North Korea would most likely not directly sell chemical weapons to non-state actors but use Syria or Iran as an intermediary. Unlike the international transfer of nuclear weapons or technology, the sale of chemical weapons is more easily concealed and could potentially evade international surveillance. As shown by the murder of Kim Jong-nam with a WMD-grade nerve agent in the Kuala Lumpur international airport, North Korea will not hesitate to use their chemical weapons in a public space and expose innocent people to them. Thus, it is feasible that Pyongyang tests the effectiveness of their chemical weapons on large populations that their allies in the Middle East deem expendable or threatening. This should be one of the primary concerns for the international community in dealing with North Korea's illicit activities and trade networks.

One of the best ways of curbing North Korea's international sale of chemical weapons is to put the Kim family regime back on the U.S government's list of state sponsors of terrorism.[65] This would send a clear message to Pyongyang that its recent actions in Malaysia and its sale of chemical weapons to Syria do not go unnoticed or unpunished by the international community. It would also exert additional financial pressure on the Kim family regime and cut off Pyongyang's access to the U.S banking system.

While Kim Jong-un has stopped direct support of non-state actors, the DPRK's complex global network of trade partners and military agreements still entangles non-state actors as possible endpoints for North Korean weapons. As North Korea continues to violate international norms and treaties with its missile tests, placing the Kim family regime back on the state sponsors of terrorism list reminds Pyongyang that the U.S will not retreat from its policy of "maximum pressure."

Endnotes

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