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Sergey Radchenko and Bernd Schaefer. "'Red on White': Kim Il Sung, Park Chung Hee, and the Failure of Korea's Reunification, 1971–1973." *Cold War History* 17:3 (2017): 259-277.

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Review by **Balázs Szalontai**, Korea University

On the basis of declassified Russian, East German, and U.S. diplomatic documents, this article examines why the leaders of North and South Korea, having fiercely clashed with each other in the preceding years, unexpectedly decided to hold top-level talks in 1971-1972, and why this rapprochement failed to lead to a long-term détente between Pyongyang and Seoul. While the authors concentrate on Kim Il Sung's views and motives, they also provide an insight into Park Chung Hee's tactical maneuvers, and seek to assess whether his decision to impose *Yushin*, an even harsher form of authoritarianism than he had earlier enacted, was a justified response to the North Korean challenge or not. Furthermore, the article skillfully places the dynamics of inter-Korean relations into a broader diplomatic context by investigating how Sino-American reconciliation influenced the actions of the two Korean leaders, and how they tried to communicate their unification policies to their allies (China, the USSR, and the U.S., respectively).

As the authors duly acknowledge in the first footnote of their work, this article is extensively based on Bernd Schaefer's earlier working paper, "Overconfidence Shattered: North Korean Unification Policy, 1971-1975."[1] Indeed, the bulk of East German sources cited in "'Red on White'" are identical with the files mentioned in "Overconfidence Shattered," though the authors carefully avoided any verbatim repetition in the main text. In their approach and conclusions, the two publications are largely similar; among other ways, both lay a strong emphasis on the 'China factor' and Kim Il Sung's unwarranted optimism about his chances of undermining the southern political system.

What distinguishes this article from "Overconfidence Shattered" is, first of all, the rich collection of Russian archival sources that Sergey Radchenko found in the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History

[1] Bernd Schaefer, "Overconfidence Shattered: North Korean Unification Policy, 1971–1975." North Korea International Documentation Project Working Paper #2 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, December 2010).

(RGANI). Apart from providing additional details about how Kim Il Sung evaluated the domestic and international conditions of South Korea, Radchenko's contribution gives a deeper insight into Pyongyang's complicated maneuvering between the two Communist giants, with particular respect to Kim's efforts to counterbalance the Sino-U.S. rapprochement by "simultaneously courting Moscow" (265). Taking advantage of his command of Chinese, Radchenko also utilizes Chinese sources (like an internal Chinese party publication titled *Mao Zedong yu waibing tanhua jilu huibian*) to reconstruct Mao's conversations with North Korean leaders. On the basis of these sources, the authors draw the reasonable conclusion that by 1970, Kim Il Sung had realized that "neither the Soviets nor the Chinese would support" (263) a North Korean attack on the ROK – a consideration that influenced his decision to switch to a less confrontational approach.

Still, the picture the article draws about Kim's balancing act between Moscow and Beijing may need some modification. Describing how the DPRK kept the Soviet bloc in the dark about its initial talks with the ROK (which culminated in the Joint Statement of 4 July 1972), the authors note that "no clear evidence has yet emerged" to indicate that "the North Koreans kept the Chinese better informed of their secret diplomacy" (268). In reality, Kim Il Sung seems to have kept more distance from the USSR and its satellites than from some of his other allies. For instance, on 14 July 1972 the Hungarian embassy in Guinea reported the following: "The DRV ambassador told me that during the talks which led to the joint statement, the deputy foreign minister of the DPRK had visited Conakry and informed the Guinean government about the negotiations. His visit was kept secret, the fraternal ambassadors were not informed."[2] Notably, the Chinese and Romanian media enthusiastically praised the Joint Statement, whereas the Soviet press simply published it without any comment.[3]

Second, "'Red on White'" covers South Korea far more extensively than the earlier working paper. On the one hand, it provides a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the South Korean domestic conditions that inspired Kim Il Sung's optimistic assessment of the prospects of unification; on the other hand, it describes the actions, views, and concerns of the ROK government in more detail. For instance, it correctly highlights President Richard Nixon's 1970 step to reduce the U.S. troop presence in South Korea (actually, this decision was communicated to Seoul as early as March, rather than July[4]), and points out that the troop withdrawal policy was carried out "despite bitter protests by President Park Chung Hee" (260). Nixon's unilateral decision to revise America's security commitment to the ROK, and the anxiety it generated among the South Korean leaders, must have played a major role in that Kim Il Sung took an optimistic view of the southern situation. Indeed, in the winter of 1970–1971, North Korea seems to have deliberately played upon

[2] Hungarian Embassy to Guinea, Telegram, 14 July 1972, Hungarian National Archives (MNL), XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1972, 59. doboz, 81-107, 00958/37/1972.

