



ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS CORPORATION
Post Office Box 9758
Marina del Rey
California 90291

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SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE
NORTH KOREAN-LIBYAN FRIENDSHIP TREATY



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I. Introduction

On 3 November 1982, North Korea and Libya concluded a ten-year friendship treaty. Article 4 of this pact states that:

...the contracting parties shall exchange military data and specialists and each party shall strive to supply the other party weapons not possessed by it.

Article 5 pledges that:

...if any of the contracting parties is subject to a threat or an aggression by imperialists and their minions, the other party shall in every way render military and material support and aid to it, regarding this as a threat or an aggression against itself. In that case, the contracting parties shall provide all conveniences for the military support of the other country.

Based on these two articles of the treaty, it is possible to interpret the treaty as suggesting:

- (1) strategic warning of a war against the ROK; and
- (2) establishment of the groundwork for North Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The present memorandum outlines the implications of this treaty for the North-South Korean military balance and potential conflict in the region.

II. Strategic Warning of Korean Conflict

2.1 Implications for North-South Korean Military Balance

Although Article 4 does not pledge the signatories to automatically provide the other weapons not in its possession, it is clear that North

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Korea's intention is to turn Libya into an out-of-country storehouse for its military. Past reports about the presence of North Korean pilots in Libya and their training on MIG-23s there (not in the arsenal of the North Korean airforce itself), may have already indicated existence of a reversed prepositioning arrangement potentially useful in shortening the lead time necessary for absorption of the MIG-23s if, and when, such aircraft were eventually supplied to the DPRK.

Under this article, North Korea may also get easy access to Western military technology which in time could affect the North-South military balance.

Combined, there are two troublesome aspects of this new contractual arrangement:

- (1) The North Korean intention--certainly it denotes a heretofore absent North Korean effort to improve its military potential while circumventing constraints currently evident insofar as supply of direct Soviet and/or Chinese weapons are concerned.
- (2) The securing of a logistic support basis of advanced weaponry could signal a step in a process of DPRK war preparations. In this regard the potential impact on the Korean air capability is the most alarming.¹

Further, even if one accepts, as an alternative explanation, that the new arrangement tacitly confirms the deterioration of the North's military position, the resulting upgraded DPRK arsenal could "by accident" provide Pyongyang with an improved capability to wage war against the South.

¹Note in this regard is the subsequent arrival of Marshal of Aviation Skorikov, Chief of the Main Staff of the Soviet Air Forces, in Libya on 2 November 1982. Aware of the potential alarm with which the West could react to a sudden resumption of direct shipments of advanced Soviet aircraft to Pyongyang, Moscow could opt for an indirect supply route to North Korea.

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Of course, assessment of the likeliness of any North-South Korean engagement has to consider the dynamic influence of the Sino-Soviet conflict. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present memo. However, in light of recent developments in the Sino-Soviet split, it might be advisable to assess what a Soviet-Chinese limited "rapprochement" might mean to Pyongyang. The Seoul daily Choson Ilbo on 18 November 1982 commented:

The Kim Il-song clique in the North must welcome such a development more than anyone else for the Sino-Soviet rapprochement will provide the Korean clique with a good opportunity to remove the awkwardness in its relations with the Soviet Union due to its leaning toward Communist China....The North Korean puppets' closer relationship with the Soviet Union resulting from the Sino-Soviet rapprochement will no doubt be taken by them as another encouraging development. This proportionally increases the danger that we must cope with.

A similar logic was used in an editorial of the Seoul daily Tong-A ILBO on 6 November 1982. Reacting to Western press reports about Moscow's declined concern over Pyongyang's tilt toward Beijing, it stated:

We believe that North Korea's military reliance on the Soviet Union is much greater than its reliance on Communist China. And, in this regard, North Korea's leaning toward Communist China may be construed as its China card for the benefit of the Soviet Union.²

2.2 Libyan Expansionism in Africa

Based on the Libyan-DPRK friendship treaty introduction of significant numbers of North Korean military personnel into Libya is a matter of

²Tokyo's Jiji Press on 14 November 1982 quoted "Authoritative Diplomatic sources in South Korea" as saying that Soviet leader Y. Andropov secretly visited Pyongyang shortly before secret visits there in April by Chinese leaders Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang.

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time. The question, however, centers on the geographical scope of Article 5. Is the pledge for mutual assistance also binding insofar as the signatories external commitments are concerned? For example, if the tripartite Libyan-Ethiopian-PDRY pact becomes "subject to a threat" by imperialists "and their minions," will North Korea be called to intervene there on behalf of Libya under Article 5?

III. North Korean Nuclear Weapons Aspirations

The treaty could be viewed also as a significant indication of Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. It should be noted that Article 4 is not limited to exchange of conventional military equipment between the two countries. In light of known Libyan involvement in Pakistan's "Islamic bomb" effort, the possibility of nuclear-relevant material reaching North Korean hands could not be excluded.³

In this regard it is worth noting that:

- (1) One important outcome of Pakistan's President Zia ul-Haq talks with Kim Il-song was the decision by the two countries to sign an agreement for cooperation in the fields of trade, science and technology.⁴
- (2) Press accounts have cited "Western intelligence sources" as pointing to a secret 1974 agreement which pledges Pakistan to provide Libya with at least one nuclear bomb in exchange for Libya's financial support.⁵

³Note that during his October visit to the DPRK, Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq heard President Kim Il-song praise him for basing his administration on the ideology of Islam. Bangkok Post, Bangkok (2 November 1982).

⁴Karachi Domestic Service (26 October 1982) in FBIS (South Asia) (27 October 1982), p. F1.

⁵See, for example, Ha'aretz, Tel Aviv (30 September 1982).

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- (3) In a detailed commentary on U.S. nuclear capabilities on the Korean Peninsula, the clandestine Voice of the Revolutionary Party for Reunification on 13 November 1982 charged that the "danger of nuclear war was further increased in South Korea." It went on to state that: the "United States has equipped the South Korean Army with nuclear weapons and is planning to produce nuclear weapons on this land. As a result, a nuclear fuel development plant was inaugurated in Taedok County in South Chungchong Province in November 1977. With this, a full-fledged study of nuclear weapons was started." These charges seem to be laying down the rationale for an adequate North Korean response.