China’s Last Ally: Beijing’s Policy toward North Korea during the U.S.–China Rapprochement, 1970–1975

The U.S.–China rapprochement in the early 1970s, which Henry Kissinger considered a “diplomatic revolution,” was a watershed event in world history. Its impact should be examined at least at two levels: first, from the process of the event, the U.S.–China rapprochement was not only an issue between the United States and China, but also involved a triangular relationship among the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, and the interests of the allies of both China and the United States; second, from the outcome, the U.S.–China rapprochement affected many other countries, which had to adjust their policies toward both China and the United States accordingly. Previous studies on alliance relationships after the U.S.–China rapprochement have focused on the Taiwan issue, the Vietnam issue, the Soviet issue, and the Japan issue. The Korean issue has received little attention in scholarly studies. For instance, Chris Tudda’s recent book on the U.S.–China rapprochement, which makes the most use of American documents, gives no treatment to the Korean issue at all. Gregg Brazinsky’s essay traces the evolution of China’s Korean policy from 1968 to 2000, giving the period from 1970 to 1975 a useful but brief treatment.

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the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) and Pyongyang’s reaction to China’s policy change have not received proper scholarly attention.⁴

The Korean peninsula became a strategic frontline of the Cold War confrontation after the outbreak of the Korean War. Both China and the United States were heavily involved in the confrontation between South and North Korea. Before the U.S.–China rapprochement, China and North Korea contested with the United States and South Korea. Any changes in U.S.–China relations naturally forced both China and the United States to modify policies toward their respective allies. In the course of the rapprochement, both Washington and Beijing gradually adjusted their policies toward the Korean peninsula. Neither China nor the United States would be willing to get involved once again in a war for the Koreans. Both North and South Korea also started to modify policies toward each other. Two issues were high in their agenda: sovereignty (in particular, South and North Korean representation at the United Nations [UN]) and security (in particular, the issue of U.S. troops in South Korea).

Making use of documents from China, the U.S. and East European archives, this article traces China’s policies toward North Korea from 1970 to 1975. It examines China’s views and positions regarding the Korean issue during the U.S.–China rapprochement negotiations, and China’s policy and tactics toward the Korean issue in subsequent deliberations at the UN. It attempts to address the question of how and why China could maintain friendly relations with Pyongyang while seeking détente with the United States—North Korea’s enemy No. 1. It is worthwhile to compare the development of Sino–Vietnamese relations with Sino–North Korean relations during this period. Although Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai ranked Indochina the most urgent issue for the relaxation of tensions in the Far East and urged the United States to withdraw its troops from Vietnam in his numerous talks with U.S. officials, North Vietnam turned to the Soviet Union and China’s relations with Vietnam deteriorated dramatically.⁵ It was understandable that Kim Il-sung, the North Korean leader was somewhat surprised at the Sino–American reconciliation when he was first told about Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to Beijing in July 1971, but China managed to maintain friendly relations with Pyongyang. How could this be? What were the issues on which China and North Korea agreed and disagreed during this process? What


was China’s foreign policy priority—defending Pyongyang or pursuing détente with Washington?

Prelude to the Sino–American Rapprochement

In January 1969, U.S. foreign policy was in serious trouble. The Vietnam War presented mostly problems and few promising opportunities for the Nixon administration, which just came to power. Early in February 1968, the Tet offensive had demonstrated that the war was not coming to an end soon. Confronted with this seemingly insurmountable obstacle, Lyndon Johnson bowed out of the 1968 presidential race. The U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union was also at a crossroads. The Soviet Union was approaching parity with the United States in long-range missile capability, although it was still way behind the United States in many other aspects. The moderate response of the United States and its West European allies to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 could only boost the Kremlin’s confidence that its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was secure. In addition, the Soviet Union was extending its influence far beyond Eastern and Central Europe. In the Middle East, Moscow offered military aid to a number of Arab states, particularly Egypt and Syria in a war of retribution against Israel after the Six Day War in 1967.6

China was a nettlesome issue to policymakers in Washington. In 1966 and 1967, American officials were carefully watching China’s Cultural Revolution with no clear idea as to what its implications were for U.S. policy. On the one hand, China provided a large amount of military and logistical support to North Vietnam for its war against South Vietnam and the United States; on the other, China’s domestic troubles greatly “reduced the likelihood” that China would send combat troops to fight the war. Furthermore, U.S. officials were obsessed with the danger posed by “one billion Chinese armed with nuclear weapons.”7

The election of Richard Nixon as president in 1968 marked a new era in U.S. Cold War strategy—the coming of “détente.” Nixon proclaimed in his inaugural address the arrival of an “era of negotiation” upon entering office.8 This was another example of the relative decline of the United States since the early Cold War years. By 1969, Nixon had recognized the emergence of a new multipolar world order. Departing from the old bipolar system, the Nixon administration expected to reconfigure the great power structure by pushing for a five-power global order

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involving the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, China, and Japan. For the Nixon administration, its ultimate mission was to restore U.S. role in the world while extricating it from America’s most disastrous military engagement. Finding a way out of Vietnam and looking for new ways of dealing with its major Cold War adversaries were top on the agenda. The Nixon administration had a series of ideas and policies to change U.S. foreign policy while in office. The most salient point was to decrease America’s commitments to its Asian allies and clients. The Nixon Doctrine, proclaimed in 1969 and America’s détente with Communist great powers (the Soviet Union and China) made up the two most important components of the diplomacy of the Nixon administration.

By the middle of 1969, China seemed to have more urgent need to improve its relationship with Washington in order to break up its diplomatic isolation and predicament. The Chinese felt “under siege” after the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 and declared that they had the right to intervene in any socialist country that deviated from Moscow’s line. Mao interpreted this “Brezhnev Doctrine” as an attack on his own legitimacy. The tension over Vietnam between China and the United States in 1968–1969 was still high. Although Nixon promised to end the war in Vietnam during the 1968 presidential campaign, he escalated America’s air war in hopes of bringing Hanoi to its knees in his first year in office. In June 1969, the United States established diplomatic relations with Cambodia, a Chinese ally, which made Beijing worry. Such security threats from China’s southern borders were made worse with the sustained military standoff between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forces and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) army across the Taiwan Strait, as well as the hostile attitudes of Japan and South Korea toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Consequently, Beijing perceived that, from Bohai Bay to the Gulf of Tonkin, all of China’s coastal borders were under siege. Since the Chinese–Indian border war of 1962, Beijing and New Delhi had viewed each other as a dangerous enemy; thus, the security situation along China’s long western border with India was equally tense.

When two bloody conflicts between Chinese and Soviet border garrison forces burst out on Zhenbao Island (called Damansky Island in Russian), located in the

Ussuri River in March 1969, China’s security situation dramatically worsened. Soon border conflict spread to other areas as tension increased along the entire length of the border. These incidents immediately brought China and the Soviet Union to the brink of a major military confrontation. According to Henry Kissinger, Soviet leaders even considered conducting a preemptive nuclear strike against their former Communist ally.\(^{14}\) It is not surprising that Beijing leaders felt compelled to improve their nation’s security by making major changes in China’s foreign and security strategy.

