

The Unmaking of South-South Cooperation: North Korea-Africa Agricultural Collaboration and the Decline of the Global South

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Abstract

This article examines North Korea's agricultural cooperation with African countries during the Cold War, focusing on the global circumstances that shaped both its expansion and its subsequent decline following the adoption of the Joint Venture Law in 1984. Since the 1950s, North Korea cultivated anti-imperialist solidarity with postcolonial African states as part of its broader pursuit of international recognition. During the 1970s and 1980s, Pyongyang promoted agricultural cooperation as a practical expression of collective self-reliance and food sovereignty. Departing from previous studies that attribute the collapse of such cooperation primarily to North Korea's domestic economic difficulties, this article argues that its decline was driven by structural transformations within the Global South. As many postcolonial states adopted market-oriented reforms and reoriented their development strategies in the late Cold War period, the political and economic foundations of South-South cooperation eroded. This shift was further reinforced by the resolution of inter-Korean diplomatic competition, as African states reoriented their foreign policies and established relations with South Korea. While these developments did not result in a complete rupture of North Korea-Africa relations, the article contends that their shared attempt to construct an alternative world order ultimately proved unsustainable in the face of neoliberal globalization.

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"The Law of Joint Venture of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [조선민주주의인민공화국 합영법]," *Minju Chosŏn*, September 11, 1984; "DPRK Law of Joint Venture," *The Pyongyang Times*, September 15, 1984.

²

Ibid.

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Kim Il Sung, *Answers to Questions Raised by the Managing Editor of the Japanese Politico-Theoretical Magazine SEKAI*, June 9, 1985, in Kim Il Sung Works, vol. 39 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), 94–95.

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Kim Il Sung, *Talk to the Delegation of the Communist Party of Portugal*, January 7–8, 1985, in Kim Il Sung Works, vol. 39, 21–22.

1. Introduction

On September 8, 1984, the North Korean Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly adopted the Law of Joint Venture [*Habyŏngbŏp*] (hereafter the Joint Venture Law) to promote economic and technical cooperation with foreign countries.¹ The enactment of this law signalled a recalibration of North Korea's foreign policy at a time when Pyongyang explicitly refused to follow the path of China's "Reform and Opening up [改革开放]." The law provided an institutional foundation for foreign companies to seek cooperation with North Korean corporations, which had largely been marginalized in the international market despite the wave of neoliberal globalization.

North Korea initially envisioned joint ventures primarily with corporations affiliated with *Chongryon*—the de facto North Korean representative body in Japan, as Article 5 distinctly mentioned "Koreans overseas, including Korean traders and manufacturers in Japan," as eligible shareholders.² At the same time, Kim Il Sung left open the possibility of cooperation "regardless of ideology, ideas, and systems" provided that potential partners maintained friendly relations with North Korea.³ In this context, he referred to countries such as Tanzania and Mozambique as candidates for joint agricultural ventures following meetings with their respective presidents.⁴ Given these statements and the broader emphasis on South-South cooperation, it appeared unlikely at the time that economic cooperation between North Korea and African countries would soon experience a decline.

Despite these expectations, North Korea-Africa relations began to deteriorate gradually in the late 1980s. Although Pyongyang maintained close ties with a limited number of leaders, including Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Didier Ratsiraka of Madagascar, many African states withdrew their exclusive support for North Korea and established diplomatic relations with Seoul. Economic cooperation followed a similar trajectory. In the final years of the Cold War, collaborative agricultural projects failed to produce significant results, and joint ventures were either terminated or transferred to other foreign corporations. As North Korea and African countries had sustained cooperation under the banner of anti-imperialism since the late 1950s, these shifts in the 1980s were particularly striking.

This paper examines the emergence and subsequent decline of agricultural cooperation between North Korea and African countries following the introduction of the Joint Venture Law in 1984. Although agricultural cooperation began in the 1970s, it intensified and became increasingly institutionalized in the 1980s, when Pyongyang sought to formalize cooperation through joint ventures with African states. The Joint Venture Law, which was designed to facilitate cooperation with foreign partners, together with Kim Il Sung's calls for joint ventures with postcolonial countries, reflected North Korea's expectation that agricultural cooperation with Africa would enter a new phase.

Despite decades of solidarity rooted in shared anti-colonial and anti-imperialist ideals, however, North Korea's agricultural cooperation with African countries began to wane in the late 1980s. This article analyzes why their agricultural cooperation, once envisioned as a promising form of South-South cooperation, proved unsustainable. It argues that the decline of such cooperation cannot be explained solely by North Korea's domestic economic difficulties, but should instead

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This article uses the term “Global South” and “Third World” to refer to postcolonial nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while focusing analytically on sub-Saharan African countries. In most cases, it employs the term “Global South” rather than “Third World,” as North Korean sources increasingly used the term “South” [남반구] or “South-South Cooperation” [남남협력], as well as “non-aligned countries” [불역불가담국가들], when describing their engagement or cooperation with other postcolonial nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America during the 1980s. This shift became evident in Kim Il Sung’s 1987 speech, *Let Us Develop South-South Cooperation*. Until the 1970s, North Korean sources also used terms such as “Third World countries” [제3세계국가들], “newly emerging force countries” [신흥세력국가들], and “developing nations” [개발도상국에 있는 국가들] interchangeably.

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Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford University Press, 2021), 9.

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Concerning the inter-Korean competition to join the United Nations and other international organizations, see B. K. Gills, *Korea versus Korea: A Case of Contested Legitimacy* (Routledge, 1996); Domin Kim, *Beyond the Camps of the Cold War: Neutral, Non-Aligned, and Third World Diplomacy of North and South Korea (1948–1976)* [냉전의 진영 너머로: 남북한의 중립·비동맹·제3세계 외교 (1948–1976)] (Yoksabipyeongsa, 2025).

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“The Outcome of the Vote on the Korean Question at the 30th United Nations General Assembly First Committee Is a Great Victory for the DPRK’s Independent Policy for Peaceful Reunification of the Nation and its Foreign Policy, as well as a Joint Victory for the Progressive Countries and Peoples of the World [제30차유엔총회 제1위원회에서의 조선문제에 관한 표결결과는 공화국정부의 자주적인 조국평화통일방침과 대외정책의 위대한 승리이며 세계진보적 나라들과 인민들의 공동의 승리이다.],” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 1, 1975.

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Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa* (Hurst, 2025), 39.

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Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–5.

be understood in relation to broader historical shifts within the Global South⁵ and the African continent during the final stage of the Cold War.

