

Book Review: Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa¹²

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In the introduction of this captivating read the author, Tycho van der Hoog, states that this book explores North Korea's contribution to the liberation of Southern Africa and analyses how African states have reciprocated this historical assistance in the present day. In particular, it investigates how political elites in Southern Africa benefited from North Korean support between 1960 and 2020. He argues that "the end of the Cold War did not terminate the fraternal ties between both parties but merely changed the nature of the African–North Korean alliance. Hence, African and North Korean elites remain comrades beyond the Cold War".⁴ The book is divided into three parts. The first two examine the 'revolutionary alliance' between African states and North Korea, which emerged from North Korea's diplomatic and military support for African liberation movements, support that Julius Nyerere identified as a foundation of independence for these movements. The third part reflects on how the presence of North Korean monuments in Africa signifies the continuing relevance of African–North Korean relations. The book is based on van der Hoog's PhD dissertation, and he notes that it is "consciously centered around African agency",⁵ something which tends to be overlooked in International Relations.

Chapter 1 highlights a crucial dimension of the struggle for freedom, namely solidarity. It reflects on the various liberation movements in Southern Africa: SWAPO,⁶ the ANC,⁷ ZANU,⁸ and FRELIMO,⁹ and introduces Tanzania as a central actor in the region's liberation narrative. As one of the Frontline African states that formed an alliance during the Cold War to oppose South African apartheid, Tanzania became a refuge for exiled African liberation fighters who established headquarters and training camps in the capital, Dar es Salaam. The city also functioned as a vital gateway linking African liberation movements to the wider international community. As van der Hoog says, "Tanzania was one of the principal stages for the politics of African solidarity, and therefore a strategic place for North Korean investment".¹⁰ The diplomacy of African

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² Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*. Hurst & Company, 2025, 336 pp., ISBN: 9781805262787, \$ 33,68.

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⁴ Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*. Hurst & Company, 2025, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ South West Africa People's Organisation

⁷ African National Congress

⁸ Zimbabwe African National Union

⁹ Frente de Libertação Moçambique

¹⁰ Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*.



liberation movements was ‘crucial’ to sustaining the flows of weapons, material aid, and humanitarian support on which their survival depended. To a large extent, these diplomatic initiatives were launched from Tanzania and other Frontline States. The chapter also shows that African liberation movements increasingly turned to Asian partners as a result of inadequate funding from within Africa and limited support from Western countries. In this context, assistance from states such as North Korea provided a vital lifeline to liberation movements during periods of need.

Chapter 2 examines how both South Korea and North Korea competed for African support in the diplomatic arena, particularly in relation to recognition at the United Nations. It highlights the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), which was committed to non-aligned solidarity and decolonization, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an outcome of the Bandung Conference that laid the foundations for cooperation across the Global South, as important new channels of engagement between African states and the Korean peninsula. Through these platforms, North Korea became acquainted with Southern African liberation movements. The chapter shows that the Koreas themselves initiated African-Korean relations, with North Korea relying primarily on cultural diplomacy and South Korea on trade diplomacy. Although both states maintained diplomatic ties with African countries, African governments tended to favour North Korea because of its perceived global independence. In addition, North Korea’s membership in the NAM appealed to African states seeking to build international relationships despite Western pressure. The NAM also provided a space for North Korea and African states to experiment with cooperation across different policy areas, thereby strengthening mutual trust. Although North Korea’s influence within the NAM proved short-lived, its early successes enabled it to build significant political capital among African member states.