After the Ninth Congress of the CCP in April 1969, the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution was over. China’s paramount leader Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai were again in effective control of Chinese foreign policymaking, and prepared to rectify some of the radical policies of the previous years. Starting in early June 1969, Chinese ambassadors, who had been recalled at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, gradually returned to their posts.\(^{15}\) Chinese diplomacy was returning to normality. The stabilization of Chinese politics was favorable to the improvement of the Sino–American relations. In mid-May, Zhou Enlai at Mao’s behest asked four veteran marshals—Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen—to study international affairs.\(^{16}\) In their reports to Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, the Marshals argued that in order for China to be ready for a major confrontation with the Soviet Union, “the card of the United States” should be played. The marshals proposed that, in addition to waging “a tit-for-tat struggle against both the United States and the Soviet Union,” China should use “negotiation as a means of struggle against them.” Perhaps the Sino–American ambassadorial talks should be resumed “when the timing is proper.”\(^{17}\) The reports by the Four Marshals’ Study Group provided Mao and Zhou with a strategic assessment that emphasized the benefits of improving the Sino–American relations. The war scare, both strategically and psychologically also created the necessary conditions for the CCP leadership to reconsider the PRC’s long-standing policy of confrontation with the United States. The perception of an extremely grave threat from the Soviet Union to China’s national security pushed Mao to decide to break up existing conceptual restrictions in order to improve relations with the United States.\(^{18}\)


\(^{15}\) Ma Jisen, *Waijiaobu wenge jishi* [The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry] (Hong Kong, 2003), 289.

\(^{16}\) On February 19, 1969, Mao, through Zhou assigned the four marshals to study international affairs. Li Ping et al., *Zhou Enlai niangu, 1949–1976* [Chronology of Zhou Enlai, 1949–1976], vol. 3 (Beijing, 1997), 281.

\(^{17}\) Xiong Xianghui, *Wo de qingbao yu waijiao shengya* [My Career in Intelligence and Diplomacy] (Beijing, 1999), 184–6.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, radicals in the Chinese leadership accused the Korean Workers’ Party of revisionism, while Kim Il-sung censured China’s Cultural Revolution as “leftist” adventurism. During this period, there was no exchange of high-level delegations between the two countries, and the relationship was tense. Nonetheless, even in the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, neither Mao nor Kim would like to see the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang become fully undermined. Therefore, in October 1967, Zhou Enlai asked Mokhtar Ould Daddah, President of Mauritania who was then visiting China and would be visiting North Korea, to carry a “personal message” from Mao and himself to Kim, stating that “China values very much the traditional friendship with Korea and the Korean people,” and that China would stand on the side of North Korea “in the case of imperialist aggression.” When Daddah returned from Pyongyang, he brought back a message from Kim to Mao and Zhou, in which the North Korean leader stated that “in the case of imperialist aggression, the DPRK and the PRC will certainly stand on the same side.”

In the second half of the 1960s, North Korea launched a series of attacks on the U.S. and South Korea, including numerous incidents in the demilitarized zone along the 38th parallel in 1967, a sneak attack at the Blue House—South Korea’s presidential palace—on January 21, 1968, the Pueblo Incident of January 23, 1968, when the DPRK captured the U.S. reconnaissance ship, and the shooting down of the U.S. spy plane EC-121 in April 1969. The tension was very high between Washington and Pyongyang. On January 28, 1968, five days after the Pueblo Incident, the Chinese government issued a statement, “The Chinese government and people firmly support the Korean government and people’s righteous stance against U.S. imperialist’s reckless provocation.” According to reports from East German diplomats, after the Blue House incident and the Pueblo incident, China sent engineering troops to repair North Korean weapons and equipment. A nineteen-member Chinese delegation came to Pyongyang to negotiate a trade agreement on January 29.

After the downing of the U.S. spy plane in April 1969, Kissinger told President Nixon in a memo that “the Chinese have not endorsed the North Korean position during the recent tension.” On August 8, 1969, “Response to National Security Study Memorandum 14” stated, “Although North Viet-Nam and North Korea pursue largely independent policies, sometimes in conflict with those of the PRC, Peking has a major national security interest in their continued existence and would almost certainly intervene militarily if the Communist regime of either country were seriously threatened.”

Since the Soviet Union and China had become military enemies after the Zhenbao incident in March, Mao no longer actively promoted revolution in the same way that he did in 1966–1969. There was no longer an incentive to criticize socialist states such as North Korea for being revisionist and insufficiently revolutionary. Predictably, China’s relations with North Korea would gradually improve on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the PRC’s founding in October 1969. Prior to National Day, on October 1, 1969, China sent a last-minute invitation to North Korea for the occasion. Pyongyang responded eagerly and swiftly. Kim Il-sung sent a high-level delegation, led by Choe Yong-gon, the chairman of the presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly of the DPRK to attend the National Day celebration. Mao talked with Choe atop Tiananmen while reviewing the National Day celebration. Mao told Choe:

Now the United States has a much closer relationship with Japan, and it also has pursued a closer relationship with South Korea and Taiwan. . . . They intend to attack you. But their target is not just you; their main target is China. Therefore, our two countries must become closer. . . . The relations between our two countries are very special, and our aims are identical, so we should improve our relations.

China’s relations with North Korea started to improve. In April 1970, Zhou Enlai visited North Korea (Figure 1), and Sino–North Korean relations quickly recovered from the coldness of the Cultural Revolution period. Zhou’s primary mission was to lure Pyongyang from Moscow to Beijing. In October 1970, Kim Il-sung secretly visited China. Mao paid a visit to Kim at the state guest house (he never did this to any Western visitor). Mao made a self-criticism of China’s radical policy and in fact revoked China’s criticism of Kim in the previous years.

27 Gao Wenqian, Wannian Zhou Enlai [Zhou Enlai’s Later Years] (Hong Kong, 2003), 419–20; Li et al., Zhou Enlai nianpu, 357, 360.
28 Li et al., Ibid., 400.
resumed its aid to North Korea, which had been suspended during the Cultural Revolution. The Sino–North Korean relations were not simply restored to the pre-Cultural Revolution status. China had to acknowledge Pyongyang’s autonomy and independence in foreign affairs. A week after Kim’s visit, on October 17, Beijing and Pyongyang signed an “Agreement on China’s Economic and Technical Aid to North Korea” and “Long-term Trade Agreement.”

Thus, China actually mended fences with North Korea before the process of rapproachment with the United States got in full swing.

THE KOREAN ISSUE IN THE U.S.–CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT TALKS

It took about two years for Washington and Beijing to establish a mechanism for high-level talks. The process started with mutual probing and signaling in 1969 and negotiations via the Warsaw channel in early 1970. After the collapse of the Warsaw channel in spring 1970, Beijing and Washington also communicated with each other via the secret Pakistani channel. Then the famous ping-pong diplomacy took place in April 1971. After receiving Nixon’s message indicating the U.S. President’s intention to visit China, Zhou Enlai chaired a Politburo meeting on

May 26 to establish China’s “basic principles” for its new relations with the United States, including the demand for U.S. withdrawal from Korea. In late May 1971, after 22 years of confrontation, the Chinese government, via the Pakistani channel, extended an invitation to President Richard Nixon to visit China. Henry Kissinger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, secretly visited Beijing in July 1971 to talk with Chinese leaders.30

Kissinger’s visit to China in July 1971 was to prepare and set up an agenda for the presidential visit to China. This was the first face-to-face meeting between senior leaders from the PRC and the United States. During Kissinger’s forty-eight hours in Beijing, he met with Zhou Enlai and other Chinese officials for seventeen hours in six meetings. The Kissinger–Zhou talks focused on the anticipated Mao–Nixon summit, Taiwan, Indochina, U.S.–Japan relations, and U.S. relations with the Korean peninsula. The two sides also haggled over the wording of the announcement on Nixon’s visit to China.31