To analyze the decline of North Korea-Africa relations in the 1980s, it is first necessary to explain how these two geographically distant regions became connected during the Cold War. Historians and political scientists have generally identified two major motivations behind North Korea’s engagement with African countries. First, existing scholarship emphasizes inter-Korean competition, as both North and South Korea sought international “recognition” as the sole legitimate government of the Korean Peninsula.⁶ This rivalry unfolded primarily within international organizations, especially the United Nations.⁷ In their efforts to secure membership and influence, both Koreas actively pursued diplomatic ties with postcolonial states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. While South Korea relied largely on support from pro-American countries, Pyongyang expanded its diplomatic presence in Africa, which provided a numerical advantage in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). North Korea called the 30th UNGA a “diplomatic victory,” during which the resolution demanding the withdrawal of the UN Command from the Korean Peninsula was adopted in December 1975.⁸ As Tycho van der Hoog, Assistant Professor of International Security Studies at the Netherlands Defence Academy, has noted, however, this interpretation of diplomatic competition—which he called “bean-counting”—risks obscuring the agency of African states.⁹

Second, scholars have underscored Pyongyang’s support for African countries as a means of promoting the personality cult of Kim Il Sung and the dissemination of Juche Ideology. During the Cold War, financial, technical, and military aid constituted an important foundation of inter-state relations. Major powers, including the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, actively intervened in the political and economic affairs of newly independent states across Asia, Africa, and Latin America to expand their influence.¹⁰ Such competition not only shaped the dynamics of the Cold War but also intertwined with the broader issues of postcolonial world order, revealing the entanglement of ideological rivalry and decolonisation.

North Korea’s assistance, while limited in scale compared to that of major powers, nonetheless attracted the interest of some African leaders. The emphasis on self-reliance and self-sufficiency inherent in the Juche ideology was also a notion already shared among many African peoples.¹¹ Seeking recognition as a leader of the international anti-imperialist movement, Kim Il Sung provided aid to African nations without demanding financial compensation. Some scholars argue that this “generous” aid policy served as a foundational element in sustaining North Korea’s relations with African countries, often citing military assistance to countries like Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, whose leaders accepted Pyongyang’s support regardless of their ideological orientation.¹²

These explanations present two key issues. First, they fail to account for North Korea’s continued large-scale cooperation with African countries during the 1980s, despite the declining significance of the “Korea Question” at the UNGA. While agricultural projects began in the 1970s, cooperation expanded in the following decade, particularly in Guinea and Tanzania, where North Korea established agricultural research institutes to promote collaboration with local technicians and farmers. Second, existing interpretations tend to attribute the decline of North Korea-Africa relations in the late 1980s primarily to Pyongyang’s domestic economic difficulties, thereby overlooking other factors that contributed to the reduction of exchanges. Beyond internal constraints, North Korea-Africa ties were closely connected to broader transformations within the Global South during the 1980s.

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Tycho van der Hoog, "Microphone Revolution: North Korean Cultural Diplomacy During the Liberation of Southern Africa," in *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, eds. Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 278–80; Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 78–79.

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Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 74–77.

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This article puts the term "Third World" in quotation marks to emphasize Vijay Prashad's conceptualization of the Third World as "a project" demanding global political equality, rather than a hierarchical or inferior category. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (The New Press, 2007).

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Domin Kim, "Diplomacy of South and North Korea towards 'Neutral Countries' during the 1950s [1950년대 중후반 남·북한의 '중립국' 외교의 전개와 성격: 동남아시아·중동·아프리카 지역을 중심으로]," *Asia Review (SNUACAR)* 10, no. 1 (2020): 164.

For these reasons, this study analyzes the decline of North Korea-Africa economic cooperation as a result of the overlap of two crises. Through primary source analysis, it demonstrates how the crisis of North Korea's domestic economy coincided with a broader crisis of the Global South, which became increasingly politically and financially subordinated to the Global North in the 1980s. This overlap, the article argues, disrupted joint agricultural projects with Pyongyang and undermined the foundations of South-South cooperation.

Unlike previous studies that treat North Korea and African nations as entirely separate political entities, this article argues that, since the late 1970s, they shared a common identification as part of the Global South and understood their economic cooperation not as unilateral aid but as a form of South-South cooperation. While the term "Global South" generally encompasses Asia, Africa, and Latin America, this study focuses on African countries because North Korea selectively engaged with them in agricultural cooperation. Pyongyang promoted its agricultural achievements and cultivated its image among African countries facing food shortages in the 1970s, a strategy that proved effective in mobilizing political support for Kim Il Sung's regime and participation in conferences held in Pyongyang.

In the following, this paper overviews North Korea-Africa relations in the Cold War era, focusing on their economic cooperation in agriculture (2.). Their collaborative projects forged North Korea's identity as a "Third World"¹³ country and a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) despite its longstanding ties with the Soviet Union and China. The third section examines the crisis of the Global South and its suggestions for the new world order, including the New International Economic Order (3.). Unlike North Korea's high expectations for the NAM, the Global South gradually lost significance in international politics as many of its countries began to yield to the rise of neoliberal globalization. The fourth section discusses the decline of South-South cooperation between North Korea and African countries at the end of the Cold War (4.). Compared to their longstanding friendship with Pyongyang, many African states established ties with South Korea, while they declined North Korea's request to boycott the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The conclusion argues for the importance of a global perspective in comprehending North Korea's foreign relations, as the rise and fall of the Global South deeply shaped its agricultural cooperation with African countries during the Cold War (5.).

2. North Korea-Africa Agricultural Cooperation and the Joint Ventures

The earliest contact between North Korea and African countries dates back to 1957, when Pyongyang dispatched a goodwill mission to Egypt.¹⁴ From the outset, North Korea sought to expand its diplomatic network among postcolonial nations that shared commitments to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. As North Korea did not have much influence in Africa and was still recovering from the Korean War, it referred to these ideologies to justify the connection between the two distant regions. The fact that North Korea not only achieved national independence against Japanese colonialism but also survived the Korean War, where the United States was engaged as part of the UN Command, proved its dedication to the global struggle toward anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism in the early stage of the Cold War. Kim Il Sung frequently employed inflammatory rhetoric to denounce what he characterized as the imperialist conduct of the United States. North Korea continues to depict itself as the victor of the Korean War—referred to domestically as the

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Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 5–6.

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"Socialism is not Abstract: Nyerere Pays Tribute to Koreans for Achievements," *The Nationalist*, June 25, 1968.

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"Tanzanians to Observe 'Socialist Villages' in North Korea," cable from Amembassy Dar Es Salaam to Department of State, June 29, 1968, POL KOR N-S-AFR 1/1/67, 1967–69 Subject-Numeric Files, Record Group 59, A1 1613-C, Box 2263, National Archives II, Maryland, the United States.

