

An Anti-Revisionist United Front?

The Beijing-Pyongyang Axis in the International Communist Movement of the early 1960s

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Since 1950, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been described by Chinese official media as an "unbreakable friendship" that was "always stable." Recent studies on their bilateral relations, however, tell quite a different story. The Sino-North Korean relationship not only repeatedly fell on hard times during the Cold War, in actual fact, the "traditional friendship" never really existed.[1] Nonetheless, current research on the Cold War pays little attention to both countries' cooperation in the ideological debates of the socialist bloc. Newly declassified Chinese documents reveal how they cooperated in this field.

From November 1962 to January 1963, five Eastern European communist countries held their party assemblies, which turned into venues for the ideological struggle between China and Soviet Union. This is also true of the 6th Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in East Berlin in January 1963, which was deemed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) as "the peak of the anti-China wave from the Soviet bloc".[2] More than 70 delegations of world communist parties were present at this Congress, including the Soviet delegation led by Nikita Khrushchev.



Before the 6th Congress, tensions between North Korea and the Soviet bloc had increased. The Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) held a decidedly different opinion toward the Soviet policy of "Peaceful Coexistence", regarding it as a "revisionist policy" which it would never support.[3] With respect to the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the WPK took a much harsher stand than both the Soviet Union and the GDR, opposing any "concessions" to the western countries. Furthermore, the North Korean regime sided with China in the Sino-Indian border conflicts.

During the 6th Congress, the WPK demonstrated itself as a staunch supporter of the Chinese cause. The North Korean delegation had discussed its guiding principles with the CPC prior to the party assembly in Berlin. As the first secretary of the North Korean embassy put it, "the WPK will stand with the CPC and fight against the revisionist parties".[4] When in East Berlin, the Chinese embassy was used as a venue for information exchange between both parties. In addition, the WPK delegation agreed to the Chinese suggestion to jointly woo German citizens and other communist delegates present at the Congress in order to "disseminate our opinions and to let them accept our activities".[5]

To defend their Chinese friends, the WPK delegation also planned to use their congratulatory speech to criticize the SED for its "unfriendly behaviour toward the CPC".[6] Although the text of this speech was at the time censored by SED authorities, the WPK published the original text in domestic newspapers and managed to disseminate the manuscript among foreign delegates and GDR citizens.[7]



Despite this cooperation, there were marked contrasts between the CPC and the WPK. For example, they did not agree on a joint approach to the SED's invitation of a Yugoslavian delegation to Berlin. Yet, in the eyes of the CPC leadership, friendship and cooperation with the WPK should be accorded topmost priority. They observed the struggles within the socialist camp from the perspectives of its International United Front Strategy, in fact, a product of the CPC's experiences with long-term domestic class struggles. Now turned into one of the most important features of PRC diplomacy, it was characterized by attempts to improve relations with advanced powers, to interest middle powers, and to isolate conservative reactionary powers.[8]

Following this strategy, the CPC believed that the delegates at the 6th Congress could be divided into three groups: left, middle and right-wing revisionist parties. The Chinese delegation should of course "undertake some activities among the left-wing comrades and try our best to increase our influence". Among the left-wing comrades, "the Koreans are always on our side".[9] Therefore, all the WPK moves at the Congress were supported and applauded by the CPC.

For the CPC, the SED's efforts to keep the WPK delegation from propagating and disseminating its views justified their claim that the Soviet bloc was "undermining the unity of the international socialist movement".[10] The CPC came away with the impression that the Sino-North Korean cooperation during the Congress succeeded in reaping the diplomatic interests it had expected before the Congress. As Mao put it, "Khrushchev's efforts to oppress us with the majority of the delegates



has failed. The left-wing parties now dare to voice their own opinions in the ideological debate among the communist parties. All of these are unfavorable to Khrushchev." [10]

The Sino-North Korean cooperation during the 6th Congress did not result in the unity of the socialist camp. Quite the contrary, the split deepened after the January party assembly. Not to mention the furious SED and CPSU, who now had to deal with CPC and WPK propaganda materials disseminated in their respective countries, even some mild communist parties deemed the CPC-WPK cooperation as factionist behavior and blamed China for the unstoppable split of the communist movement. Thus China's International United Front strategy failed to bring the CPC any new friends.

Even if they cooperated closely with the CPC during and after the SED's 6th Congress, the WPK followed its independent agenda rather than being a puppet of the CPC. Therefore, after the Soviet Union had decided to enlarge its economic and military aid to the DPRK in 1965, Kim Il-sung changed his attitude toward the Soviet Union and tried to mend fences with the Soviet bloc countries. To enjoy a favorable position in the Sino-Soviet power struggle, the WPK restored its equidistant diplomacy. Kim could now wait and see which side would offer him more.

[1] Zhihua Shen, *The Last Celestial Empire: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung and Sino-North Korean Relations*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2017.



[2] "Our views on the SED's 6th Congress", 9.2.1963, Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives (CFMA):109-02569-01.

[3] Balazs Szalontai, Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, p.184.

[4] "The guiding principle of the WPK delegation during the 6th Congress of the SED", 12.1.1963, CFMA:106-00720-03.

[5] Wu Xiuquan, Autobiography of Wu Xiuquan, Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2009, p.269.

[6] "Conversation with the Korean diplomats", 22.1.1963, CFMA:106-00720-03.

[7] "Reaction from different parties on the speeches delivered by Wu Xiuquan and Khrushchev at the 6th Congress of the SED", 24.1.1963, CFMA:109-03381-02.

[8] Kuisong Yang, "Revolutionary Diplomacy Thought and Practice of New China", Shixue yuekan (History Monthly), No.2, 2010.

[9] "A summary of the CPC's delegation to the SED's 6th Congress", 20.2.1963, CFMA:109-02569-01.



[10] Wu Lengxi, Ten Year War of Words, 1956-1966, a Memoir of Sino-Soviet Relations, Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2014, p.338,343-345.

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