

GUEST EDITORIAL

Beyond the Hermit Kingdom: North Korea's International Connections Revisited

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The year 2025 marked the seventieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference, a landmark gathering that sought to forge economic and cultural cooperation among newly independent Asian and African states. They were united by the shared experience of colonialism and the determination to create an alternative world order amid the bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. North Korea was not among the original participants—its pro-Soviet alignment made it ineligible to participate in the non-aligned gathering—yet Pyongyang eventually attended as an observer and formally joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1975. This trajectory encapsulates a broader, understudied story: far from being the "hermit kingdom," North Korea has long pursued an ambitious and diverse international agenda.

Today, North Korea's foreign relations are largely framed through the lens of its deepening military partnership with Russia. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022, Pyongyang has emerged as one of Moscow's closest allies, resulting in the signing of the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty—a pact that observers compare to the 1961 Soviet-North Korean Mutual Aid Treaty in its implications for mutual military assistance.¹ Yet reducing North Korea's international relations to this alliance, or even to the longstanding Russia-China-North Korea triangle, would miss much of the picture of Pyongyang's broader global network.

North Korea's diplomatic history is considerably richer than its current image suggests. From the late 1950s onward, Kim Il Sung actively cultivated ties with leaders of the emerging Third World—Indonesia's Sukarno, Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk, and Cuba's Fidel Castro—as Pyongyang sought to position itself as a champion of anti-imperialism and postcolonial solidarity. The 1970s, in particular, marked a decade of North Korean diplomatic expansion. The global shift toward détente opened unexpected doors: North Korea established diplomatic relations with the Nordic countries, developed trade ties with Western European partners, and launched developmental projects across sub-Saharan Africa. Although the decline of the socialist bloc and the collapse of the Soviet Union significantly curtailed North Korea's global reach, Pyongyang endeavored to maintain its international network through limited economic opening, establishing several joint ventures throughout the world.

These connections have not entirely disappeared in the post-Cold War era. During the eightieth founding anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea in October 2025, Laotian President Thongloun Sisoulith and Vietnamese ruling party leader To Lam both travelled to Pyongyang, where they met Kim Jong Un and celebrated the occasion alongside the North Korean leadership. Following the summit between Kim and Sisoulith, the two sides' foreign ministers agreed to expand bilateral cooperation, which constituted a concrete signal of sustained international ties between the two socialist states.² To Lam, for his part, expressed his admiration for North Korea's achievements under Kim Jong Un's leadership and reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to deepening the two countries' traditional friendship.³

Yet academic scholarship has not kept pace with this complexity. North Korea's relations with Russia, China, the United States, and South Korea have been comprehensively examined in the existing literature, covering topics ranging from North Korea's ties with the Soviet Union since 1945 to inter-Korean dynamics and US-DPRK negotiations on denuclearization. But the wider arc of Pyongyang's

international engagement—its diplomacy with smaller and middle-power states, its participation in international organizations, its cultural outreach, its developmental projects in the Third World—remains understudied. This gap is partly attributable to the scarcity of accessible archival sources and the nature of North Korean primary sources, which tend to focus on domestic political and economic achievements rather than foreign affairs. Yet the absence of easily accessible sources is not the same as the absence of history.

This special issue of *Korea Europe Review* takes up that challenge. Following the journal's commitment to transcending the traditional boundaries of area studies through interdisciplinary inquiry, the contributions gathered here examine dimensions of North Korean foreign relations that have received insufficient scholarly attention. The articles cover a wide thematic range: diplomatic ties with smaller and mid-level states; North Korea's institutions for cultural diplomacy such as friendship associations; North Korean-led developmental projects and joint ventures in Third World countries and exchanges between the Workers' Party of Korea and other socialist parties. Notably, most contributors independently converged on the 1970s as a pivotal decade in their analyses, underscoring how consequential, and how underexplored, that period remains.