The Korean issue was discussed at some length in the first meeting between Zhou and Kissinger. On the afternoon of July 9, Zhou urged U.S. withdrawal from Korea, and Kissinger indicated that it should not be a problem. Zhou said, “Your troops in South Korea should also withdraw. We withdrew our people voluntarily from Korea back in 1958...”32 At their meeting on July 10, Kissinger explained that what happened in Korea depended very much on the general relationships in the area. If the war in Indochina ended and U.S.–PRC relations developed, the Republic of Korea (ROK) troops in Vietnam would return, and it was conceivable that before the end of President Nixon’s second term, most of the U.S. troops in Korea would be withdrawn. Kissinger said, “Frankly, I don’t think that the Korean problem need detain us very long. I am certain that a political evolution is occurring in which this will take care of itself. Our military presence in South Korea is not a permanent feature of our foreign policy.” Kissinger told Zhou that Nixon could talk with him regarding a precise timetable for U.S. withdrawal from South Korea.33

It seems that Kissinger’s declaration went beyond the formulation of the National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 48, issued on March 20, 1970. NSDM 48 stated that “the President has decided to reduce the U.S. military presence in Korea by 20,000 personnel by the end of FY 71.” It also pointed out, “Further withdrawals of substantial numbers of U.S. personnel beyond the 20,000 personnel decided upon are not now planned, though they may be considered when substantial ROK forces return from Vietnam or compensating improvements in ROK forces are well underway.”34 Thus, Kissinger’s declaration without

30. Xia, Negotiating with the Enemy, 136–59.
33. Ibid., 390–91.
many policy implications was mainly for the purpose of creating a congenial atmosphere for the Sino–American talks. Later in their conversation, when Zhou expressed concerns that after U.S. withdrawal from the Korean peninsula, Japanese forces might move in. Kissinger said that “it is absolutely against President Nixon’s policy to project Japan’s military power outside its home islands into areas for possible offensive uses.” When Zhou mentioned that there was only an armistice agreement between South and North Koreas, and North Korea felt threatened by the presence of U.S. forces in the South, Kissinger stated, “we oppose military aggression by South Korea against North Korea. . . . We believe that it would help maintain Asian peace if you could use your influence with North Korea to not use force against the U.S. and against South Korea.” Zhou raised no objection. 35 It seems that both Washington and Beijing were interested in preserving stability in the Korean Peninsula.

The Sino–American reconciliation had troubling implications for China’s erstwhile Communist allies outside the Soviet bloc, who had relied on China to stand up to “American imperialists.” These countries include North Vietnam, North Korea, and Albania. Thus, Zhou Enlai had a tough job of selling China’s new policy toward Washington to its Communist allies. Soon after Kissinger left Beijing, Zhou traveled to Hanoi on July 13–14 and Pyongyang on July 15, to explain China’s new policy toward the United States to the Vietnamese and North Korean leaders. He failed to convince the Vietnamese although he stated that China would never barter away principles and would continue to assist the Vietnamese in their struggle against the United States. But, in fact, China’s diplomatic priority was to improve relations with the United States—to welcome Kissinger and Nixon to visit China. The North Vietnamese were so angry that they tilted more obviously toward the Soviet Union. 36 Albania, which had vigorously supported China’s policy during the Cultural Revolution, felt betrayed by China’s reconciliation with the United States. Enver Hoxha, the Albanian leader put it in his memoirs, stating this development “fell like a bombshell on us Albanians, on the Vietnamese, the Koreans, not to mention the others.” 37

In his deliberation to Kim Il-sung, Zhou formulated China’s new strategy as forming a United Front with the American people against U.S. imperialists. It seems Zhou was successful in convincing Kim. Kim was somewhat surprised and


even shocked at first, but he did not view China’s improved relations with the United States as a betrayal. Zhou tried to persuade Kim to comprehend the prospect of U.S.–China rapprochement and to seize the opportunity to drive the United States out of the Korean peninsula. Zhou told Kim this was an identical effort on China’s part, that is, engaging the United States to get Taiwan’s return to China. Zhou stated that China would never trade off principles and would stick to its positions. Kim soon voiced support for China’s changing policy toward the United States.

Pyongyang started to adjust its policy in the wake of the Sino–American reconciliation and the changing international situation. Early on June 10, in his meeting with the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceauşescu in Pyongyang, Kim Il-sung elaborated on North Korea’s complex strategy. In addition to achieving Korean unification, North Korea attempted to elevate its stature by using China’s entry into the UN. He deemed “peaceful means” as the only feasible option to achieve Korean unification. He insisted that all other solutions “could trigger a global-scale war.” He noted that neither China nor the Soviet Union wanted “to get involved in such a confrontation.” Thus, in North Korea’s perspective, unification might be achieved if revolutionary activities grew in the South, and the U.S. army withdrew. Kim stated, “Should Park Chung Hee be overthrown, we will be able to discuss the unification of our country with anyone who desires this.”

On July 30, North Korea’s vice premier Kim Il traveled to China and introduced to the Chinese side the eight-point program for peaceful unification of Korea, which was promulgated by the North Korean Supreme People’s Assembly in April, and asked the Chinese to transmit it the United States. The eight-point program, which focused on the withdrawal of foreign troops and dissolution of the UN Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK), made no references to inter-Korean relations or unification issues. Zhou later relayed the eight-point program to Kissinger in October.

On August 6, during the visit of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian leader in-exile, Kim Il-sung publicly praised China’s reconciliation with the United States. Kim announced that Nixon’s visit to China “will not be the march of a victor but a journey of the defeated. . . . This is a great victory for the Chinese people and victory for the revolutionary people of the world.”

intended to use this formulation to mitigate the impact of the Sino–American rapprochement on the North Korean people. He then announced that he would meet with any party, “including the Democratic Republican Party, and all social organizations and individual personages in south Korea” to improve North–South relations and work toward unification. But on the same day, Kim also pointed out in Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the Korean Workers’ Party, that Koreans should not be cheated by imperialist détente strategy and should make concerted efforts to strike against U.S. imperialists. Nonetheless, the ensuing North–South (Korea) dialogue was initiated under the impact of the Sino–American rapprochement.

To alleviate North Korea’s apprehension about a U.S.–China deal on the Korean issue, China enhanced military cooperation with Pyongyang. On August 5, in an interview with James Reston of the New York Times, Zhou Enlai said that China had supported North Korea’s position on the Pueblo incident and the EC-121 crisis. Between August 18 and September 7, a high-level North Korean delegation visited China, and the PRC promised to provide Pyongyang free military equipment. As Kissinger later explained to Nixon, “The Chinese are no doubt well prepared to pay this kind of a price to shift Kim Il-sung into a less belligerent stance on the peninsula.”

During his public trip to China in October 1971, Kissinger held ten meetings with Zhou Enlai. The discussion of North Korea between Zhou and Kissinger was longer this time than in July. Zhou ranked Korea third on the agenda (immediately behind Vietnam and Taiwan in importance), giving it a higher priority than in July. He was responding to North Korea’s request. In addition to the U.S. withdrawal from Korea, Zhou talked about letting North Korea participate in the UN debate unconditionally. It seemed that Zhou already anticipated the PRC’s role at the UN—to champion for North Korea. Zhou stressed the importance for the UN to treat South and North Korea equally. He emphasized that the PRC, being a big country, could afford to wait on issues of direct concern, such as Taiwan, while the more urgent

44. Embassy of the GDR in the DPRK, September 21, 1971. Assessment of the Visit by a Delegation of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), headed by the Member of the Political Committee of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) and Chief of the KPA General Staff, Army General O Chin-u, in the PRC. PolAAA, MfAA, C 944/76, NKIDP Archives; Schaefer, “North Korean ‘Adventurism’,” 36.
45. Kissinger to Nixon, “Briefing Papers for the China Trip,” February 8, 1972, Folder 4, Box 847, NSC files, NPMP.
46. Xia, Negotiating with the Enemy, 177–80.
matters were those concerning her smaller friends, such as Indochina and Korea, whom one could not expect to have a broad perspective.47

