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North Korea-Global South Connections
in the 2020s: Declining or Resilient?

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North Korea-Global South Connections in the 2020s: Declining or Resilient?

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Korea Focus – Briefing is a series of short articles that review key events and topics relevant to Korea. This issue is written by Seung Hwan Ryu, who is a Doctoral Fellow at the Graduate School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. His doctoral research discusses international cooperation between North Korea and Tanzania during the Cold War, examining how they collectively practiced the idea of self-reliance through collaborative agricultural projects in rural Tanzania. He holds a BA in History and Economics from Sogang University, South Korea, and an MA in Global Studies from the University of Vienna and Leipzig University. His recent publication includes a journal article, “Between Second and Third World: North Korean Use of “Imagined Affinity” in the Socialist Globalization Project with Regard to Tanzania” (Comparativ, 2023).

Introduction

The Global South has recently drawn increased attention in international politics, particularly with the potential emergence of a “New Cold War” and the growing prominence of BRICS as an influential political and economic entity. Simultaneously, the Global South remains a focal point for cooperation due to its significant developmental potential. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, stands as the most prominent—and often controversial—effort to strengthen ties with the Global South, reflecting broader competition for influence in the “Third World” that has persisted since the Cold War. Despite its limited capacity compared to other superpowers, North Korea has sought to forge close relationships with these countries, underscoring shared ideals of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism since the late 1950s. For a time, North Korea even served as a model for postcolonial development to some leaders in Africa and Latin America. While these connections weakened after the end of the Cold War, North Korea continues to maintain relationships with certain Global South countries that align with anti-Western ideologies or value long-standing alliances from the Cold War era. This short article summarizes the major events concerning the relations between North Korea and the Global South in the 2020s. While Pyongyang did not maintain the same level of affinity with these nations compared to the Cold War era, the Global South still has symbolic significance as a platform to denounce the Western countries and the United Nations that enforced economic sanctions. This was confirmed by North Korea’s recent participation in the meetings of Global South countries in Kampala, Uganda, which forecasted its possible recoupling with the members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G-77).

Historical Connections between North Korea and Global South

North Korean connections with Global South countries started during the Cold War when Seoul and Pyongyang competed to gain recognition in the international sphere. The two Koreas put much effort into maintaining close ties with decolonized countries in the “Third World” until their competition to claim legitimacy concluded with the end of the Cold War and North Korea’s “Arduous March” in the 1990s. They particularly endeavored to establish diplomatic relations with newly independent countries in Asia and Africa to receive their votes at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). South Korea constantly maintained a higher number of diplomatic relations resting on US support. Nonetheless, some countries with socialist ideologies, including Tanzania, Guinea, and Angola, recognized North Korea as the only legitimate regime in the Korean Peninsula during the Cold War. Their competition to become a member of the UN was fostered after China replaced Taiwan in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 1971, which motivated North Korea to join the international organization and be broadly recognized as a legitimate state.¹ As a response, South Korean President Park Chung Hee renounced the

¹ Jong-dae Shin, “남북한 외교경쟁과 ‘6.23 선언’ Inter-Korean Diplomatic Competition and the June 23 Declaration,” *Review of North Korean Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 205.

“Hallstein Doctrine” on June 23, 1973. This change enabled South Korea to seek diplomatic relations with states that had already recognized North Korea.

Diplomatic competition between the two Koreas peaked when they applied for membership in the NAM in 1975. Ideological orientations and their involvement in the Cold War competition did not meet the principles of the NAM. Still, North and South Korea believed that the NAM membership would help secure support from other members, who took the majority in the UNGA. Among the two countries, the NAM only granted membership to North Korea, which claimed the “diplomatic victory” against Seoul in August 1975. Since its accession to the NAM, North Korea endeavored to promote its modernized agriculture to African members, which had maintained close relations with Pyongyang since the 1960s. To demonstrate its leadership in solving the food problems of the non-aligned countries, North Korea even hosted the Symposium of the Non-aligned and Other Developing Countries on Increasing Food and Agricultural Production in August 1981. This event forecasted the active agricultural cooperation between North Korea and African countries, which continued until the early 1990s. North Korea also provided military training in countries like Uganda and Zimbabwe.² Dispatched military instructors played a significant role in exporting North Korea’s “revolutionary struggle” against Japanese colonialism and US imperialism. Some of these activities were turned into illicit exchanges of weapons in the post-Cold War era, which became North Korea’s major source of foreign currency after the UNSC sanctions were applied in the 2010s.³

Mixed Signals of North Korea-Global South Connections in the 2020s

One signal that their connections began deteriorating was the closure of North Korean embassies in foreign countries in recent years. According to NK NEWS, North Korea withdrew its embassies from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Spain, Hong Kong, Uganda, Angola, Nepal, Senegal, and Guinea in 2023.⁴ Several countries on this list were significant in North Korea’s diplomacy during the Cold War era. For instance, its embassy in Kampala, Uganda, was closed in late October 2023 despite their long-standing military cooperation for more than four decades. Some experts commented that Pyongyang’s financial issue⁵ or international sanction to block

² Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 126–35.

