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## Article Review 170

Balazs Szalontai and Yoo Jinil. "Maneuvering between Baghdad and Tehran: North Korea's Relations with Iraq and Iran during the Cold War." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 25:2 (Spring 2023): 179-247.

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While cooperation between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and Iran over the past three decades in developing ballistic missiles and possibly in sharing nuclear-weapons-related technology has been well studied,<sup>1</sup> very little attention has been given to Pyongyang's relations with Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> South Korea-based scholars Balazs Szalontai and Yoo Jinil fill this literature gap in their thorough assessment of the diplomatic relations between North Korea and Iran and Iraq over the course of the Cold War. Extending the contrast, they also shed light on Pyongyang's relations with Tehran before Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. These comparisons bring greater clarity to the foreign policy conduct of these three adversaries of the US-led Western world.

The Cold War context of the article refers to the period of ideological clash between the United States and Soviet Union between 1945 and 1991, and by extension between their respective partners on the Korean Peninsula. The term "Cold War" might also be used to describe the hostility between Iraq and Iran before it erupted into real war in 1980. These two cold conflicts provide the fulcrum of the authors' analysis. Just as Pyongyang played on the competition between the two Persian Gulf states, so too did the latter two maneuver between North and South Korea to seek their own advantage.

The dearth of scholarship about the DPRK-Iraq relationship can be explained by the insignificant arms trade between the two, in stark contrast to Pyongyang's sale of missiles and other military goods to Cairo, Damascus, Tehran, and non-state actors in the region (180). This was not totally for lack of trying. Lack of trust was also a factor. In 1999–2001, the DPRK negotiated the sale of 1,300 km-range *Nodong* missiles and production technology to Iraq. In the end, however, North Korea neither delivered the equipment nor refunded Iraq's \$10 million advance payment. The authors note that North Korea thereby conducted an act

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kerr, Steven A. Hildreth and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Iran-North Korea-Syria Ballistic Missile and Nuclear Cooperation," Congressional Research Service, 26 February 2016, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/R43480.pdf>; Michael Elleman, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," *The Iran Primer US Institute for Peace*, January 13, 2021, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>; Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran and North Korea: The Proliferation Nexus," *Survival* 48:1 (2006): 61-80.

<sup>2</sup> Balazs Szalontai and Yoo Jinil mention three publications that in their view touch too superficially on DPRK-Iraq relations: Chung-in Moon, "Between Ideology and Interest: North Korea in the Middle East," in Park Jae Kyu, Byung Chul Koh, and Tae-Hwan Kwak, eds., *The Foreign Relations of North Korea* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 379–410; Shirzad Azad, *Koreans in the Persian Gulf: Policies and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2015); and Barry K. Gills, *Korea versus Korea: A Case of Contested Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 1996).

of “double deception,” first by ignoring the security interests of its more important trade partner, Iran, and second by breaking a promise to Iraq (242-243). At other times, the DPRK stiffed Iran. In 1976, North Korea agreed to provide cement and rice in exchange for Iranian oil but failed to meet its obligations (222).

For data to tally the relationships, Szalontai and Yoo rely on diplomatic archives, including in the UK, US and, most illuminatingly, in Hungary; votes in the United Nations and Non-Aligned Movement; and articles about Iran and Iraq in DPRK state press organs, against which they use East German state media as a kind of comparative control. The authors mention trade figures anecdotally, mostly in terms of crude oil. This may reflect the fact that North Korea trade statistics are notoriously unreliable. Yet other authors have wrung useful assessments from the data from DPRK trade partners and estimates from the South Korean Bank of Korea.<sup>3</sup>

If trade volumes are set aside, the tangible benefits that the respective parties gained from exploiting the rivalries of the counterpart dyad are not entirely clear. Having spent part of my career working to round up votes in UN-related agencies, I do not mean to diminish the importance of such diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> Prevailing in UN votes can enhance a state’s credibility, particularly if one’s rival loses. For fringe states that are fighting for status, diplomatic recognition and General Assembly victories constitute a public scorecard. It is trade and military cooperation, however, that tangibly enhance state power.