Zhou then handed over the eight-point program of the North Korean government to Kissinger. This document is a generally abusive series of demands upon Washington to withdraw U.S. forces and military support for Korea, give North Korea equal status, prevent Japanese influence, disband UNCURK, leave the Korean question to the Koreans themselves, and let North Korea participate in the UN debate unconditionally. Kissinger retorted in extremely sharp fashion. He said that the Nixon Administration was dedicated to improving relations and easing tensions in East Asia, but he rejected the translation of this goal into a series of unilateral demands. The United States was prepared to set certain directions, but could not accept a paper which listed all the things that the United States “must” do and called its South Korean ally a “puppet.” The PRC had never done this, and the U.S. respected it for standing by its friends. But it was important for North Korea, as it was for North Vietnam, to show some of the largeness of spirit of its large ally. Kissinger then clarified what the objectives in the peninsula should be. The United States was prepared to discuss the possibility of a more permanent legal basis for the existing situation in Korea, but the United States was not interested in a legal situation that made the reopening of hostilities possible. Kissinger also said that the United States was already reviewing the UNCURK question and that the United States recognized North Korea as a fact of life. Zhou stressed that the PRC was interested in equal legal status for both Koreas and unification should be left to the future.48

In their further exchanges, Kissinger said that it was U.S. policy not to allow Japanese military forces to enter South Korea to the extent that the United States could control this. As tensions in the Far East diminished the number of U.S. forces would continue to go down and could be expected to be small. In any event, the United States would not allow South Korean military attacks while U.S. forces were there. As an end of a complicated process, but not as an immediate objective, the United States could envisage North Korea as a lawful entity in the UN and elsewhere. There was merit in North Korea’s having fair representation in discussions about the peninsula. As for final reunification, the United States had not studied this problem but it should be accomplished peacefully. At the end of their discussion, Zhou seemed to have accepted the U.S. position that the issue of Korea would take time but that opinions could be exchanged in the interim. Zhou was

more interested in the dissolution of UNCURK than the U.S. withdrawal. Kissinger believed that China was not particularly interested in a unified Korea.\textsuperscript{49}

In the draft communiqué for the President’s visit, both China and the United States agreed to disagree. Instead of superficially and vaguely emphasizing the common and shared points by the two sides, each side would state its own position toward a specific issue (including the Korea question). And this would allow both sides to keep their credibility while, at the same time, putting together a mutually acceptable joint statement, in Kissinger’s words, “the very novelty of the approach might resolve our perplexities.” The Chinese supported North Korea’s eight-point program and called for the abolition of UNCURK. The United States honored its commitments to South Korea and endorsed reduced tension and increased communication in the peninsula.\textsuperscript{50} This showed that China placated North Korea, but was in no hurry to facilitate U.S. army withdrawal from the Korean unification.

After his secret trip to Beijing on November 1–3, 1971, Kim Il-sung became even more convinced that the North–South dialogue under the auspices of the North could achieve unification.\textsuperscript{51} He now saw this as a contingent, but useful strategy. On November 15, in his address to the 26th plenary of the UN General Assembly (GA), Qiao Guanhua, vice foreign minister and head of the Chinese delegation, declared that the Chinese government and people resolutely supported DPRK’s eight-point program for unification, its just demands for repealing unlawful UN resolutions on Korea, and the dissolution of UNCURK.\textsuperscript{52} On December 2, in a speech to party cadre education instructors, Kim Il-sung said,

In world revolutionary struggle, Communists never gave up anti-imperialist revolution stand only because they signed a treaty or engaged in talks with imperialists. In the past, the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression treaty with Nazi Germany, but they continued with revolutionary struggle. Although the CCP is scheduled to receive Nixon, neither will it forsake revolution nor will it betray the interests of the socialist countries.\textsuperscript{53}

In early January 1972, Alexander Haig, deputy assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, led an advance team to visit Beijing. Its mission was

\textsuperscript{49} Ibíd.


\textsuperscript{52} Renmin ribao, November 17, 1971, 1.

to make technical arrangements for Nixon’s visit. Zhou told Haig that the “situation in Vietnam is different from that which pertained in Korea. In Korea, he was heavily involved and agreement could be reached with the U.S.” 54 Zhou’s statement indicated that China’s relationship with North Vietnam had become very tense. North Vietnam made a futile attempt to persuade the Chinese to call off President Nixon’s trip to China. But Kim Il-sung showed no objection to U.S.–China engagement. Kim apparently hoped that this would facilitate U.S. troop withdrawal and achieve Korean unification under his leadership. In his interview with the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun on January 10, Kim proposed that once a peace agreement was signed, North and South Koreas should conduct large-scale disarmament after U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea. 55 Many in the U.S. government were very concerned about the timing of the signing of the peace agreement, whether it be signed before or after U.S. troop withdrawal.

On January 26, 1972, a North Korean foreign ministry delegation headed by Vice Premier Pak Song-chol flew to Beijing. They joined with their Chinese colleagues to prepare the section on the Korean peninsula for the forthcoming U.S.–China talks during President Nixon’s trip to China. Several members of the delegation actually stayed in Beijing when Nixon was there in the later part of February. Some sources claimed that Kim Il-sung secretly visited Beijing, which Pyongyang denied, but Moscow confirmed. 56 When the U.S. President was visiting China from February 21–28, 1972, direct talks between the U.S. delegation and the North Korean delegation never happened. China kept the North Koreans apart from the Nixon delegation. 57

While Nixon was in Beijing, he and Zhou Enlai exchanged views on a broad range of international issues. Zhou and Nixon briefly touched on the Korean issue—only to confirm what Zhou had previous discussed with Kissinger. Zhou said,

As for the question of Korea, we know of course your ideas, and of course you also know our ideas. First, the official policy of the President is that he is prepared to finally withdraw troops from Korea in the future, and also to prevent the entry of Japanese forces into South Korea because this would not be beneficial to the cause of peace in the Far East. How does one promote contacts

54. Message From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Beijing, January 8, 1972, in FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. 17, 652.
56. GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Memorandum on a Conversation with the First Secretary of the Embassy of the Soviet Union, Comrade Kurbatov, on January 7, 1972, January 10, 1972, PolAAA, MfAA, C 944/76, NKIDP Archives.
between North and South Korea? How does one promote peaceful reunification? That question will take a long time.\textsuperscript{58}

Nixon replied, “The Koreans, both the North and the South, are emotionally impulsive people.” He called for the United States and the PRC to restrain the two Koreas from initiating conflicts that could lead to a large war among the Great Powers.\textsuperscript{59} The Shanghai Communiqué, which was released at the end of the presidential visit on February 27, states “the United States will maintain its close ties with and support for the Republic of Korea [and] will support efforts of the Republic of Korea to seek a relaxation of tension and increased communication on the Korean Peninsula.” The PRC “firmly supports the eight-point program for the peaceful unification of Korea,” and the stand for the abolition of the “U.N. Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea.”\textsuperscript{60}

On March 7, 1972, Zhou Enlai traveled to Pyongyang to brief Kim Il-sung on the U.S.–China negotiations during Nixon’s visit. Zhou, in particular, mentioned Nixon’s tacit agreement that “the Japanese forces would not be allowed to enter. Nor will the U.S. allow the Japanese forces to enter South Korea.” Although the Shanghai Communiqué stated that “neither is prepared to negotiate on behalf of any third party,” China reminded the United States that “China and North Korea represent one side at the Korean Military Armistice Commission.” According to the Chinese report, Kim was very pleased.\textsuperscript{61} Meanwhile, China paid more attention to cultivate its delicate relationship with North Korea. On the occasions of Kim’s sixtieth birthday on April 15, 1972 and the fortieth anniversary of the Korean People’s Army on April 25, Mao and Zhou sent congratulatory messages, and dispatched large Chinese delegations for the occasions.\textsuperscript{62} According to Erich Merten, charge d’affaires of the East German Embassy in Pyongyang, Kim was very pleased with the result of Nixon’s visit to China, in particular China’s support of North Korea’s position in the Shanghai Communiqué.\textsuperscript{63} On the one hand, North Korea attempted to use China’s influence to achieve Korean unification; on the other, Pyongyang’s subsequent peace offensive was an indication of its dissatisfaction with China’s position of not pressing hard enough for U.S. withdrawal. In March 1973, the Soviet diplomat reported, “the Chinese are not
interested in Korean unification. . . . The Chinese were said not to have insisted enough on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea.”