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For an overview of the existing scholarship on North Korea–Africa relations, see Seung Hwan Ryu, "North Korean Engagement in Africa during the Cold War: A Survey of Recent Historiographical Analyses," *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics, Society, and Economics* 2 (2022).

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Jay Solomon, "The North Korean-Israeli Shadow War," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/north-korean-israeli-shadow-war>; Balázs Szalontai, "Courting the 'Traitor to the Arab Cause': Egyptian-North Korean Relations in the Sadat Era, 1970–1981," *S/N Korean Humanities* 5, no. 1 (March 2019): 112.

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Benjamin R. Young, "Special Report: North Korea in Africa: Historical Solidarity, China's Role, and Sanctions Evasion," *United States Institute of Peace*, no. 490 (February 2021): 5.

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Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 100.

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Ibid.

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Recently, cultural and international historians increasingly acknowledge nation branding as a significant strategy of national and international recognition. Carolin Viktorin, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, and Marcel K. Will, "Introduction: Beyond Marketing and Diplomacy: Exploring the Historical Origins of Nation Branding," in *Nation Branding in Modern History*, ed. Carolin Viktorin, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner, and Marcel K. Will (Berghahn Books, 2018), 19–20.

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Van der Hoog, *Comrades beyond the Cold War*, 89.

"Fatherland Liberation War"—and actively promotes its anti-American and anti-imperialist ideology in the international arena.

Several African leaders were also drawn to North Korea's rapid industrialisation following Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War, as well as the strong, centralized authority embodied by Kim Il Sung. As Benjamin R. Young notes, some Global South leaders were astonished by North Korea's economic growth and social transformation, which became an important example for other postcolonial nations.¹⁵ Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, expressed particular interest in North Korea's agricultural development during his visit to Pyongyang in June 1968.¹⁶ Following this visit, Tanzania dispatched a few technicians to study "socialist villages" in rural North Korea.¹⁷ Other postcolonial leaders also appreciated Pyongyang's unyielding support for anti-colonial struggles in southern Africa and its "cordial" hospitality whenever they visited North Korea. They often faced hierarchical relations during their visits to countries like the Soviet Union and China, which only made Pyongyang's sincere hospitality more peculiar.

Existing scholarship has focused primarily on North Korea's dispatch of military instructors and arms exports.¹⁸ For instance, during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, also known as the Yom Kippur War, North Korea sent approximately 1,500 military advisers and forty air force personnel to Egypt.¹⁹ Pyongyang also dispatched military instructors and supplied arms to Uganda and Namibia in the 1980s.²⁰ Notably, such assistance extended across ideological lines: both Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, a leftist leader, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, a right-wing leader, benefitted from North Korean support in postcolonial nation-building. Young has further disclosed how Pyongyang exported its "Mass Games," large team gymnastics emphasising national unity and collective discipline, which became prominent among postcolonial leaders in the Global South during the Cold War.²¹ He analyzes that these leaders appreciated the Mass Games as a helpful tool for "mobilising youth populations and fostering patriotism," which was significant for nation-building in the newly independent countries.²²

While existing scholarship has concentrated primarily on North Korea's military and cultural cooperation with African countries, its engagement in the agricultural sector has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Compared to this neglect, Pyongyang was assured of its capability to support African agriculture, particularly between the late 1970s and the early 1980s in the international arena. North Korea strategically leveraged what Kim Il Sung termed the "Juche Farming Method" to present its agrarian achievements. In this sense, agricultural cooperation functioned as a form of nation branding and political legitimization for North Korea's regime during this period.²³

Although North Korea is known to have implemented more than twenty agriculture-related projects across Africa, only a small number—such as those in Tanzania and Ghana—have been subject to substantive academic research.²⁴ Unlike other capitalist and socialist countries that have provided aid in the agricultural sector, North Korea viewed such assistance as potentially undermining the economic independence of African nations. Instead of offering unilateral aid, North Korea proposed a model of practical cooperation whereby it would dispatch scientists and technicians to African countries to work directly with local farmers in implementing agricultural projects.²⁵ In this context, Kim Il Sung adopted the idea of "collective self-reliance," which had been a crucial objective among the "Third World" countries in the 1970s to pursue the NIEO.²⁶ As Tycho van der Hoog argues,

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Kim Il Sung, *For the Development of Agriculture in African Countries*, Speech at the Consultative Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from Eastern and Western Africa, August 31, 1981, in *Kim Il Sung Works*, vol. 36 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1990), 218–30.

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Priya Lal, “African Socialism and the Limits of Global Familyhood: Tanzania and the New International Economic Order in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (2015): 22.

27

Van der Hoog, *Comrades beyond the Cold War*, 86–87. It is unclear whether Tycho van der Hoog refers to “Juche Farming Method” [주체농법] with “Juche agriculture.”

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Ibid.

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Korea's Agriculture (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1983).

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“CERP 0002: Burundi: Relations with Communist Countries,” cable from Amembassy Bujumbura to Department of State, November 15, 1974, Burundi, *Program Files on Soviet Foreign Policy*, Record Group 59, P15, Box 8, National Archives II, Maryland, the United States.

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Kim Il Sung, *Non-Aligned and Developing Countries Should Solve the Agricultural Problem through Their Own Efforts*, Speech at the Banquet for the Symposium Delegations, August 26, 1981, in *Kim Il Sung Works*, vol. 36, 212–17.

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Kim Il Sung, *For the Development of Agriculture in African Countries*, 226–27.

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Chang Joon Ok, “Pyongyang Declarations: Imaginative Geography of North Korea during the Cold War [냉전기 북한의 상상 지리와 ‘평양 선언’],” *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies* 12, no. 1 (2020): 28–30.

North Korea manipulated the field of agriculture as an “ideal opportunity for cooperation,” exporting its “Juche agriculture” that emphasized “rescaling the land through collectivisation and heavy technological intervention.”²⁷ As he correctly pointed out, North Korea framed its engagement with African states in agriculture as South-South cooperation, aiming at self-sufficiency in food production.²⁸

While it remains difficult to reconstruct a comprehensive quantitative account of North Korea’s agricultural assistance to African countries, available records indicate notable and sustained cooperation during the 1970s and 1980s. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations and bilateral friendship associations, Pyongyang pursued agricultural collaboration as a means of strengthening anti-imperialist networks and promoting Kim Il Sung’s leadership internationally. In response to the global food crisis of the 1970s, North Korea promoted the “Juche Farming Method,” which emphasized “scientification” and “mechanization” as strategies to increase agricultural productivity.²⁹ Kim Il Sung, who is reportedly credited with the development of this method, claimed that it could not only alleviate food shortages in rural areas but also liberate peasants from arduous manual labour.