In 1970s and 1980s, the DPRK sought to obtain crude oil and convertible currency from both Iraq and Iran (181-182). It found much more success with Iran, even before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. While it took Pyongyang ten years (1959–1968) to establish full diplomatic relations with anti-imperialist Iraq, mutual recognition with Western-oriented Iran took less than a year (1973), despite opposition from both Seoul and Washington. As in the case of US-China ties, Ping-Pong diplomacy eased the way for DPRK-Iran ties (216).<sup>5</sup>

As this timeframe attests, ideological ties were not as important as the rhetoric from the various capitals would suggest. As mentioned, in the 1970s, for example, North Korea, facing a global oil shock and internal debt crisis, sought to procure oil where it could, including from then US-ally Iran (181, 224). The authors reveal that in 1978, for example, Iraq undertook to give the DPRK a \$50 million interest-free loan, declaring that “the loan stems from friendly relations between the two countries and their joint desire to strengthen the struggle against colonialism and imperialism” (225). Yet in the same year, the Iraqi government awarded a larger \$130 million infrastructure contract to South Korea’s Hyundai Corporation. The DPRK could not match its richer southern neighbor’s economic challenge (225-226). For its part, Seoul also maneuvered between the two Persian Gulf states. In the 1980s, it even sold military equipment to the Islamic Republic of Iran (236), eliciting US government complaints.

Of course, North Korea sold much more military equipment to Iran during its 1980-1988 war with Iraq: Scud-B-type short-range ballistic missiles, HY-2 Silkworm anti-ship cruise missiles, 170-mm self-propelled artillery, anti-tank missiles, and fast attack patrol boats. It is surprising that by 1986, “North Korean officers and artillerymen directly participated in the planning and conducting of Iranian offensive operations” in the war (238). Judging from the large-scale material cooperation in contrast to the limited diplomatic consensus between Iran and North Korea at the time, which involved, for example, a disagreement over Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini’s conditions to end the war, analysts at the CIA concluded that the relations between

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Maximilian Ernst and Eliana Kim, “Economic Development under Kim Jong-un,” *North Korean Review*, 16:2 (Fall 2020).

<sup>4</sup> I served as Counselor for Nuclear Affairs at the US Mission to UN Organizations in Vienna from 1998–2001, attending many a board of governors meeting and general conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

<sup>5</sup> An exchange of table tennis players in 1971-72 helped ease the hostility between China and the United States. Ruth Eckstein, “Ping Pong Diplomacy: A View from behind the Scenes.” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2: 3 (1993) 327-42.

the two countries were “based more on economic realities than on any sense of common struggle against imperialism” (238).

Among the refreshingly blunt telegrams the authors unearth is one from the US Interests Section in Baghdad in 1976 that relayed the comments of Ismet Kettaneh, director-general of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, about DPRK tactics at the Colombo conference of the Non-Aligned Movement. The North Koreans reportedly “made pests of [them]selves...with incessant jawboning and arm-grabbing in the corridors.” “By giving ‘unanimous’ approval of Vietnamese candidacy over North Korea’s, conferees were rewarding polished Vietnamese behavior at conference and rebuking presumptuous, self-important North Koreans” (222).

In another unvarnished cable, Hungary’s ambassador to Pyongyang in 1980 recounted how his Iraqi counterpart told him that the annual volume of Iraqi-DPRK trade stood at a mere \$5 million, and that North Korea was seeking to obtain crude oil from Iraq at below-market prices. Iraq refused when Pyongyang would not break with Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat in the wake of the 1978 Camp David Accords and the ensuing 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty. Scorning North Korea’s attempts to outcompete South Korea in the Third World, the Iraqi ambassador pointed out that the South Koreans were far more capable than North Korea of providing desirable goods. “The only thing the North could supply was ideology,” the Iraqi ambassador complained (230).

Unable to obtain cut-rate oil from Iraq, the DPRK began a mutually rewarding relationship with newly revolutionary Iran. In October 1980, the Iraq broke off diplomatic relations with North Korea, expelling its diplomats on the grounds that the DPRK had recently started to supply arms to Iran (231). Iraq also broke off ties with Syria and Libya for the same reason. A triangular relationship then developed whereby Syria trained Iranian soldiers to operate the Soviet-made light arms provided by North Korea.

In the interesting penultimate section on the “Emergence of the Iranian-DPRK Alliance, 1979–1988” (226–240), the authors note that during Iran’s Islamic revolution, North Korea initially hedged its bets, not running any articles in *Nodong simbun* about the protests that were convulsing Iran in 1978 until the Shah left. They write that “on the contrary, the newspaper’s reports invariably struck an optimistic and laudatory tone, with a focus on Iran’s dynamic economic development, its friendly relations with the various Communist states and developing countries, and its ceremonial interactions with the DPRK” (226). Uncertain as to who might emerge in control in Tehran, North Korean leaders evidently sought to wait out the revolutionary storm. By contrast, the East German state media, after holding off the first eight months of 1978, vocally supported the revolution from September that month (227).