In sum, in consideration of the interests and sovereignty of South Korea, the United States was unwilling to discuss North Korea in depth during the U.S.–China rapprochement talks. China had its own dilemma. Beijing did not want to alienate Pyongyang and thus drive it back to Moscow while seeking rapprochement with the United States. China had to convince Kim Il-sung that U.S.–China reconciliation would actually help Pyongyang to achieve unification under his leadership. China thus made numerous attempts to include the Korean issue in U.S.–China talks and presented itself as a defender of North Korean interests.

THE KOREAN ISSUE AT THE UN

Since the end of the Korean War, the UNGA annually (except 1960 and 1964) debated three resolutions comprising the Korean issue: acceptance of the UNCURK report, dissolution of UNCURK, and withdrawal of UN and all other foreign forces. The United States and the ROK held that Korean reunification should take place through peninsula-wide elections supervised by UNCURK. The PRC criticized it as a unilateral instrument of U.S. policy. In 1971, the United States and South Korea asked the UN to put off any discussion on the Korean issue, insisting on waiting for the results of inter-Korean talks. The UN did suspend the discussion of the Korean issue in 1971.

Because both the Soviet Union and China had a mutual defense treaty with North Korea (signed in July 1961) and the United States had one with South Korea (signed in 1953), the U.S.–China rapprochement affected this confrontational structure on the Korean peninsula (i.e., China and North Korea plus the Soviet Union versus the United States and South Korea plus Japan). After Nixon’s trip to China in early 1972, China and the United States made enormous efforts to avoid a direct confrontation over the Korean issue in the international arena. Pyongyang modified its international strategy, strengthening its international united front via the UN and nonalliance movement. In North–South relations, Pyongyang launched a peace offensive toward the South Korean government in 1971, initiating the North–South dialogue in order to force U.S. troop withdrawal, preventing Japanese intrusion into South Korea and winning international recognition. Pyongyang hoped to be invited to the 27th Session of the UNGA in 1972 and to end the UN mission on the Korean peninsula. But Seoul was against inviting

65. Lee, Mikan No Heiwa, 94.
66. Henry Kissinger to the President, “State Department Briefing Books for the China Trip,” February 14, 1972, Folder 2, Box 848, NSC files, NPMP.
67. Lee, Pukhan-Chungguk kwangiy, 123.
Pyongyang, requesting UN discussion of the Korean issue be postponed to after 1972 on the ground that it might interfere with the inter-Korea dialogue. After six years of absence, China returned to the Korean Military Armistice Commission in July 1971. On the superficial level, China called for U.S. troop withdrawal because this could win the hearts and minds of North Korea. But from a short-term perspective, there were not many strategic interests for China in a complete U.S. troop withdrawal. China was more worried about the Soviet Union than the United States. According to U.S. National Security Estimate of May 1972, the Sino–North Korean cooperation in foreign policy rested on the basis of shared hostility toward “revisionism” and latent fears of Japanese expansionism. Thus, China supported Algeria and twelve other UN members’ motion to put the North Korean proposal, “To create a favorable atmosphere for the autonomous and peaceful unification of Korea,” on the agenda of the 27th session of the UNGA.68

Washington attempted to postpone UN debate on the Korean issue. On June 9, 1972, in a memo to Kissinger, NSC staff member Richard Solomon suggested,

While Chinese Foreign Ministry officials have expressed the view that debate on the Korean issue is unavoidable at the coming 27th UNGA, we might seek a coordinated position with Peking (and Moscow) to avoid an acrimonious public debate which would likely polarize positions just at a time when, in light of the growing yet fragile contacts between Seoul and Pyongyang, deferment of a GA debate would be of greatest interest to the major parties concerned.69

When Kissinger visited Beijing on June 22, 1972, Zhou Enlai and Kissinger discussed the Korean issue. Despite Kissinger’s suggestion that China and the United States work together to avoid public debate on the Korean issue at the UN, Zhou made it clear that China would push the Korean issue and the abolition of UNCURK on the UN agenda in the fall of 1972.70

The UNCURK was established by a UNGA resolution in October 1950 for the purpose of creating a unified, independent, and democratic Korean government and “to exercise such responsibilities in connection with relief and rehabilitation in Korea.” To Pyongyang, UNCURK’s existence implied that the UN would ultimately manage Korea’s unification and it thus objected to it. North Korea had always argued that unification must be the result of bilateral efforts of the two Koreas outside the UN. But South Korea considered UNCURK to be the key to its peaceful reunification policy and an important link in the chain of UN

sponsorship of the legitimacy of the ROK as “the only legal government in Korea.” By the early 1970s, Washington no longer viewed UNCURK as strategically important. Korean rehabilitation had been accomplished and there was no role which UNCURK could play in Korean unification.71

Kissinger reported to Nixon regarding his June 1972 trip to China that “Chou’s [Zhou’s] views have evolved on Korea as well. Although he maintained the principle of U.S. withdrawal, he indicated that we should keep our troops there for some time in order to keep out Japanese forces. The Chinese only demonstrated a diplomatic gesture of supporting North Korea in order to win over North Korea.”72 Nonetheless, the Chinese became the chief diplomatic champion for North Korea at the UN at the expense of Moscow’s competing claim.73

Starting from November 1971, high-level delegates from Pyongyang and Seoul met secretly for political talks—the so-called “inter-Korean dialogue.” The two sides issued a joint statement on July 4, 1972—to achieve Korean unification under the umbrella of no foreign intervention and through peaceful means.74 Pyongyang and Seoul had secretly agreed to exclude the Korean issue from UN deliberations. Although the statement claimed that North and South Koreans were of one nation and one people, pursuing national unification in disregard of ideologies and political systems, its actual role was at best minimal. South Korea was unwilling to give up its unique legal status at the UN (although South Korea was not a full UN member) or any further withdrawal of U.S. troops. North Korea valued the legality and security protection the document could give to the North.75

In 1972, China and the United States reached a tacit agreement on the Korean issue at the UN. The UNGA adopted another one-year moratorium on the Korean question by a vote of seventy to thirty-four with twenty-one abstentions.76 On July 26, in his conversation with Huang Hua, China’s permanent representative to the UN, Kissinger said that the United States preferred to avoid a Korean debate in that year’s General Assembly. The United States believed it was not helpful to have a direct confrontation between China and the United States over the issue. Kissinger told Huang Hua that “if we avoid a debate in the UN this time we would use our influence to bring about a dismantling of UNCURK.”77 On September 19, Huang notified Kissinger that the Chinese side accepted the