North Korean officials sought to extend this vision transnationally through agricultural cooperation with African nations. For instance, in 1973, US diplomatic reports noted a minor collaborative effort between North Korea and Burundi, in which Pyongyang committed to constructing a small factory for the production of agricultural implements—specifically hoes, the primary tillage tool used in Burundi.³⁰ Even in contexts where mechanisation was limited and the adoption of equipment such as tractors remained impractical, North Korea’s objective was to promote the application of science and technology in agriculture tailored to local conditions.

Kim Il Sung promised that North Korea would take a more active role in developing agriculture in African countries during the Symposium of the Non-Aligned and Other Developing Countries on Increasing Food and Agricultural Production, held in Pyongyang on August 26–31, 1981.³¹ The conference held dual significance for North Korea. First, Pyongyang sought to persuade non-aligned nations to endorse its unification plan and advocate for the withdrawal of the UN Command from the Korean Peninsula. Second, North Korea aimed to present itself as a provider of agricultural assistance to other Global South countries. Given its limited financial and technical resources, Pyongyang strategically positioned agriculture as a key area of expertise, focusing its engagement on nations struggling with food shortages. Following the conference, Kim Il Sung held separate meetings with ministers from African countries to propose concrete initiatives, including the establishment of agricultural research centres in Eastern and Western Africa.³² These proposals were meant to distinguish North Korea’s assistance from Western developmental aid, which was criticized for offering temporary remedies instead of sustainable farming methods adapted to local climate and environmental conditions. As a result, North Korean scientists and engineers were dispatched to Guinea and Tanzania, where they worked with local farmers and technicians to establish agricultural research institutions known as the Kim Il Sung and the Chollima Agro-Science Research Institute.³³

These initiatives laid the groundwork for a more institutionalized form of cooperation in the mid-1980s. The introduction of the Joint Venture Law in September 1984 was intended to facilitate the expansion of agricultural cooperation by providing a legal framework for joint economic projects. According to Kyu Sup

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Kyu Sup Chung, *Past and Present of the North Korean Diplomacy* [북한외교의 어제와 오늘] (Ilshinsa, 1999), 191–92.

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Kim Il Sung, *Talk to the Delegation of the Communist Party of Portugal*, 21–22.

36

Chang Hyun Jeong, *From the Side of Kim Jong Il: A Dialogue with Shin Kyung Wan, Former Vice Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Workers' Party of Korea* [곁에서 본 김정일] (Kimyöngsa, 2000), 193–95.

37

Ibid., 201–202.

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"On Our Country's Joint Venture Law [우리 나라 합영법에 대하여]," *Minju Chosŏn*, October 5, 1984.

39

Hy-Sang Lee, "North Korea's Closed Economy: The Hidden Opening," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 12 (1988): 1272.

40

Chung, *Past and Present of the North Korean Diplomacy*, 196.

41

"Tanzania, DPRK to Co-operate in Agriculture," *Daily News Tanzania*, April 25, 1985.

Chung, North Korea adopted this legislation after recognizing the limitations of a self-reliant and closed economy, seeking instead to promote international cooperation and expand foreign trade.³⁴ Although the majority of joint ventures established under this legislation were formed with enterprises affiliated with *Chongryon*, it is significant that, in the early phases of implementation, efforts were also made to initiate joint projects with European corporations and state-owned enterprises in Africa. During this period, Kim Il Sung frequently promoted joint ventures as a viable model for cooperation with African countries.³⁵ Framed as an alternative to Western developmental aid, joint ventures were expected to offer mechanisms for achieving collective self-reliance and mutual benefit. Unlike financial aid or military assistance aimed at supporting anti-imperialist revolutionary forces, joint ventures were promoted as forms of cooperation capable of delivering tangible economic gains to all participating parties.

Beyond their economic function, the success of joint ventures carried particular significance in the context of leadership succession in North Korea. According to Shin Kyung Wan, former vice-director of the Publicity and Information Department, Kim Jong Il made most of the decisions on domestic policies after he was officially appointed as the successor at the Sixth Party Congress in October 1980,³⁶ while Kim Il Sung continued to exercise substantial influence over foreign policy. Within this context, the introduction of the Joint Venture Law—widely regarded as a policy initiative associated with Kim Jong Il—suggests that he had begun to take a more active role in shaping North Korea's external economic relations. Given Kim Jong Il's reputation for hardline approaches to inter-Korean relations,³⁷ the development of joint ventures offered an opportunity to demonstrate his capacity to engage in cooperative economic initiatives with foreign partners, independent of military mobilisation or the use of force.

North Korean media portrayed the uniqueness of the Joint Venture Law as distinctive for its openness to foreign and diaspora investors, framing it as evidence of a pragmatic adjustment in economic policy. As *Minju Chosŏn*, the newspaper of the Cabinet of the DPRK, emphasized, the law imposed few formal restrictions on potential partners, sectors of cooperation, or geographical locations, explicitly allowing participation by foreign enterprises as well as overseas Koreans, including Korean-Japanese businesspeople.³⁸ Other observers also noted early signs of outreach beyond *Chongryon*-affiliated firms. According to Hy-Sang Lee, Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, North Korea announced an agreement with a "French company on building and managing a hotel in Pyongyang" and "active North Korean inquiries about joint ventures in Europe" soon after announcing the adoption of the Joint Venture Law.³⁹ However, Pyongyang's ambition to expand its economic network via this law was not realized, possibly due to its foreign debt. As several scholars have analyzed, this law did not fundamentally transform the structure of North Korea's pattern of international cooperation but instead facilitated a small number of enterprises, most of them in collaboration with *Chongryon*.⁴⁰ The initial idea to open a business with Western and non-aligned countries thus remained largely unrealized.

North Korea's ambitions were also institutionalized in several African countries through joint ventures. For instance, the Korea-Tanzania Joint Agricultural Company (KOTACO) was established in 1986 as a joint venture between North Korea and Tanzania, with the aim of developing agricultural production in the Rufiji Basin.⁴¹ At the launch ceremony, Paul Bomani, then Minister for Agriculture and Livestock

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"Dar, Pyongyang Launch Farming Firm," *Daily News Tanzania*, February 28, 1987.

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Still, it is difficult to provide precise figures regarding the achievements of North Korea-Tanzania agricultural cooperation at the Chollima Agro-Science Research Institute or in other villages. For example, a North Korean article reported significant increases in maize production in Maguria, Iringa, following the dispatch of agricultural advisers. According to this account, an area described as an uninhabited plain was transformed into a "socialist village" through collaboration between North Korean experts and local residents, with the cultivated area reportedly expanding from 70,000 m² to 3,500,000 m² and maize output increasing by a factor of 350 by 1983 compared with the 1970s. Such figures, however, are difficult—if not impossible—to verify in the absence of independent data on harvest conditions and production levels in the same locality. "The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung Received the Agricultural Technical Cooperation Delegation Dispatched to the United Republic of Tanzania [위대한 수령 김일성동지께서 탄자니아련합공화국에 파견된 농업기술 협조단을 접견하시었다]," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 5, 1982, 1.