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the mechanisms through which African–North Korean relations were cultivated. It assesses North Korea’s invitation diplomacy in the Southern African context and explores the significance of Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, as a key meeting place. As the chapter notes, “personal invitations to Pyongyang were a powerful tool in the goodwill campaign that North Korea utilised to impress African countries”.¹¹ In the first two decades following the Korean War, North Korea’s economy outperformed that of South Korea, and Pyongyang showcased impressive post-war reconstruction alongside the regime’s Juche ideals (translated as ‘self-reliance’, premised on the principle that ‘man is the master of all things’). The city’s architecture and its people projected a promise of possibility to oppressed or newly liberated populations across the globe. The chapter further observes that “the entire first generation of Southern African presidents visited Pyongyang and maintained friendly, personal ties to the Kim regime throughout their tenure in government”.¹² African delegates were received with the highest honours, and leaders of liberation movements

Hurst & Company, 2025, 27.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹² Ibid., 60.

were welcomed as statesmen-in-waiting at a time when much of the Western world regarded them with suspicion. These bilateral engagements created fertile ground for North Korea to cultivate strong personal relationships with African leaders. Ultimately, invitation diplomacy contributed to deeper diplomatic ties, expanded military cooperation, and the sale of North Korean monuments.

Chapter 4 unpacks Juche thought which, according to van der Hoog, replaced Marxism–Leninism as North Korea’s official ideology in 1970, signalling political independence from its two principal communist sponsors, China and Russia. This ideological shift made North Korea more attractive to non-aligned African states and gave it a diplomatic advantage over South Korea. Juche resonated strongly with indigenous African development philosophies, including Kenneth Kaunda’s humanism, Kwame Nkrumah’s consciencism, Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa, and Seretse Khama’s *boipelego* principle. As the chapter explains, “African desires for autonomy, anti-imperialism and postcolonial development were echoed in Juche thought, which hinted at socialist principles and underlined the importance of self-determination”.¹³ It further argues that “Juche was thus instrumental in creating a shared ideological framework that brought the distant political struggles of African liberation movements and North Korea closer together. This, in turn, allowed the development of practical connections that benefited all sides”.¹⁴

Chapter 5 explores why African states were particularly receptive to North Korea’s development ideas. As van der Hoog notes, “there were two main reasons for Africa’s interest in North Korean development aid: its miraculous post-war reconstruction and its emphasis on independence from external actors, especially from major powers”.¹⁵ For North Korea, development assistance formed a central component of its foreign policy in Africa, especially in the agricultural sector. The chapter examines Tanzania and Ghana as key sites of African–North Korean agricultural cooperation. Both countries served as strategic hubs for liberation movements and held strong ideological significance, given the influence of Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah as leading thinkers on African decolonisation. Although these initiatives were framed as South–South cooperation, they achieved limited success, largely because decision-making was imposed from Pyongyang with little regard for local conditions and dynamics.

Turning to the second part of the book, Chapter 6 focuses on the Southern African battlefield, unpacking the shift in African political thought that led anticolonial leaders to take up arms. It introduces the various wars fought across Southern Africa from the 1960s to the 1990s and highlights the central challenge faced by liberation movements, the shortage of weapons, to which the Communist bloc became a crucial source of support for African liberation. As the demand for weapons intensified, North Korea emerges as a key actor in Chapter 7. van der Hoog notes that the Korean War was the first major military conflict of the Cold War and that its effects were felt globally. He

¹³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86.



argues that the war was instrumental in establishing the early networks between Pyongyang and African states. While some African countries fought on behalf of South Korea, others drew inspiration from North Korea's wartime legacy. As alluded to earlier in the review, North Korea's anti-colonial outlook (shaped by its struggle against Japanese colonisation) and its post-war reconstruction efforts resonated strongly with African states. Beyond rhetorical support, North Korea actively assisted liberation movements by providing arms. In this sense, both North Korea and African liberation movements perceived themselves as fellow freedom fighters.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 provide insight into the dynamics of African–North Korean relations by examining the various military programmes and training initiatives that North Korea offered to the armed wings of liberation movements. These engagements initially took place in sites of exile across the African continent. With North Korean assistance, African liberation forces were able to defeat white settler regimes and colonial governments. North Korea continued to play a significant role in the post-independence period, as former revolutionaries assumed positions of power, by offering internal regime support to African states. In the final decade of the Cold War, the provision of presidential security emerged as a central theme in African–North Korean relations. Despite United Nations sanctions imposed in the 2000s, which led to North Korea's international isolation, African–North Korean relations have persisted. Countries such as Angola and Namibia, for example, received a North Korean delegation that travelled to Africa in 2008 in an effort to expand economic and trade cooperation and to break Pyongyang's diplomatic isolation. In this way, North Korea has managed to endure despite significant internal and external pressures. van der Hoog nevertheless observes that “the modus operandi of many North Korean operatives appears to be opportunistic trade that exploits historic relationships, maintenance dependency and weak enforcement”.¹⁶