75. Lee, Mikan No Heiwa, 182.
76. Lee, China and Korea, 103; ZRGW, 41–42.
U.S. position to postpone the discussion of the Korean issue until after the U.S. election in November.\textsuperscript{78} Pyongyang viewed China’s changing position as unsupportive. During Kim Il-sung’s secret visit to Beijing on August 22–25, differences over the issue erupted between the Chinese and North Koreans. Although North Korea eventually accepted China’s position, it saw China’s action as betrayal.\textsuperscript{79}

Pyongyang came to realize that “a visible move to begin trade with the U.S. and/or initiate official or informal government to government contacts with the U.S. would have a favorable impact on North Korea’s drive to increase its international prestige and influence, to establish diplomatic or trade relations with a larger number of third world countries and to gain membership in international organizations.” Such a move would create doubts in Seoul about U.S. intentions, and would also increase the domestic and international pressures on Seoul to negotiate with the North but would weaken the ROK’s negotiating position.\textsuperscript{80}

North Korea also made numerous failed efforts to establish direct contact with the United States. On February 9, 1973, North Korean foreign minister Heo Dam visited China, requesting that China probe the United States regarding North Korea–U.S. contact. On February 11, Zhou told Heo Dam that China would transmit Korea’s request to Kissinger when he arrived. North Korea still hoped to establish contact with the United States via China to help bring about U.S. withdrawal. Zhou indicated that firstly, the Korean issue could only be resolved via the North–South dialogue; secondly, that all foreign troops should withdraw from the Korean peninsula; and thirdly, that the UNCURK should be abolished. He would also indirectly ask about North Korea’s direct contact with the United States. This shows that the Chinese were not enthusiastic about direct DPRK–U.S. contact. During Kissinger’s visit on February 15–19, Zhou discussed these issues. Kissinger indicated that the UNCURK would be abolished in the second half of the year. The United States would gradually withdraw from South Korea. He would think about direct U.S.–North Korean contact. On February 20, Zhou notified Heo Dam of his conversation with Kissinger.\textsuperscript{81} Once again, while China still insisted that the U.S. troops withdraw from South Korea as a general rule, Beijing would not demand immediate action from Washington, which conflicted with Pyongyang’s position. China was concerned more about the UN’s legitimacy over the Korean issue rather than immediate U.S. withdrawal.

On August 27, 1973, Ri Jae-phil, deputy chief of mission at the DPRK embassy in Beijing called on Alfred Jenkins, deputy head of the U.S. Liaison Office (USLO)
and discussed the issue of North Korea’s membership in the World Health Organization and sending of a Permanent Observer Mission to the UN headquarters in New York. This was the first direct contact between the United States and DPRK diplomats. David Bruce, head of USLO believed that Pyongyang “could look upon Peking as a convenient – and safe – place to deal directly with the U.S. when or if such a course is determined.”82 On September 26, when Kissinger informed Huang Hua about this contact and asked China to make some contacts with South Korea, Huang rejected Kissinger’s proposal on the ground that this would violate China’s principle of “one Korea” and “one China.”83

Meanwhile inter-Korean dialogue came to a halt in August 1973. Soon after the first meeting of the Co-Chairmen of the North–South Coordinating Committee in October 1972, North Korea started to demand a peace treaty with South Korea and reduction of foreign troops. But South Korea was only interested in economic and social interactions between the two Koreas, not military and political issues. In its June 23 Declaration of 1973, South Korea recognized North Korea as an independent state, proposing that both South and North Koreas join the UN together. In the word of Lee Hu-Rak, director of South Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), South Korea’s purpose in inter-Korea dialogue was to achieve peaceful co-existence between two Koreas on the basis of keeping U.S. troops in the South. He expected this would lead to two Koreas in the UN.84 On June 23, North Korea announced its “five-point plan for national unification,” criticizing South Korea, opposing both South and North Korea joining the UN together on the ground that it would lead to permanent division of the Korean peninsula. In August, North Korea terminated inter-Korean dialogue on the excuse of the KCIA kidnapping opposition leader Kim Dae-jung.85

In 1973, China and the United States continued to cooperate on the Korean issue at the UN. Although China was a strong defender of North Korea’s interests, Beijing, nonetheless, subjected the Korean issue to the general nature and the trend in the Sino–American détente. On September 26, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told Huang Hua, “We have agreed to the dissolution of UNCURK. If we could shelve the issue of the UN Command for one year at least. The problem now is that the armistice depends on the existence of the UN Command. That will give us an opportunity to look and work with you on this and to develop alternative legal arrangements.” When Huang Hua suggested that South Korean President Park Chung Hee abandon his proposal to have both

82. “Call on USLO by North Korean Charge in Peking,” Bruce to Kissinger, August 28, 1973, Box 328, Director’s Files of Winston Lord, RG 59.
83. Lee, Mikan No Heiwa, 182.
Koreas admitted into the UN, Kissinger refused to commit himself on this question.  

Before the UNGA meeting in November 1973, Kim Il-sung secretly traveled to Shenyang (China) on October 20–21 and held discussions with Zhou Enlai regarding China and North Korea’s strategy at the UNGA. Several months previously, vice foreign minister Qiao Guanhua had traveled to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Il-sung to discuss China and North Korea’s scheme regarding the Korean issue at the UN. In early September, DPRK’s first vice foreign minister, Ri Jong-mok, head of North Korean delegation to the UN, stopped over in Beijing on route to New York for discussion and coordination with Qiao Guanhua. The Chinese delegation collaborated closely with the North Korean delegation during the UN meetings. Zhou Enlai called an emergency meeting in Beijing to discuss China’s strategy regarding the Korean issue at the UN after meeting with Kim in Shenyang. Zhang Tingyan, then a desk officer for the Korean affairs at the Foreign Ministry and later China’s ambassador to South Korea (1992–1998), who was at the time a member of the Chinese delegation attending UN meetings, was recalled to Beijing to report on the situation at the UN. The Chinese delegation was instructed to adopt a flexible strategy regarding the Korean issue at the UNGA meetings. Zhou was able to dissuade Pyongyang from insisting on a tough resolution that called for the immediate elimination of both the UNCURK and the UNC, which was unacceptable to Washington and Seoul. Zhang Tingyan’s recollection showed the intensity of consultations and collaborations between China and North Korea raised questions on how and why China could replace the Soviet Union as North Korea’s champion at the UN.

At the 1973 UNGA, China helped remove the twelve-year-old “Stevenson” formula, which discouraged North Korean participation in UN debates on the Korean issue and then invited both North and South Koreas to participate in UN debates without being able to vote. In the context of Beijing’s new détente policy toward the United States and Japan, Huang Hua, China’s permanent representative to the UN fully cooperated with U.S. permanent representative to the UN, John Scali to extract a compromise from the two rival draft resolutions and to adopt a consensus statement on the Korean question at the UNGA on November 18, 1973. He also got the North Koreans to accept the consensus statement. The statement noted that “a joint communiqué was issued by the North and the South of Korea on July 4, 1972” and hoped that “the South and the North of Korea will be urged to continue their dialogue and widen their many-sided exchanges and

87. Zhang Tingyan, “The UN Discusses the Korean Issue,” in Wan Jinzhang and Zhang Bing, Fengyun jihui lianheguo [Unpredictable Meetings at the UN] (Beijing, 2008), 53–4; Li et al., Zhou Enlai mianpu, 629.
cooperation in the above spirit so as to expedite the independent peaceful reunification of the country.” It also dissolved UNCURK immediately.  