³ Tycho van der Hoog, “Defying United Nations Sanctions: Three Reasons for African Engagement with North Korea,” *On Korea: Academic Paper Series*, June 15, 2022, 4–5. <https://keia.org/publication/defying-united-nations-sanctions-three-reasons-for-african-engagement-with-north-korea/>.

⁴ Jeongmin Kim and Joe Smith, “North Korea closes embassies in Senegal and Guinea as Africa exodus continues,” *NK NEWS*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/2023/12/north-korea-closes-embassies-in-senegal-and-guinea-as-africa-exodus-continues/>.

⁵ Joe Smith and Shreyas Reddy, “North Korea shuts embassy in Uganda in move to streamline Africa operations,” *NK NEWS*, October 25, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/2023/10/north-korea-shuts-embassy-in-uganda-in-move-to-streamline-africa-operations/>.

illegal funds was the cause of its withdrawal. Others acknowledged North Korea has “neither the political nor economic benefits of its formerly close relationship with Africa.”⁶

North Korea’s long-standing ties with Global South countries were also affected by the rise of South Korea and its cultural diplomacy. For instance, Uganda ended its military cooperation with North Korea in 2016 after signing a treaty of cooperation with South Korea.⁷ Uganda also became a key participant in South Korea’s “Global Saemaul Undong” initiative, an official development aid program rooted in South Korea’s rural modernization effort of the 1970s. Similarly, the case of Cuba is particularly notable. On February 14, 2024, South Korea agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba, a long-standing “comrade” of North Korea. The ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that the cultural exchanges between the two countries, including the Hallyu Fan Club “ArtCor” in Cuba, significantly created positive images of South Korea.⁸ This transition was a massive setback for North Korea. Indeed, Pyongyang always congratulated the anniversaries of the Cuban Revolution and highly regarded their friendship based on socialist internationalism. Cuba was not merely one of the many nations with which North Korea established diplomatic ties; it stood as a symbol of resistance against US imperialism and socialist revolution during the Cold War. As the host of the Tricontinental Conference (1966), Cuba also served as a central figure in the Global South. These facts highlight how establishing diplomatic relations between South Korea and Cuba significantly impacted North Korea’s broader ties with the Global South.

Unlike its declining relations with individual Global South countries, North Korea’s connections with Global South organizations demonstrated the resilience of North Korea-Global South relations in recent years. The former’s participation in the meetings of the NAM and G-77 proved its continuous commitment to the Global South. In January 2024, the North Korean delegation led by Kim Son Gyong, the Special Envoy of the DPRK government and the Vice Foreign Minister, attended the meetings of the Global South in Kampala, Uganda.⁹

First, its delegation participated in the 19th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the NAM, held on January 19–20, 2024. The NAM is a crucial organization that connects the former “Third World” countries, which rejected the competition between superpowers in the Cold War, following the principles of the Bandung Conference (1955). According to the Kampala Declaration, the 19th Summit focused on reaffirming the “right of self-determination of peoples under foreign occupation” as an initial principle of the NAM.¹⁰ During the meeting, Kim Son Gyong asserted that North Korea would “attach continuous importance to boosting the role of the NAM for establishing a new international order based on independence and justice according

⁶ Kim and Smith, “North Korea closes embassies in Senegal and Guinea,” *NK NEWS*, December 5, 2023.

⁷ Sang-Hun Choe, “Uganda Halts Military Cooperation with North Korea,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/world/africa/north-korea-uganda-military.html>.

⁸ “Korea and Cuba Establish Diplomatic Relations,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, effective February 14, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322416&page=1.

⁹ KCNA, “NAM summit held,” *The Pyongyang Times*, January 27, 2024, 11.

¹⁰ “Kampala Declaration of the 19th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement,” Non-Aligned Movement: The Uganda Chairmanship 2024-2027, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://nam.go.ug/sites/default/files/2024-02/Kampala%20Declaration.pdf>.

to its foreign policy idea of independence, peace, and friendship and make every effort to develop the NAM.” His statement revealed that North Korea envisages a “new international order,” which repudiates ongoing dominance of the United States and other Western countries.