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Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30–33.

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Mikael Bergius et al., "Green Economy, Degradation Narratives, and Land-Use Conflicts in Tanzania," *World Development* 129 (2020).

46

Ibid. RUBADA and South-South Company of Korea initially held a 50 percent share for the respective countries. Concerning the past ownership structure, see Jennifer J. West and Ruth Haug, "The Vulnerability and Resilience of Smallholder-Inclusive Agricultural Investments in Tanzania," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 675.

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Jamie Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Indiana University Press, 2009), 124–27.

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Available sources remain fragmentary regarding other joint ventures in African states. This limitation makes systematic comparison difficult. Consequently, this article focuses on the Tanzanian case, where relatively detailed documentation allows for closer empirical examination.

Development, announced an ambitious plan to irrigate 50,000 hectares, with an initial phase of 15,000 hectares expected to yield approximately 107,000 tons of cereals.⁴² This project built on more than a decade of prior cooperation: from the early 1980s, over one hundred North Korean experts had been dispatched to rural areas in Tanzania to provide technical assistance in rice and maize production.⁴³ Tanzania, under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, had prioritized rural development and agriculture since independence through the policy of ujamaa, articulated in the Arusha Declaration of 1967.⁴⁴ North Korea was among the few countries that continued to support Tanzanian agricultural initiatives even as Nyerere's vision of *ujamaa* and forced villagization began to unravel in the mid-1970s.

Despite these ambitious goals, KOTACO failed to achieve its projected outcomes. By 1989, the project had cleared and developed approximately 5,818 hectares, yet only about 2,500 hectares were ultimately cultivated.⁴⁵ The project faced challenges due to financial constraints and logistical issues, leading to its abandonment in 1993 amid economic hardships in North Korea. Subsequently, the Rufiji Basin Development Authority (RUBADA) took possession of the Mngeta Farm assets on behalf of the Tanzanian government.⁴⁶ The farm was later leased to various tenants, including Kilombero Plantations Limited, in 2007, but none fully realized the original development plans. Despite the proximity of the TANZAM (Tanzania-Zambia) railway,⁴⁷ which could have facilitated transportation and trade, the project did not achieve its intended outcomes, reflecting broader challenges in North Korea-Tanzania agricultural collaborations.

The disappointing performance of KOTACO illustrates the wider constraints facing North Korea's agricultural cooperation with African countries in the late 1980s. As Tanzania had been one of Pyongyang's most important partners in agricultural cooperation, the project's failure undermined prospects for further collective initiatives. According to Kyu Sup Chung, Pyongyang also pursued joint ventures with Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Zambia, and the Central African Republic.⁴⁸ Yet only seven joint ventures were established with African states, compared to twenty-seven ventures involving *Chongryon*-affiliated enterprises.⁴⁹ While the adoption of the Joint Venture Law signalled North Korea's intention to enhance external engagement and align—at least partially—with global trends, in practice, its implementation was primarily limited to cooperation with companies affiliated with *Chongryon*. Partnerships with non-aligned countries, including those in Africa, thus remained highly restricted. Given Pyongyang's sustained efforts to promote the "Juche Farming Method" and to cultivate influence in African states through agricultural cooperation, the subsequent contraction of these partnerships is remarkable.

This outcome raises a broader question: why did agricultural cooperation between North Korea and African countries fail to sustain its earlier momentum in the late 1980s? Existing scholarship often attributes this decline to North Korea's deteriorating domestic economic conditions and the reduction of external support from the Soviet Union and China. By the late 1970s, North Korea was already entering a period of prolonged economic stagnation, exacerbated by mounting external debt and declining industrial productivity.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, China had begun improving relations with the United States through its reform and opening policy, and the Soviet Union—already struggling economically before Gorbachev's rise—was increasingly unable to support allied socialist states. However, given North Korea's continued commitment to agricultural projects in Africa well into the early

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Chung, Past and Present of the North Korean Diplomacy, 195.

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Moon Soo Yang, "The North Korean Economy in the 1970s and the Formation of a Mechanism of Long-term Depression [1970년대 북한 경제와 장기침체 메커니즘의 형성]," *Review of North Korean Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 84–86.

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Nate Kerkhoff, "North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement: From Adulation to Marginalization," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 28 (2021): 50.

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Kim, *Beyond the Camps of the Cold War*, 454–66.

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Kevin Gray and Barry K. Gills, "South–South Cooperation and the Rise of the Global South," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2016): 558.

54

Gyan Prakash and Jeremy Adelman, "Introduction: Imagining the Third World," in *Inventing the Third World: Postwar Social Science and the Global Cold War*, ed. Gyan Prakash and Jeremy Adelman (Routledge, 2022), 21.

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Taekyoon Kim, *After Bandung: The International Political Sociology of the Global South* [반둥 이후: 글로벌 사우스의 국제 정치경제학] (Zininzin, 2023), 176.

1980s, it is insufficient to explain the decline of cooperation solely through domestic economic downturn and geopolitical shifts among its traditional allies. A more nuanced analysis requires an understanding of global circumstances that reshaped North Korea's foreign relations during the last stage of the Cold War.

3. Decline of the Global South and the Momentum of the South-South Cooperation

Like diplomatic relations between North Korea and African states, their agricultural cooperation was often initiated by Pyongyang as part of its broader effort to gain international recognition from postcolonial nations. This, however, does not imply that African states were passive recipients of North Korean initiatives. Cooperation did not automatically translate into political support, as African governments evaluated both the quantity and quality of assistance and assessed whether such projects aligned with their own domestic priorities.

Recognition nevertheless remained a central concern for North Korea, shaped by the unresolved "Korea Question" at the United Nations and the importance of votes from postcolonial states in the UN General Assembly. African and Latin American support in this process reflected distinct political and economic calculations, most clearly illustrated by North Korea's admission to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at the 1975 Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers Conference held in Lima, Peru.⁵¹ During the conference, the applications of both Pyongyang and Seoul were considered, but only North Korea's was accepted, largely with the support of African and Latin American countries.⁵² Although North Korea had not been invited to the NAM initially in 1961, Kim Il Sung made sustained efforts throughout the 1970s—including overseas visits to Eastern Europe and North Africa—to secure membership. Following its admission in August 1975, Pyongyang increasingly used the NAM as a platform to seek recognition from newly independent states. Collective farming and irrigation projects with African countries emerged in this context, as North Korea viewed the NAM as a crucial institution for consolidating its international standing.