The issue of the UN Command (UNC) was more complicated and important than the dissolution of the UNCURK because it was the mechanism for maintaining the cease-fire in Korea and the authority to command troops in Korea. The UNC was established in July 1950 by a UN resolution which requested the United States to assume command of all UN forces. It provided “the umbrella for U.S. operational control of ROK armed forces and the basis for a secret arrangement with Japan for the use of U.S. bases in Japan” for the defense of Korea. The PRC had always objected to the presence of U.S. troops in Korea. In March 1973, Marshall Green, assistant secretary of state for East Asian Affairs pointed out in a State Department study that the UNC could prevent the South from attacking the North by maintaining the cease-fire agreement, posing as a psychological deterrence on the North. Thus, the State Department came to view the UNCURK as a tactical issue, but the UNC as a strategic issue and more important. The NSDM 251 of March 1974 stipulated that only after the power of the UNC was transferred to the ROK–U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), could the UNC be dissolved.

On March 25, 1974, North Korea proposed to sign a unilateral peace treaty with the United States. It stated that South Korea was not even a signatory party of the Korean armistice treaty and was under U.S. military control. It accused South Korea of rejecting to sign a peace treaty during inter-Korean dialogue. It demanded that foreign troops should be withdrawn from South Korea “at the earliest possible date.” This is a reversal of its previous position that the U.S. troops were to be withdrawn from Korea after the conclusion of the peace agreement. It seems that Pyongyang’s new position was influenced by the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973, which ended direct U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

In order to force the Americans to agree to direct talks, North Korea created numerous crises along the Northern Limit Line (the sea line dividing the North from the South). Pyongyang also made several attempts to establish direct contact with Washington via Egypt, Romania, and even David Rockefeller (New York

89. Lee, China and Korea, 103–4; ZRGW, 42–43.
91. Lee, Mikan No Heiwa, 261.
92. NSDM 251: Termination of the UN Command in Korea, March 29, 1974 (online); Also “NSDM: Dissolution of the UNC,” March 29, 1974, Box 376, Winston Lord Files, NA.
95. Michishita, North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 52–72; Lee, Mikan No Heiwa, 283.
banker and a personal friend of Kissinger). On April 30, during Kissinger’s visit to Egypt, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat told Kissinger that Pyongyang asked him to help establish direct contact with the United States. Prior to that, Kim Il-sung also wrote to the U.S. Congress without receiving a reply. Kissinger told Sadat that Kim must make contact with the U.S. Executive Branch. The U.S. could “agree to initiating a dialogue with North Korea . . . but it should be secret and conducted through President Sadat.”

On August 26, 1974, Vasile Pungan, Counselor to Romanian President Nicolae Ceaușescu, visited Kissinger at the State Department. He told Kissinger that North Korea desired “to establish contact with the United States” and had asked Romania to facilitate it. Kissinger said, “I understand he wants a meeting with us. The question is: do we want a meeting. To be brutal, what will we get out of a meeting?” Kissinger further stated, “It is one thing to arrange a meeting with Mao. It is another thing to do something for Kim Il-sung though his own estimation of his relative importance is not low.” Although Kissinger did not dismiss the possibility of contact with North Korea, he showed very little interest. Kissinger’s statement demonstrated that North Korea was not an important enough country from a geostrategic perspective for the U.S. government to make compromises on its ideals simply for the sake of meetings. Two other factors may also contribute to this: first, North Korea attacked U.S. leaders in person (abusive languages toward Nixon, which the Chinese never used); second, the United States was concerned about possible South Korean reaction.

On April 12, 1974, in a memo from Richard Solomon to Kissinger on the topics of “The PRC and Termination of the U.N. Command in Korea,” Solomon wrote, “last summer, in preparing our position on the Korean issue for the fall session of the U.N. General Assembly, you indicated to PRC officials that we would be willing to reconsider the future of the U.N. Command if UNCURK were dissolved in a non-contentious manner.” The document further pointed out, “Peking will respond in generally favorable terms to our alternate arrangement for abolition of the UNC if it can be presented to Pyongyang as a transitional arrangement which would hold out some possibility for the eventual realization of North Korea’s maximum goal of a complete U.S. withdrawal from Korea.”

On June 13, the United States related to the Chinese the content of National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 251 regarding the dissolution of the UNC. On July 31, China turned down the U.S. proposal, accusing it of attempting to continue to have its troops in Korea, and making the division of Korea permanent. This was most likely because North Korea rejected the proposal. North Korea organized a

97. Memorandum of Conversation between Vasile Pungan and Henry Kissinger, August 26, 1974. DNSA: Kissinger Transcripts, KT01110.
twenty-nine nation lobby effort, demanding all foreign troop withdrawal from Korea. Pressed by North Korea, on September 19, Huang Hua publicly called the United States to withdraw its troops from Korea.

On October 2, 1974, during the UNGA meeting, Qiao Guanhua and Kissinger discussed the UNC issue at the latter’s dinner party in honor of Qiao. During the day, Qiao had attacked détente and criticized both superpowers, and demanded the withdrawal of foreign forces from South Korea. But in their private conversation, Qiao enjoyed a rapport with Kissinger. Qiao told Kissinger, “You understand that we keep on good relations with the DPRK. On this issue we have to respect their views.” Kissinger replied that, “Our problem is that we cannot accept abolition of the United Nations Command if there is no legal basis on both sides for the continuation of the Armistice.” Qiao told Kissinger that the details on the Korean question were of no great significance. He reminded his host, “As you know from your discussions with Chairman Mao, this is not a major issue if you look at it in terms of the overall world situation.” Qiao also mentioned that China had delivered the revised U.S. proposal to North Korea, but had not heard from it since then. Meanwhile, with the support of a number of countries, but without prior consultation with China, North Korea had submitted a proposal for a peace agreement and the dissolution of the UNC.

Partly due to deteriorating political developments in the United States (the Watergate scandal, which forced President Nixon out of office) and China (Premier Zhou Enlai, the champion for good U.S.–China relations, suffered a political setback) in 1974, China and the United States were not able to reach a compromise over the UNC. Kissinger observed that Nixon’s resignation “was incomprehensible to the Chinese leaders” and “led to a collapse of congressional support for an active foreign policy in the subsequent congressional elections in November 1974.” He noted that Chinese foreign minister Qiao Guanhua “turned confrontational” in their negotiations.

In his seventh visit to China in November 1974, Kissinger intentionally avoided a discussion of the Korean issue with the Chinese. In his report to President Gerald Ford, Kissinger claimed that the United States had achieved an advantage in the UN over the Korean issue and had more supporters than China and North Korea.

In the process of the Sino–American rapprochement, there were mutual needs for both China and North Korea to sustain a friendly relationship. But by 1975, Mao Zedong was no longer interested in fomenting revolution in the world in general or supporting Pyongyang’s unification by force in particular. Mao was very

100 Lee, Mikan No Heiwa, 298.
disappointed with the failure of global revolution and its limited regional achievements. Following his 1973 theory of the “three worlds,” Mao had increasingly shifted his focus from supporting unsuccessful revolutionary movements to anti-Soviet governments of various types. By 1974, he declared, “We may not mention that the current world tide is revolution.” This explains why the PRC declined to support Kim Il-sung’s proposal to attack the South in April 1975. Kim made a public visit to Beijing against the background that the Vietnam War was coming to an end with a Communist victory and thus was energized (Figure 2). In his first public appearance in Beijing on April 18, Kim declared Asia to be on a “high tide of revolution.” If war were to break out in Korea, he said, “We have to lose only the Military Demarcation Line but will gain the country’s reunification.” It will be “up to the U.S. whether there will be war in Korea or not.” He also declared that “as members of the same nation,” Koreans in the North would not stand by “with folded arms” if “revolution” breaks out in South Korea; the DPRK would “energetically support the South Korean people.”

There was a limit to China’s support to North Korea. George H. W. Bush, who was then head of U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing, recorded in his diary


of April 24, “Kim Il-sung’s talking militantly about Korea, China apparently downplaying this.”