Szalontai and Yoo also touch on post-Cold War relationships. One curious development is that despite North Korea’s strong military assistance during the Iran-Iraq War and its ongoing missile cooperation, its import of Iranian oil gradually declined after the war, apparently ending altogether by 1995. The authors note that because Russian oil shipments also stopped after the fall of the Soviet Union, North Korea became dependent on a single supplier: China (241).

Assessing the reasons for the drop-off of Iranian crude and extending the analysis of North Korea’s Middle East ties to more recent years would be a worthy enterprise for further research. Several mysteries surround those relationships. One outstanding question, for example, is whether critics of Iran were correct in suggesting that Iran funded or was otherwise involved in Syria’s 2001–2007 procurement from North Korea of a plutonium-producing reactor near the town of Al-Kibar, which Israel destroyed before it could become operational.<sup>6</sup> I have not seen any evidence to support this contention, though it would have been logical for

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<sup>6</sup> Statement of the Honorable R. James Woolsey, Chairman, Foundation For Defense Of Democracies (Former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency), Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa and the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific and the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and

Iran to have had a claim on the plutonium to supplement its uranium-enrichment focused nuclear hedging strategy and its own now-suspended plan for a plutonium-producing research reactor.

One obvious lesson from this maneuvering is that the US government should not blithely lump Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, along with Cuba and Libya, into a basket of what National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and other officials often called “rogue states.”<sup>7</sup> These states differ significantly in their international interactions. President George W. Bush compounded the analytical error in his State of the Union speech on 29 January 2002, several months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, calling Iran, Iraq, and North Korea the “axis of evil” because of their alleged sponsorship of terrorism and interest in weapons of mass destruction.<sup>8</sup> State Department officials, who had not been asked to clear the speech, winced at the name-calling, anticipating that it could backfire.<sup>9</sup>

In their conclusion, Szalontai and Yoo cite four long-term patterns that are evident in North Korea’s policies toward Iran and Iraq, both during and after the Cold War. First, North Korea’s commitment to one vis-à-vis the other was nowhere near as unconditional as the solidarity the DPRK expected them to adopt vis-à-vis South Korea. Second, North Korean leaders usually sought to avoid taking a public stance on the Iraq-Iran dispute, even when they were on good terms with one state and lacked any contacts with the other (243). Third, North Korea was disinclined to confront Iraq and Iran over their domestic politics. For example, unlike the East German *Neues Deutschland*, North Korea propaganda ignored Iraq’s repressive measures against the Kurds (244). Fourth, North Korea occasionally adopted an unusually extreme position in support of one or both—far more than Moscow or Beijing were willing to do. For instance, North Korea praised the public hanging of Jewish “spies” in Baghdad, temporarily backed Iraq’s claims to the Shatt al-Arab, condemned Iran’s seizure of Gulf islands claimed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), approved of the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran, and shipped arms to the Islamic Republic shortly after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (244).

Szalontai and Yoo conclude that the supreme objective of North Korea’s strategy toward the Third World in general, and Iraq and Iran in particular, seems to have been to maximize its number of partners in order to prevail in competition with South Korea (245). The result, however, was that those Middle Eastern partners, especially the Iraqi Ba’ath regime, came to perceive the DPRK as unreliable and opportunistic regarding Mideast issues, yet dogmatically aggressive in pursuing its own national interests. Given that its economic capabilities fell short of South Korea, North Korea “was not an optimal ally” (246). In sum, North Korea’s “attempts to play both ends against the middle rarely achieved much success” (247).

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Trade of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 11 April 2013, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg80364/html/CHRG-113hhrg80364.htm>. See also, Hans Rühle, “How Iran Pushed Forward Syria’s Nuclear Armament: Background of the Israeli Action against the Reactor of Al-Kibar,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19 March 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Lake, “Confronting Backlash States,” *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1994-03-01/confronting-backlash-states>.

<sup>8</sup> “Text of President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address” *Washington Post*, 29 January 2002.

<sup>9</sup> The “Axis of Evil” phrase had immediate negative consequences in that it led Iran to stop the cooperation it had been providing vis-à-vis Al Qaeda and the Taliban government. Suzanne Maloney, “US Policy toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forward,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32:2 (Summer 2008): 25-44 at 28-30.

authored with Michael Elleman and Paulina Izewicz, is *Uncertain Future: The JCPOA and Iran's Nuclear and Missile Programmes* (Routledge, 2018).