Until the 1970s, many "Third World" countries actively pursued the establishment of an alternative global economic order. Alongside the broader vision of South-South cooperation articulated at the Bandung Conference and institutionalized through the NAM, organizations such as the Group of 77 (G-77) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) advanced the concept of a New International Economic Order (NIEO).⁵³ The NIEO called for economic sovereignty, collective self-reliance, and the elimination of unequal exchange between the Global North and South. African countries, in particular, reached the height of their collective political influence during this period, as leaders raised unified demands through forums like UNCTAD and the G-77.⁵⁴ These institutions shaped the foundation for the NIEO, which envisioned a restructured international economic system based on sovereign control over natural resources, fairer terms of trade, reform of international finance and trade regimes, regulations of multinational corporations, debt relief, and expanded development assistance. As Taekyoon Kim, Professor of International Development at Seoul National University, has noted, these demands—calling on former colonial powers to accept responsibility for structural inequality—had the potential to transform global politics and the world economy in the long run.⁵⁵

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Barry Riley, *The Political History of American Food Aid: An Uneasy Benevolence* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 340–41.

57

Seokjin Kim, “Establishing a New International Economic Order is a Just Cause for the Independent Development and Prosperity of Developing Countries [새로운 국제경제질서를 세우는 것은 신흥세력나라들의 자주적발전과 번영을 위한 정당한 위업],” *Külloja*, September 1976, 59–64.

58

Ibid., 60.

59

Ibid., 63–64.

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Lal, “African Socialism and the Limits of Global Familyhood,” 24–27.

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Kim, *After Bandung*, 176–79.

North Korea placed significant hopes on the NAM as a platform through which it could mobilize support from postcolonial African states. By the early 1980s, however, the NAM no longer wielded the same influence it had in earlier decades. This decline was closely tied to the waning influence of the Global South itself. The global food crisis of the early 1970s dealt a severe blow to many non-oil-producing countries that were heavily dependent on primary commodity exports.⁵⁶ Tanzania offers a revealing example. Nyerere’s *Ujamaa*, which had been a promising rural development project started in 1967, turned into a catastrophe for many peasants. They endured severe drought, skyrocketing oil prices, forced migration, and the Ugandan invasion of Tanzania in October 1978. Consequently, even countries that had previously maintained amicable relations with North Korea and engaged in agricultural cooperation began, by the 1980s, to accept structural adjustment programs promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), thereby aligning themselves with the neoliberal tide of globalisation. In this context, North Korea and African states could no longer sustain the same degree of agricultural cooperation as before.

North Korea also endorsed the NIEO as a valid demand for transforming the unequal world order. Its party organ published an article that echoed the core demands of the NIEO.⁵⁷ For example, one article argued that unfair trade conditions represented a clear and concentrated form of injustice, whereby “imperialist” powers set the prices of raw materials and primary goods at the lowest possible levels, thereby widening the economic gap between developed and developing countries. It further characterized the existing economic order as a subjugating and exploitative system, as well as problematized the deceptive actions of developed countries using the terms “aid” and “cooperation” to undermine the national economies of developing countries.⁵⁸ The article concluded with a call for collective action among developing countries against the attempts of “imperialist powers” to divide newly emerging forces and preserve the old international order.⁵⁹

Contrary to initial expectations, the “Third World” countries were unable to maintain long-term unity. Priya Lal, a historian of Africa and Professor at Boston College, described the fractures within the Global South that hindered efforts to organize unity, even if the members agreed upon the global divide of wealth.⁶⁰ Nyerere was a strong advocate of international solidarity, and he raised his voice to call for collective action in international organisations like UNCTAD and the G-77. Yet even Nyerere, who strongly underscored cross-border cooperation, could not ignore Tanzania’s domestic challenges and was unwilling to accept the sacrifice of individual nations for the sake of transnational solidarity. The economic self-interest of the members limited the capacity of the NIEO and the possibility of achieving collective self-reliance. Moreover, the impact of the NIEO was limited due to the oil crisis, where its bargaining power significantly declined without the support of the OPEC countries. The hike in crude oil prices created another friction within the Global South, where the export profits of the OPEC members exceeded those of the rest of the Third World countries after the oil crises in 1973 and 1979. The decline of the NIEO meant the political and economic dominance of developed countries along with the growing neoliberal international order.⁶¹

Kim Il Sung repeatedly articulated his expectation of the NAM as a platform to take the initiative in the global anti-imperialist movement and disclose economic inequality between the Global North and South. From his perspective, the NAM should exert more power to unite its members and create a new world order where

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Kim Il Sung, *For the Development of the Non-Aligned Movement*, Concluding Speech at the Joint Meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the WPK and the Central People's Committee of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, June 20, 1986, in *Kim Il Sung Works*, vol. 40, 115–44.

63

Ibid., 116.

64

Ibid., 120.

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Jovan Cavoški, *Non-Aligned Movement Summits: A History* (Bloomsbury, 2022), 196–97.

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"Record of Conversation between Comrade J. Batmunkh and Kim Il Sung," November 20, 1986, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Mongolian Foreign Ministry Archive, fond 3, dans 1, kh/n 173, khuu 123–64. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko and Onon Perenlei. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116671>.

the Global South is no longer reliant on and subordinate to wealthier nations in the West. Kim's vision for the NAM appeared in his speech on June 20, 1986. In this speech, he mentioned six urgent matters to develop the NAM: (1) Unite to fight against imperialism; (2) Prevention of nuclear war and the abolition of nuclear weapons; (3) Elimination of colonialism and racism, and achieving national liberation; (4) Economic independence of the Global South (through South-South cooperation); (5) Establishing a New International Economic Order (Imperialists plundering natural resources of the developing countries); (6) The development of the NAM.⁶² He argued that the members must tackle these issues to fulfil the "noble mission" of the NAM and satisfy the "aspirations and desires" of their populations.⁶³

In emphasizing South-South cooperation, Kim Il Sung also stressed unity among NAM members. As he stated, "Imperialism is the common enemy of the peoples of the non-aligned countries and the progressive people throughout the world. The allied imperialist force is challenging the just cause of the people for independence, peace and social progress. ... The people can only oppose and defeat the allied imperialist force by a united effort."⁶⁴ By referring to imperialism, he could provoke the memory of colonial rule, which was shared by the NAM members, and contend for the necessity of solidarity among themselves.