Moe Taylor's article traces the ideological transformation of North Korean foreign policy in the 1970s through Kim Il Sung's concept of the "Era of Chajusŏng." Focusing on North Korea's engagement with the Non-Aligned Movement, the article explores how Pyongyang reoriented its foreign policy from a framework centered on proletarian internationalism toward one that emphasized national self-determination and political autonomy. Rather than interpreting this shift as a merely pragmatic response to changing international circumstances, Taylor argues that it reflected a broader ideological adaptation that enabled North Korea to position itself within the evolving political landscape of the Global South.

Seung Hwan Ryu's article examines North Korea's agricultural cooperation with African countries as an important dimension of Pyongyang's engagement with the postcolonial world. Focusing on joint agricultural projects in the 1970s and 1980s, it explores North Korea's efforts to foster anti-imperialist solidarity and South-South cooperation. While previous studies have tended to explain the decline of these projects primarily through North Korea's domestic economic difficulties, Ryu instead situates the unraveling of this cooperation within broader transformations in the international environment, including the global spread of neoliberal economic practices and the weakening of postcolonial solidarity networks.

Shifting the focus to Europe, Sabine Burghart's article traces the development of Austria-DPRK relations from early contacts to diplomatic recognition between 1960 and 1974. By examining how Austrian policymakers balanced domestic interests, economic considerations, and pressures from both South Korea and the United States, the article highlights the complexities of divided-state diplomacy and neutral-state foreign policy during the Cold War. At the same time, Burghart demonstrates that North Korea actively sought to expand its diplomatic presence in Europe by engaging with smaller and neutral states beyond the socialist bloc.

Japan represents another important case of a country that grappled with the question of diplomatic normalization with North Korea during the Cold War. Ulv Hanssen and Eun Hee Woo revisit the prospects for Japan-DPRK normalization in the early 1970s. The article demonstrates how détente, changes in Sino-American relations, inter-Korean dialogue, and growing economic interest from Japanese

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Seung Hwan Ryu and Suhon Lee, "2025 Berlin Forum on Korea: Korea at a Crossroads: 50 Years After Helsinki, 70 Years After Bandung," *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics, Society, and Economics*, no. 9 (December 2025).

business circles briefly created favorable conditions for diplomatic rapprochement between the two countries. At the same time, the authors argue that Japan's concerns about provoking South Korea and upsetting the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula ultimately prevailed and prevented normalization, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of North Korea's diplomatic outreach during the Cold War.

Finally, Camilo Aguirre-Torrini shifts attention from state-to-state relations to the role of non-state actors in North Korea's international engagement. Focusing on the Chile-North Korea Friendship Association, the article examines how cultural exchanges and solidarity activities contributed to the development of bilateral relations between the two countries. In doing so, Aguirre-Torrini demonstrates that North Korea's international networks were sustained not only through official diplomacy but also through transnational solidarity and grassroots forms of internationalism.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue demonstrate that North Korea's international relations during the Cold War extended far beyond the confines of the socialist bloc. Pyongyang sought to expand its international space through a variety of diplomatic, economic, and societal channels. At the same time, these initiatives were shaped and constrained by the dynamics of the Cold War, regional political developments, economic transformations, and the broader restructuring of the international order.

This special issue also points to the need to move beyond major-power-centered narratives of Cold War diplomacy and to approach North Korean foreign relations from more multilayered and transnational perspectives. In particular, future research would benefit from greater use of multilingual archival materials, closer attention to non-state actors and cultural networks, further analysis of North Korea's engagement with international organizations, and comparative approaches grounded in Global South perspectives. Such efforts can contribute to a more nuanced reconstruction of North Korea's place in modern international history.

These questions are not merely of historical interest. The international community continues to search for viable channels to re-engage Pyongyang, including proposals such as the Berlin Forum 2025's recommendation for indirect humanitarian cooperation through international trust funds.⁴ A richer understanding of North Korea's historical and ongoing connections with the Global South, Europe, and its regional neighbors offers essential context. The "hermit kingdom" might have more friends than we thought.

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