Second, the delegation stayed in Kampala to attend a subsequent event, the Third South Summit, which was a meeting of the G-77 plus China, held on January 21–22. While the NAM focused on the Cold War politics surrounding the superpowers, the G-77 emphasized the “structural disadvantages in the international economic system¹¹” and called for the New International Economic Order to overcome economic inequality between the Global North and South during the Cold War. Similar to his speech at the NAM Summit, Kim Son Gyong pointed out that the unequal development gap became more severe, which demanded the G-77 to “firmly unite in compliance with its mission and objectives and to double the efforts to enhance its negotiating power vis-à-vis the developed countries in the international economic sector.¹²” His argument referred to the principles of the G-77 to resist the existing economic inequality based on the South-South cooperation.

In contrast to declining relations with individual Global South countries, the North Korean delegation put much effort into resonating with the main agenda of the meetings in Kampala in January 2024. The members agreed upon the suggestion of a “new international order” to resist the Global North’s political dominance and increasing economic inequality. The articles published after these summits followed the agenda, justifying the multi-polarized world and demanding a new international order based on independence and justice.¹³ North Korea also referred to the idea of a “fair international order” as a source to demand the reform of the United Nations, which “had been degenerated into a tool for legitimizing the hegemonic maneuvers of certain countries” and “failed to fulfill its role in ensuring global peace and security.¹⁴” In other words, Pyongyang appropriated the languages of the NAM and the G-77 to justify its criticism of the US-led hegemonic international order and international organizations that did not achieve peace and economic equality. These organizations of the Global South became crucial sources for North Korea to engage with global politics in the 2020s.

Prospects for the Connections between North Korea and Global South

Many experts questioned the future of North Korea’s relationship with the Global South following the closure of its embassies in 2023.¹⁵ These embassies had functioned as crucial channels to maintain state-level contact with its allies from the Cold War period, which provided a source of

¹¹ Dena Freeman, “The Global South at the UN: Using International Politics to Re-Vision the Global,” *The Global South* 11, no. 2 (2017): 72.

¹² KCNA, “Third South Summit held,” *The Pyongyang Times*, January 27, 2024, 11.

¹³ Jinhyang Pak, “세계는 다극화에도 더욱 활력있게 나아가고있다 The World is Advancing toward Multipolarity with Increasing Dynamism,” *Rodong Shinmun*, January 24, 2024, 8.

¹⁴ Jeongcheol Eun, “공정한 국제질서의 수립은 강렬한 시대적지향 The Establishment of a Fair International Order is an Urgent and Profound Aspiration of Our Times,” *Rodong Shinmun*, February 4, 2024, 6.

¹⁵ Kim and Smith, “North Korea closes embassies in Senegal and Guinea,” *NK NEWS*, December 5, 2023.

legitimacy and international prestige for Pyongyang. For instance, it was astonishing to find the North Korean Embassy in Conakry closed in October 2023 because Guinea was a core location of Pyongyang's agricultural support during and after the Cold War. North Korea not only established an agricultural research institute near Conakry in 1982 but also dispatched thirty technicians to Guinea in 2022, showcasing its well-established bilateral ties. Likewise, the closure of embassies in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Uganda, Angola, and Nepal may indicate a shift in North Korea's foreign policy toward the Global South, prioritizing its traditional alliances with Russia and China.

Nonetheless, its active engagement with the NAM and the South Summit in 2024 implied its ongoing interest in maintaining close ties with the Global South, especially with the organizations of multiple states like the NAM and the G-77. These platforms provide a golden opportunity for North Korea to resonate with agendas like economic inequality between the Global North and South, ongoing anti-imperialist struggles, and the shared criticism of the United States and its supporters. As Pyongyang can no longer rely on its few remaining embassies, it is expected that North Korea will utilize these transregional meetings and dispatch representatives to continue its contact with the Global South in the future. Despite the limited political and economic capacity of the Global South, North Korea can continuously use these summits to denounce unequal political and economic relations between the Global North and South and the remaining legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Pyongyang could also emphasize its historical connections with the NAM and the G-77 and continue similar languages used during the Cold War to justify the connections with the Global South in the 2020s. These organizations would gain further symbolic significance for North Korea, where Pyongyang could continuously demand the reform of the UN and the lifting of international sanctions. North Korea's commemoration of the 50th anniversary of its accession to the NAM on August 25, 2025, deserves attention, as it could provide valuable insight into the direction of its Global South policy in the years to come.

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