Kim thus appeared to have regarded the NAM as a platform through which the Global South could continue its anti-imperialist struggle by fostering solidarity among member states. His high expectations made Pyongyang apply to host the NAM Conference, which was unsuccessful. Moreover, by the 1980s, the movement was experiencing internal divisions due to ideological and policy differences among its members. Despite the designation as "non-aligned," the NAM included several member states—particularly Cuba—that exhibited strong pro-Soviet tendencies, while others emphasized the need to uphold the principle of non-alignment by refraining from supporting either the United States or the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ Within this context, Kim's repeated emphasis on South-South cooperation and his calls for strengthened unity among NAM member states can be understood as an effort to counteract this decline. Nonetheless, North Korea, a relatively new member, did not have enough influence to unite other countries, and the NAM members were occupied with surviving neoliberal globalisation.

During his meeting with Jambyn Batmunkh, the General Secretary of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (1984–1990), Kim Il Sung voiced growing disillusionment with the NAM, emphasising its diminishing relevance in global affairs.⁶⁶ He observed that the organisation had recently failed to exert meaningful influence, largely due to internal challenges faced by its member states and persistent divisions among them. He criticized the NAM's inability to maintain cohesion or effectively pursue its stated goals, such as decolonisation and economic self-reliance. Kim also expressed scepticism toward the leadership within the Global South, suggesting that many political leaders from developing countries lacked practical commitment. He also recounted how some leaders frequently visited other nations seeking advice but rarely implemented meaningful reforms at home. This conversation revealed North Korea's growing frustration with the NAM's internal divisions and its declining influence over member states. Pyongyang was particularly disillusioned by the realisation that the retreat of the NAM could not be reversed through the efforts of a single country. Young claimed that North Korea eventually sought a breakthrough in its foreign relations with "Third World" countries outside

67

Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 140.

68

Ibid., 139.

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Non-Aligned Movement, *Harare Final Document: 8th Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement, Harare, Zimbabwe, September 1-6, 1986*, 72–73.

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Kim Il Sung, *Let Us Develop South-South Cooperation*, Congratulatory Speech at the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Countries on South-South Cooperation, June 9, 1987, in *Kim Il Sung Works*, vol. 40 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), 299.

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Kim Il Sung, *Non-Aligned and Developing Countries Should Solve the Agricultural Problem*, 214.

72

Gray and Gills, “South–South Cooperation and the Rise of the Global South,” 557.

the framework of the NAM in the late 1980s.⁶⁷

Still, Pyongyang could not easily dismiss the NAM, which had been a core platform to advocate its international position. Despite its declining influence, North Korea remained committed to using the movement as a crucial diplomatic tool to promote its anti-imperialist agenda and amplify its voice in global affairs. As a last attempt to revitalize South-South cooperation, North Korea hosted minor conferences of the NAM calling for South-South cooperation, but the meeting yielded little tangible outcome. Many African states sought connections with South Korea at the end of the Cold War, which only deteriorated longstanding ties with Pyongyang.

4. An Age of Counter-Revolution: From Solidarity to Strategy

After failing to secure hosting rights for the NAM summits in 1983 and 1986, North Korea managed to organize the 1987 Extraordinary Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Countries on South-South Cooperation in Pyongyang.⁶⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, Kim Il Sung was desperate to revitalize the NAM to pressure the United States and South Korea to withdraw foreign troops from the Korean Peninsula and pursue unification without external intervention. Like earlier summits, the 1986 NAM summit in Harare called for peaceful reunification and the withdrawal of foreign forces.⁶⁹ However, compared to lengthy statements addressing political and economic issues elsewhere, the Harare declaration devoted only minimal attention to solidarity with North Korea.

In his welcome speech, Kim Il Sung emphasized South-South cooperation as a means of achieving collective self-reliance. He stated: “Collective self-reliance is the common ideal and principle for the peoples of the non-aligned countries in their struggle to shape their destinies for themselves in a spirit of unity and cooperation. The masses of the people have to forge their own destiny. To this end, they must unite and cooperate with each other not only within their own countries but also on an international scale under the banner of self-reliance.”⁷⁰ Kim had previously invoked the concept of collective self-reliance when dispatching North Korean scientists and engineers to countries such as Guinea and Tanzania to assist in agricultural development.⁷¹

For North Korea, collective self-reliance symbolized both its sustained efforts to support agricultural development in Africa during the 1980s and an appeal for recognition of its contributions. Maintaining South-South cooperation under this banner of collective self-reliance was seen as a matter of existential importance for a country that remained fiercely critical of neoliberal globalization and structural adjustment programmes led by the World Bank and the IMF. This form of cooperation was, therefore, understood not only as beneficial for countries like North Korea but also as a proposal to overcome poverty and underdevelopment at the international level. As social scientists Kevin Gray and Barry K. Gills argue, South-South cooperation offers a “vision of mutual benefit and solidarity among the disadvantaged of the world system,” fostering hopes for development based on mutual assistance without reliance on the Global North.⁷²

By the mid-1980s, however, North Korean officials increasingly recognized that African countries were no longer offering unconditional support. Pyongyang’s engagement with the NAM had become anachronistic: although the NAM no longer functioned as a cohesive force within the Global South, North Korea continued

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Kerkhoff, "North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement," 61.

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Ibid., 65; Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 140.

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Kim Il Sung, *For the Complete Victory of Socialism*, Policy Speech at the First Session of the Eighth Supreme People's Assembly of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, December 30, 1986, in *Kim Il Sung Works*, vol. 40 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), 194–223.

76

Sergey Radchenko, "It's Not Enough to Win: The Seoul Olympics and the Roots of North Korea's Isolation," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 9 (2012): 1249–54.

77

Young-hwan Koh, *P'yŏngyang25shi* [평양 25시] (Goryeowon, 1992), 185–202. His testimony should be interpreted cautiously due to his identity as a diplomat-turned-defector who publicly criticizes the North Korean government in several channels. His experience as a North Korean diplomat in Africa is also limited to the late 1970s and the 1980s. Soo-yeon Kim, "Ex-N. Korean Diplomat Named Special Adviser to Seoul's Unification Minister," *Yonhap News Agency*, September 6, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230906003500325>.

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Koh, *P'yŏngyang25shi*, 187.

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Young, *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader*, 141.