[3] Hungarian Embassy to the USSR, Telegram, 13 July 1972, MNL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1972, 59. doboz, 81-107, 00958/33/1972; Hungarian Foreign Ministry, Memorandum, 26 July 1972, MNL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1972, 59. doboz, 81-107, 00958/41/1972.

[4] Min Yong Lee, "The Vietnam War: South Korea's Search for National Security," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 422.

Park's fears of abandonment by provoking armed clashes with ROKA units but carefully refraining from killing U.S. soldiers.[5]

The authors also identify several additional factors that emboldened Kim and convinced him of the superiority of his own political system over the South. In their opinion, "Kim Il Sung continued to believe that North Korea was winning the economic contest with the South" (269). Since Kim was not wholly unaware of the defects of the northern economy, the authors conclude that his optimism was based on the view that the socio-economic problems of the ROK were far more serious. It is indeed possible that the North Korean dictator did believe his own propaganda about the "chaos and unemployment" (269) in the South, but one might add that Kim had some other reasons to feel elated. Namely, in this period the DPRK dramatically expanded its economic contacts with Japan and Western Europe. As early as the 1960s, the North Korean leaders had actively sought to obtain modern technical equipment from the capitalist countries, but the prospects of technology transfer remained relatively limited as long as they maintained a belligerent stance toward Seoul.[6] Once they adopted an outwardly peaceful posture, they became increasingly able to purchase entire industrial plants from Japanese and Western firms on credit (1972-1974), which in turn greatly irritated the ROK government. Thus Kim Il Sung managed to use the process of inter-Korean rapprochement to outcompete the South, and to drive a wedge between Seoul and Tokyo.[7]

Similarly, Radchenko and Schaefer point out that the North Korean leaders, having failed to create a viable guerrilla movement in the ROK, realized that they might achieve better results if they took steps conducive to the growth of South Korea's parliamentary opposition parties. In the authors' opinion, Pyongyang gained inspiration primarily from Kim Daejung's good performance during the presidential elections held on 27 April 1971 and from his avowed interest in finding a modus vivendi with the North. Actually, the origins of this new North Korean approach may be traced back to May 1969 when Kim Il Sung told a Soviet delegation that the DPRK intended to neutralize Park's strategy of playing on the population's fears of the 'northern threat.' To help the opposition parties gain votes, Pyongyang would adopt a peaceful attitude before the next southern elections, Kim said.[8] On 12 April 1971 (that is, two weeks before the ROK presidential elections), the northern Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) did issue an Eight-Point Declaration containing an "essentially peaceful formula for reunification."[9] The DPRK would be willing to negotiate with any South Korean politician except Park Chung Hee, the SPA stated in a hardly disguised attempt to influence the

[5] Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 62–64.

[6] Chin O. Chung, *P'yongyang Between Peking and Moscow: North Korea's Involvement in the Sino-Soviet Dispute* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1978), 92-98.

[7] Adrian Buzo, *Politics and Leadership in North Korea: The Guerilla Dynasty.* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 76–77; Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, 115-122.

[8] Balázs Szalontai, "In the Shadow of Vietnam: A New Look at North Korea's Militant Strategy, 1962-1970," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:4 (Fall 2012), 164.

[9] Schaefer, "Overconfidence Shattered," 4.

outcome of the elections.[10] It was only on 6 August 1971 (that is, after Park and his party had won both the presidential elections and the subsequent National Assembly elections) that Kim Il Sung "offered to hold direct talks with all South Korean parties, including the ruling Democratic Republican Party" (267).