After Kim made the radical speech, Beijing’s leaders demonstrated little interest in his ideas. When Kim met with Mao (Figure 3), the Chairman had referred him to talk with Deng Xiaoping, executive vice premier on political issues. And Deng told Kim that Beijing would not be in a position to commit its resources to Kim’s revolutionary war plans (Figure 4).

Consequently, in Kim’s farewell speech, he greatly lowered his tone. Accordingly, the final PRC–DPRK communique of April 1975 defined the “correct path to solve the problem of Korean reunification” by quoting Kim’s three principles from 1972 (peaceful, without foreign interference, national unity despite different systems) and by another “peaceful” DPRK Five-Point-Program of 1973. The PRC was obviously eager to prevent the Korean question from affecting its relations with the United States and Japan or to get dragged into a


military conflict on the Korean peninsula. Kim left China without achieving his primary goal of getting Beijing’s approval for a military assault on the South.

Kim Il-sung also wanted to visit the Soviet Union in the second half of May, but the date he proposed did not suit the Soviet leaders. While China was not supporting North Korea’s attack on the South, it did not want to estrange its ally. China had to provide North Korea with more weapons. Without China and the Soviet Union’s support for unification by force, Kim promoted North Korea’s cause internationally by active involvement in the non-aligned movement. Pyongyang applied and was accepted to the foreign ministers’ conference of non-aligned nations at Lima, Peru in August. This was an important step for North Korea to win more votes at the UN.109

In view of their precarious position at the UN, the United States and South Korea proposed in June 1975 to terminate the UNC by January 1, 1976, provided China and North Korea agree to continue the armistice agreement. According to Kissinger’s talking points, the United States sent a letter to the UN Security Council on June 27, 1975 announcing U.S. willingness to see the UNC for Korea dissolved on January 1, 1976, if the governments of the PRC and North Korea agreed to uphold the armistice by accepting the United States and the ROK

as the “successors in command.” In his speech at the UN on September 22, 1975, Kissinger said it was important to pay attention to the efficacy of the Armistice treaty. It was necessary for all parties involved to negotiate in order to achieve a transformation in the armistice arrangement. On September 26, in his speech at the UN, Qiao Guanhua publicly retorted Kissinger’s position, stating that the U.S. proposal was designed to prolong the stay of U.S. troops in South Korea. The parties to sign a peace treaty should be the United States and the DPRK. But later Qiao told Kissinger privately that this was the DPRK’s view only.  

On November 18, 1975, the UNGA adopted two mutually contradictory resolutions—the pro-Seoul resolution by a vote of fifty-nine/fifty-one with twenty-nine abstentions and the pro-Pyongyang resolution by a vote of fifty-four/forty-three with forty-two abstentions. The pro-Pyongyang resolution, initiated by China and forty-two other nations called for the unconditional dissolution of the UNC and the withdrawal of all foreign troops stationed in South Korea under the flag of the UN and asked “the real parties to the Armistice Agreement” (meaning the United States and North Korea) to replace it with a peace agreement. The UN’s adoption of two contradictory resolutions made it impossible for either resolution to be implemented. The Korean issue would be frozen at the 1976 UNGA meeting as a consequence of the Axe Murder Incident of August 1976. The Korean issue would gradually evolve into an international issue dominated by two related parties, but also involving several other major powers. In 1978, a bi-national headquarters, the ROK–U.S. CFC, was created, and the South Korean military units with frontline missions were transferred from the UNC to the CFC’s operational control. As of today, the United States has not yet withdrawn all its troops from Korea.

CONCLUSION

During the period from 1970 to 1975, the overall foreign policy direction of the PRC was to achieve rapprochement and maintain détente with the United States. But China also attempted to retain its revolutionary credentials and took into consideration the interests and sentiments of its smaller allies such as North Korea, Vietnam, and Albania. It was an impossible job. Vietnam and Albania openly opposed the Sino–American rapprochement, and their relations with China deteriorated as a consequence. Thus, North Korea became even more important to China. Beijing took up and relayed Pyongyang’s demands regarding the Korean peninsula to the United States. The Chinese leaders maintained close contacts and extensive consultation with the North Koreans. Zhou Enlai flew to

111. Lee, Mikai No Heiwa, 319.
112. ZRGW, 43; Lee, China and Korea, 105.
Pyongyang to brief Kim Il-sung after Kissinger’s secret visit and Nixon’s trip to China. Immediately after Kissinger’s second trip to Beijing, Kim also made a secret visit to Beijing to learn about the U.S. position from the Chinese leaders. But Washington did not feel the need to consult Seoul regarding its policy toward the Korean peninsula in its talks with the Chinese, and never made such an effort. Before Nixon’s trip to China, South Korean President Park Chung Hee requested a meeting with the U.S. president, but his request was not granted. Only when the U.S. Embassy in Seoul made numerous attempts did Kissinger finally agree to visit South Korea in November 1973. But he stopped there only for a couple of hours.113

At the UN meetings, Qiao Guanhua and Huang Hua ferociously criticized the United States in public, demanded foreign forces’ withdrawal from South Korea, and vociferously defended the DPRK position. But, privately, the Chinese seemed to accept the U.S. position that the resolution of the Korean issue would take time.

How could China maintain a friendly relationship with North Korea when Pyongyang was obviously unsatisfied with China’s new policy? There are at least two reasons. First, the Soviet Union was not interested in Korea’s unification by force as Pyongyang proposed, and was not supportive of such a move. To maintain good relations with Beijing was in Pyongyang’s best interest. North Korea adjusted its policy accordingly and attempted to use the Sino–American détente to force U.S. withdrawal from Korea and, therefore, to unify Korea under Pyongyang’s terms. Second, China enhanced its economic and military aid to North Korea and was Pyongyang’s largest donor. North Korea was China’s last ally in Mao’s later years. By 1974, it seems that Pyongyang became suspicious that Beijing did not pressure Washington enough to force the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea during Nixon’s trip to China in February 1972. Pyongyang started to act alone without prior consultation with Beijing over major issues on the Korean peninsula, such as the dissolution of the UNC, a peace agreement between North Korea and the United States, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. Pyongyang made numerous futile attempts to start direct negotiations with the United States. China also stated explicitly that it would not support North Korea’s attempt to unify the Korean peninsula by force. China’s primary foreign policy goal during this period was to maintain détente with Washington in order to form a united front to counter the Soviet threat, and to prevent the resumption of war on the Korean peninsula. Thus, China’s policy toward North Korea was made more for national security and geopolitical consideration and less for ideological affinities.

In a recent book, political scientist Thomas Christensen argues that disagreements between Moscow and Beijing during the Cold War often caused the two to try to outdo each other in supporting revolutions such as the one in Vietnam, and from the perspective of America’s policy makers, this made the Communist

alliance “worse than a monolith.” In the period from 1970 to 1975, the frictions in the Sino–North Korean relationship occurred because China was insufficiently supportive of DPRK aggression, not, as before, because it was hounding Pyongyang for not being revolutionary enough. But with the Sino–North Korean relations improved, China could play a restraining role on North Korea. This study echoes Christensen’s thesis: when Pyongyang’s relation with Beijing was very tense in the second half of the 1960s, North Korea acted more recklessly and hostile toward South Korea and the United States. This article suggests that a relatively good relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang from 1970 to 1975 actually benefited the United States as well. Washington was able to improve relations with Beijing while at the same time indirectly improving its security vis-à-vis Pyongyang. North Korea was far less aggressive and confrontational toward South Korea and the United States during this period. Thus, this study suggests that alienating the DPRK from the PRC does not seem to be an ideal path for the United States.