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Yeon-chul Kim, *70 Years of Dialogue: Rethinking the History of Inter-Korean Relations* [70년의 대화—새로 읽는 남북관계사] (Changbi: 2018), 187–88.

to rely on it as a vehicle for international recognition.⁷³ At successive NAM-related meetings, Pyongyang repeatedly foregrounded issues related to the Korean Peninsula and demanded unequivocal support from member states. As scholars like Nate Kerkhoff and Benjamin R. Young have demonstrated, this approach generated considerable discontent within the movement.⁷⁴

At the same time, the growing influence of the United States and the rapid economic development of South Korea opened room for the NAM member states to establish ties with Seoul. This shift undermined Pyongyang's efforts to orchestrate a boycott of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, modelled on earlier boycotts of the Moscow (1980) and Los Angeles (1984) Games. Although Kim Il Sung did not publicly claim African support for a boycott, preventing South Korea from successfully hosting the Olympics was of central importance to North Korea. Following Kim Il Sung's assurance on the "complete victory of socialism"⁷⁵ in December 1986, the prospect of a global event—one that included participation from communist states—being held in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, symbolized a substantial setback for Pyongyang in the ongoing inter-Korean competition. North Korea also tried hard to persuade the International Olympic Committee to include itself as a co-host of the 1988 Olympics while urging socialist countries to boycott the event.⁷⁶

Yet even long-standing African partners proved reluctant to offer unconditional support for this boycott initiative. According to the recollection of Koh Young-hwan, a former North Korean diplomat in Zaire (today's Democratic Republic of the Congo) who defected to South Korea in the early 1990s, Tanzania declined to commit to a boycott, despite the two countries' long history of agricultural cooperation.⁷⁷ Even though North Korean delegates chose Tanzania as the first destination, given its influence in the "Third World" and the close friendship between Kim Il Sung and Julius Nyerere, newly elected President Ali Hassan Mwinyi cautiously responded that he should consult with other socialist and non-aligned leaders.⁷⁸ This hesitation reflected a broader reorientation among African governments, which increasingly prioritized pragmatic diplomatic and economic considerations over ideological loyalty. In the end, a limited number of countries, including Cuba, Nicaragua, and Madagascar, chose to boycott the event⁷⁹, while the Seoul Olympics only showcased South Korea's rapid industrialization and highlighted its growing economic superiority over North Korea.

These developments coincided with a broader diplomatic setback, namely South Korea's normalization of relations with the Soviet Union and China, which put Pyongyang in a diplomatic predicament. As a result, North Korea could no longer ignore the reality that it had to join the United Nations as a separate entity from South Korea, each holding its own seat.⁸⁰ Consequently, on September 17, 1991, during the 46th UNGA, South Korea and North Korea became the 160th and 161st official member states, respectively. This marked the end of the decades-long diplomatic competition between the two Koreas over UN membership. The simultaneous admission of both Koreas to the UN can also be seen as a turning point at which North Korea's interactions with African countries began to decline.

In addition, North Korea-Africa relations were influenced by shifts within African countries. As many postcolonial nations faced mounting national debt, they became increasingly dependent on loans and grants from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. These loans and grants were subject to conditions that often took the form of structural adjustment programs mandating economic reforms, leading to the dismantling of socialist policies and the

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Paul Bjerk, *Julius Nyerere* (Ohio University Press, 2017), 119–26.

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Chong-Ae Yu explains that North Korea's heavy reliance on cheap petroleum from the Soviet Union caused an unprecedented food crisis in the early 1990s. See Chong-Ae Yu, "The Rise and Demise of Industrial Agriculture in North Korea," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 75–109.

83

Van der Hoog, *Comrades beyond the Cold War*, 187.

84

Ibid., 161–73; 227–34.

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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/>.

adoption of neoliberal economic models. For example, Tanzania began economic reform with the beginning of Ali Hassan Mwinyi's presidency in 1985, which included trade liberalization and privatization of state-owned enterprises.⁸¹ These economic reforms exhibited a dual nature: while they contributed to the recovery of productivity, they also deepened dependence on foreign aid and external debt. North Korea was highly critical of such reform trajectories, viewing them as a departure from the principle of self-reliance and as detrimental to the economic independence of the Global South. As neoliberal globalization advanced, Pyongyang's ideological appeal weakened, and agricultural cooperation with African states steadily lost momentum.

5. Conclusion: Thwarted Attempt to Construct an Alternative World Order

This article has demonstrated that North Korea's agricultural cooperation with African countries during the Cold War was closely intertwined with the rise and decline of the Global South. Pyongyang's efforts to collaborate with African farmers and promote locally adapted agricultural methods were initially welcomed by postcolonial states seeking economic self-reliance and food sovereignty. Expectations for expanded cooperation were further heightened by the adoption of the Joint Venture Law in 1984. While a small number of joint ventures were established, most failed to produce lasting results. Rather than collapsing solely due to North Korea's internal economic difficulties, these projects unravelled alongside the broader erosion of the Global South, as many postcolonial states embraced neoliberal reforms in exchange for loans and aid from institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. In contrast to earlier decades—when non-aligned countries collectively advanced the New International Economic Order—the ideal of collective self-reliance lost political and economic relevance in the era of neoliberal globalization.

North Korea's diplomacy using its agricultural success also reflected its persistent quest for international recognition, in which African support played a crucial role in strengthening its position vis-à-vis South Korea. Even after the inter-Korean rivalry at the United Nations diminished in the late 1970s, Pyongyang continued agricultural cooperation with countries such as Guinea and Tanzania, underscoring its commitment to collective self-reliance. Yet most of these projects came to an end in the early 1990s without tangible outcomes, as North Korean personnel withdrew amid mounting domestic economic hardship. While the severe economic decline culminating in the "Arduous March"—a period of mass starvation in the late 1990s—undoubtedly weakened Pyongyang's capacity to sustain domestic agricultural production and overseas projects,⁸² agricultural cooperation with Africa had already lost momentum once countries of the Global South abandoned collective efforts to construct an alternative world order and accommodated themselves to neoliberal globalization. As both anti-imperialist ideology and the strategic value of international recognition declined, the rationale underpinning these collaborations faded.

As Van der Hoog rightly noted, it would be misleading to assume that North Korea-Africa relations ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall or the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁸³ In the post-Cold War era, Pyongyang reactivated its historical ties to generate hard currency and circumvent international sanctions through arms sales and monument construction.⁸⁴ Despite the closure of its embassies abroad,⁸⁵ North Korea continued to participate in NAM and G-77 summits, signalling its

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Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), "NAM Summit Held," *The Pyongyang Times*, January 27, 2024; KCNA, "Third South Summit Held," *The Pyongyang Times*, January 27, 2024.

enduring rhetorical commitment to the Global South.⁸⁶ Yet these connections could not resurrect the shared global project of creating a new world order in the 1970s and the 1980s. The decline of agricultural cooperation between North Korea and African states thus marked not merely the end of bilateral economic engagements, but the disillusioning collapse of a broader vision of South-South cooperation and collective self-reliance: one that could not be salvaged through institutional mechanisms like joint ventures.

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AI use for English editing

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely to improve English clarity and style at the author's direction. The author reviewed and edited all outputs and is responsible for the final text. No AI tool was used to generate, analyze, or interpret historical or other primary sources.

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