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THE PYONGYANG-PEKING-MOSCOW TRIANGLE

Central Intelligence Agency
National Foreign Assessment Center

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Key Judgments

In recent years China and the USSR have demonstrated little enthusiasm for Kim Il-song's efforts to reunify the Korean peninsula on his own terms. In an unusual convergence of interests, both the Chinese and Soviets have an important stake in maintaining Korean stability. A major conflict there would seriously complicate each country's bilateral relations with the US, stimulate possible major changes in Japanese security policy, and introduce new uncertainties into the overall power balance in East Asia.

China and the USSR are Pyongyang's treaty allies and traditional military suppliers. Both publicly support North Korea's call for withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. When tension on the peninsula increases, however, they seek to dissociate themselves from Kim Il-song's more rash actions--as demonstrated in the wake of the Panmunjom slayings in 1976. They view the US security commitment to Seoul as a useful ingredient in the mix of factors that keep peace on the peninsula and restrain any Japanese impulse toward rearmament.

Kim is well aware that China and the USSR subordinate North Korean ambitions to their own broader strategic interests. In seeking to strengthen and preserve North

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Korea's independence of action, he has tried to exploit the mutual antagonism between China and the USSR. In this he has had little success; China has had the inside track since the early 1970s, and Moscow has shown little inclination to compete with Peking for Kim's favor.

Kim's efforts to schedule a Moscow visit to balance his highly publicized trip to Peking in 1975 have been turned aside, although a Kim visit later this year cannot be ruled out. Informal contacts between the Soviet Union and South Korea have continued despite Pyongyang's protests. Moscow has not volunteered to ease Pyongyang's financial plight by providing hard-currency relief. Weary of North Korea's repeated failure to meet bilateral trade commitments, the Soviets in fact have retaliated by reducing their own exports. More important, North Korea apparently has been cut off for several years from advanced weapons of the type that Moscow has routinely provided to a number of other clients.

More recently, some effort has been made by North Korea and the Soviet Union to--in the words of one Soviet official--"stabilize" their political relationship. There have been more frequent and higher level contacts. In January 1978, Soviet Politburo member Kunayev visited Pyongyang to award Kim Il-song the Order of Lenin. Although Kunayev admittedly is not a heavyweight on the Politburo, he is the first Soviet leader of that party rank to visit Pyongyang since 1971 when relations were distinctly warmer. North Korea discounted the significance of the event somewhat by calling attention to the fact that the medal was awarded originally in 1972 on Kim's 60th birthday.

We suspect, but cannot prove, that the Soviets perceived some slackening in Sino-North Korean ties and decided additional effort on their part was in order. They presumably were aware of the notable absence of high-level Chinese contacts with North Korea in the months following Mao's death in September 1976.

The Chinese are, of course, sensitive to such Russian maneuvering. In January 1977, for example, the departing North Korean ambassador in Peking was treated to a rare audience with the top echelon of the Chinese leadership--including party chairman Hua Kuo-feng--on the same day

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that North Korean leader Pak Song-chol was arriving in Moscow for what appeared to be a spur-of-the-moment visit following a trip by Pak to the Middle East.

More recently, North Korea and China have published contradictory pronouncements that underscore their differing world views, especially regarding the US. North Korea denounced the US as the "main enemy" and contended that all nations should be judged by their attitude toward "US imperialism". China, on the other hand, tagged the Soviets as having taken over from the US the role of "international Gendarme," a term used by North Korea to describe the US.

This disagreement, which is not usually so forcefully argued in public, stems largely from North Korean frustration over the unwillingness of Peking--or Moscow for that matter--to support fully Pyongyang's ambitions for control of the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang's decision to challenge, publicly Chinese policy may in fact have been intended to set the stage for the recent visit of Chinese party chairman Hua Kuo-feng to North Korea. The Hua visit should provide the basis for a better reading on the current status of Chinese-Korean relations once the details are known.

North Korea will be watching closely the reaction in Moscow and Peking as the US moves ahead on ground-force withdrawals. Kim Il-song knows that in the Korean peninsula the interests of the major powers intersect in important ways. He recognizes that Chinese and Soviet support for his course is constrained by the desire of both to avoid complicating their relations with the US and Japan. He will be looking for any signs that, as the withdrawal proceeds, his allies might be more inclined to increase their support or at least become less committed to stability on the peninsula.

In keeping with their generally low-key approach to the Korean question, the Soviets and Chinese have not commented extensively on the US troop withdrawal plan or the recent revision of its first phase. In their public reaction, they have emphasized that retention of US air power in South Korea means there is no real change in the situation. This emphasis on the status quo seems to reflect their concern that any withdrawal be accomplished in a manner that does not disrupt the basic political and military balance on the peninsula.

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Privately, the Chinese go much further. They have expressed concern that a US pullout would leave a vacuum for the Soviets to fill. In recent months these Chinese warnings have become more frequent and direct.

Kim will almost certainly press Moscow and Peking for increased military assistance in the event that US force reductions are accompanied by a substantial upgrading of South Korean military capabilities. This pressure will be difficult to resist, especially if Kim can present a convincing case that the US assistance package poses a significant threat to North Korea. Given the pattern of Soviet and Chinese arms restraint in recent years and the strategic equities involved, neither ally is likely to respond to requests for offsetting aid in a manner that upsets the basic military equilibrium on the peninsula.

Looking to the future, it is possible that North Korea's financial plight, in combination with continued strengthening of South Korea's economic and military power, might prompt Kim at some point to abandon his efforts to preserve a balance in his ties with Moscow and Peking. Kim might even consider aligning his country with one or the other in an effort to extract maximum support and assistance. In such a move, however, he would risk having to bow to outside influence and control--an outcome that Kim has long struggled to avoid.

Kim would probably take this step only as a last resort and only after other alternatives had been explored. North Korea continues to attempt to foster political and economic contacts with the non-Communist world, and it still displays scant concern for the sensitivities of its major Communist allies--as demonstrated most recently by its unilateral declaration of a 50-mile coastal security zone.

Although China and the USSR have indicated their lack of enthusiasm for Kim Il-song's reunification efforts, the rivalry limits the extent to which either is prepared to restrain the North Korean leader. On the diplomatic front, for example, neither has been willing to push Kim in directions he does not want to go. They have made it clear that their participation in any multilateral talks on the future of the Korean peninsula will be subject to North Korea's acceptance.

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Over the years, nevertheless, Pyongyang has exhibited great concern over the possibility of a Korean settlement imposed by the major powers--as is evident in Pyongyang's intense attacks on various proposals for "two Koreas" and for "cross recognition." Recent events unquestionably have magnified these worries. In December visiting East German leader Honecker, acting at Soviet behest, lectured Kim on the applicability of a two Germanies solution for Korea. Early this year the press played up Ambassador Woodcock's remarks about the commonality of interests between the US and China and China's potential role in maintaining stability in Northeast Asia. President Tito's proposal for tripartite talks on Korea--with the Pak government as a full participant--received widespread media attention except in Pyongyang where it was greeted with stony silence. In light of Ambassador Woodcock's earlier statement, there seems little doubt that the parameters of Dr. Brzezinski's trip will promote even greater anxiety in Pyongyang.

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