The third and final part of the book, set largely in the twenty-first century, reflects on this earlier period. North Korean memorials across Africa are a direct legacy of the diplomatic ties forged between North Korean and African leaders and frequently commemorate the struggles for independence. To understand the correlation between North Korean memorials and African memorials, Chapter 11 offers an example of the Independence Memorial in Namibia which according to van der Hoog “has a similar function as the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang, which narrates North Korea's war experience through the heritage of anticolonial struggle. The adoption of North Korea's heritage model occurs across Southern Africa”.¹⁷ Consequently, liberation governments emerge as the sole actors in the revolutionary struggle, thereby marginalising all other participants. As a result, the party assumes unquestioned dominance. How this has shaped nation states in Africa is explained in great detail in Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15, with an emphasis on post-liberation states leaning into a nationalist heritage, seen through the erecting of nationalist monuments

¹⁶ Ibid., 173.

¹⁷ Ibid., 193–194.

such as the African Renaissance Monument in Senegal—the construction of which was delayed at some point because the faces looked too Korean (oddly). Notwithstanding, van der Hoog notes that “the liberation movements that fought for democracy have been transformed into liberation governments that are guided by a desire for political survival and display anti-democratic behaviour”.¹⁸

The conclusion reflects on the effect of North-Korea on the authoritarian tendencies of political culture in Southern Africa. van der Hoog notes that “a struggle for liberal ideals does not always result in a liberal outcome. African nationalists searched for freedom and eventually found power”.¹⁹ According to van der Hoog, African liberation governments have struggled to move beyond the militarised mindsets formed during exile and continue to interpret contemporary politics through a liberation lens. By invoking the past to legitimise their authority, they promote the notion of a continuous struggle extending into the twenty-first century. In their pursuit of prolonged rule, these governments found an unexpected source of inspiration in North Korea, a hereditary/dynastic state that has persisted post the Cold War. Focusing on ‘African agency’ (hinted to earlier in this review) reveals that liberation governments strategically employed North Korea’s diplomatic cooperation, military assistance, and nationalist heritage to ultimately advance their own party interests rather than those of the state as a whole.

As someone previously unfamiliar with North Korea’s role in the liberation movements of Southern Africa, I found this book to be an eye-opener. As van der Hoog emphasises, African–North Korean relations cannot be understood solely through a Cold War lens but instead extend well beyond it. North Korea has had a profound influence on the post-colonial trajectories of Southern African states, while also benefiting from trade relations at a time when it remains largely isolated within the global system. I agree with van der Hoog’s assertion that ‘Southern Africa is governed by the past’, with political elites clinging to liberation histories to maintain their hold on power, although the tide may be turning in countries such as South Africa, where marginalised communities are increasingly recognising that history alone cannot sustain them. Using the past to rule has allowed contemporary politics to be framed through ‘revolutionary rhetoric’, as van der Hoog notes, usually at the expense of democratic practice. This is not unique to Southern Africa though; this pattern is evident across much of the continent where liberation movements have transitioned into governing parties, often paving the way for the emergence of ‘strong man’ leaders that refuse to leave their seats of power.

Overall, this first of its kind book offers comprehensive and thoughtful insights into African–North Korean relations. I highly recommend it to those interested in African politics and history, Cold War and post–Cold War international relations and North Korea’s foreign policy.

¹⁸ Ibid., 237.

¹⁹ Ibid., 239.