At the same time, the authors correctly emphasize that Kim Il Sung was "looking to cast a wider net" (271). While he successfully established contacts with Kim Daejung's New Democratic Party, he also tried to exploit "the alleged animosity between Park and his prime minister, Kim Jongpil, and also between Park and Lee Hurak" (271). In fact, the animosity between Kim, Park, and Lee was not just 'alleged' but quite real. Once again, the origins of this rivalry may be traced back to 1969, when Park encountered substantial opposition from Kim Jongpil and the so-called 'Main Current' faction of the Democratic Republican Party. Since Kim aspired to run for president when Park's second term expired, his group temporarily blocked Park's plan to pass a constitutional amendment allowing him to run for a third term.[11]

Radchenko and Schaefer convincingly argue that Kim Il Sung's ultimate objective was neither peaceful co-existence with the South Korean administration nor reunification based on the principle of equality but rather the imposition of a Communist system on the ROK: "All of Kim's golden words about national unity and reconciliation masked his basic aspiration to extend his rule to the South" (276). That is, Kim's flexible tactics merely constituted a new means to achieve the same aim that the North Korean leader had earlier tried to attain by hatching assassination plots against Park. The available evidence, some of which was presented in "Overconfidence Shattered," strongly supports this conclusion:

First of all, in August 1972 a cadre of the Central Committee's International Liaisons Office openly told a Bulgarian diplomat that the establishment of a "bourgeois democratic system" in the South would be only the first stage of the unification process: "Now the Korean Communists are working to ensure that Park Chung Hee have only one way out, namely, the extension of North-South contacts, which will eventually strangle Park Chung Hee and his Fascist regime."[12] Second, the DPRK authorities emphatically warned their Soviet bloc allies that despite the inter-Korean rapprochement, "the fraternal socialist countries" should not adopt a friendly attitude toward "the South Korean puppets but, in reverse, isolate them even more through persistent and not abating pressure."[13] Third, in 1971 (that is, in the very period of the inter-Korean dialogue) the

[10] Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, Report, 14 May 1971, MNL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1971, 67. doboz, 81-20, 002308/1971.

[11] Y.C. Han, "The 1969 Constitutional Revision and Party Politics in South Korea," *Pacific Affairs* 44:2 (Summer 1971), 242-246; Byung-Kook Kim, "The Labyrinth of Solitude: Park and the Exercise of Presidential Power," in *The Park Chung Hee Era*, 145.

[12] Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, Telegram, 26 July 1972, MNL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1972, 59. doboz, 81-107, 00958/48/1972.

[13] Schaefer, "Overconfidence Shattered," 45-46.

North Korean military started to dig infiltration tunnels under the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), evidently in preparation for an invasion of the South.[14]

For these reasons, I am quite in agreement with Radchenko and Schaefer in that Park's decision to impose Yushin was at least partly influenced by the inter-Korean talks. Aware of Pyongyang's efforts to establish contacts with the various southern opposition groups, the South Korean leader—as the North Koreans correctly understood—wanted to secure "the monopoly to conduct the dialogue" with the DPRK.[15] "By brutally squashing the eggs in Kim Il Sung's democratic basket, Park Chung Hee had seriously upset the 'Great Leader's' strategy of promoting democracy qua revolution" (273), Radchenko and Schaefer conclude. Nevertheless, they do not go so far as to openly endorse Park's anti-democratic step. On the contrary, they argue that "precisely because Kim Il Sung overestimated his capabilities, the so-called communist threat to South Korea was not as great as Park Chung Hee made it out to be" (276). Indeed, the New Democratic Party, critical as it was of Park's authoritarian methods, showed readiness to cooperate with him in some periods when the "Communist threat" appeared especially serious.[16]

All in all, this article is a valuable contribution to the academic literature on both North and South Korean history. By carefully juxtaposing Kim Il Sung's "golden words about national unity and reconciliation" with the confidential statements he made in the presence of his Communist allies, Radchenko and Schaefer present a skeptical but justified assessment of the prospects of inter-Korean reconciliation. Under the present circumstances, when the North-South dialogue is once again on the upswing, the lessons of 1971–1972 may be still at least partly valid.

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[14] Narushige Michishita, *North Korea's Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008* (London: Routledge, 2010), 84.

[15] Schaefer, "Overconfidence Shattered," 16.

[16] Soo Jin Kim, "Opposition Parties in the Park Chung Hee Era: A Focus on the *Sinmindang*," in *Kim Dae-jung and History of Korean Opposition Parties*, ed. Sang-young Rhyu, Sam-woong Kim, and Ji-yeon Shim (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2013), 68, 89-90.