

Behaviors of Small Socialist States: The Cases of North Korea and Romania

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I. Introduction

North Korea has been known to be a country which has maintained an independent line in her relations with the Soviet Union. It has been said that North Korea's manipulation of Sino-Soviet conflicts based on her geo-strategic position is a crucial factor for her independence.

One may contend, however, that by putting too much emphasis on geo-strategic factor, such a view tends to exaggerate the uniqueness of North Korean case in the relations among socialist countries. It can be also noted that such a Pyongyang-centric view has been argued in most cases by specialists on North Korea. Rarely, if not at all, North Korea has been compared with other socialist countries.

While not denying the unique aspects of the policy environment of North Korea, contents, tactics, strategies and patterns of North Korea policies have not been put to close scrutiny.

This paper is an attempt to compare North Korea and Romanian relations with the Soviet Union with the three questions in mind. First, based on the analysis of similarities and differences in their policies, distinctive and unique features of North Korean policies will be demonstrated which can be attributed to the special geopolitical situation of North Korea. Second, a conceptual discussion will be made to characterize the nature of deviant behaviors of the two countries. Related to this is to identify tactics and strategies of small social states in dealing with super socialist power. Lastly, the attitudes and responses of these states to the changes occurred in the Soviet Union since Gorbachev came to power will be analyzed to discuss change and continuity of policy orientations of these countries.

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II. Deviant Behaviors of North Korea and Romania

Deviant behaviors are here defined as policies of these two socialist countries which are designed to be partially and totally different from those of the Soviet Union. Difference may manifest itself in different forms: total disagreement, revision and non-action. In terms of degree of differences, policies can be categorized from total difference to revision. Policies also can be grouped in terms of positive actions taken and non-action. It is possible to imagine that certain policies adopted by these two countries did contradict with those of the Soviet Union but never came to surface. Such policies for the obvious reason of the lack of access cannot be the subject of this paper. In terms of target areas of policies, they can be regarding relations among socialist relations, the West and the third world.

The first sign of difference between Romania and the Soviet Union was in 1962 when Romania refused to participate in the supranational coordination of economic plans among the members of COMECON. The reason for Romanian refusal was that "socialist division of labor" proposed by COMECON would leave Romania underdeveloped agrarian country. Romania refused to participate in Warsaw Pact military operations and unilaterally reduced induction periods for conscripts. Romania criticized harshly the Soviet and Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Romania alone sent its ambassador back to Tirana even under pressure from Moscow. Romania's taking advantage of Sino-Soviet conflicts and flirtation with Tito are well-known. In 1963, the Romanian Workers Party published a summary of the critical letter of June 14, 1963, of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on Sino-Soviet relations which had not been published in the Soviet-bloc states. The idea of building "little detente" was entertained with Yugoslavia. In terms of its relations with the West, Romania was the first Soviet-bloc country to establish diplomatic relations with West Germany in 1967. Romania also was the only Soviet-bloc country which did not break diplomatic relations with Israel in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in June 1967. Romania disapproved Soviet support for Vietnam's occupation of Indochina.

Romania sought to maintain close economic relations with the West. In 1972, Romania was the first Soviet-bloc country which became a member of IMF and IBRD. Regarding super-power relations, Romanian position has been taking a neutral position in urging both the United States and the Soviet Union to reduce strategic nuclear weapons. Romania has been very active in the nonalignment movement especially from the early 70s.

North Korea's relations with the Soviet Union have been fluctuating for the

past three decades. Major examples for North Korea policy positions are as follows. In the case of Sino-Indian conflicts in the late fifties and early sixties, North Korea supported the Chinese position, deviating from Soviet neutral position. Pyongyang expressed deep disappointment and frustration about the Cuban fiasco in 1962. In the party congresses of East European countries in the sixties where differences between the Soviet Union and China were sharply manifested, North Korea clearly sided with the Chinese. After the Cuban crisis, the North Koreans attacked Moscow almost by name.

In clear defiance from Moscow, Pyongyang organized Asian Economic Seminar in 1964, where Soviet aid to fraternal countries was severely criticized. While North Korea endorsed Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, she took a neutral position on Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969. In 1970, North Korea supported Sihanouk's government in exile, while the Soviet Union recognized Lon Nol government. North Korea has been actively promoting the causes of the non-alignment movement since 1970s. Pyongyang publicly denounced the Soviet-supported Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979. The Soviet press called attention to the DPRK's failure to denounce the PRC invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. North Korea joined Romania in refusing to back a resolution supported by ten other countries expressing solidarity with the new Afghan government at the Sofia meeting in 1980. It was a clear example where following the principles for the nonalignment movement prevailed over the support for Soviet actions.

As for the examples of non-action which are meant to be deviation by both Romania and North Korea, both countries have been reluctant to attend multilateral meetings among socialist countries, although the two countries have sent their representatives to the party congresses of the CPSU. North Korea is not a member of COMECON.

Even a cursory review made in the above shows several differences between Romania and North Korea in terms of the contents of policies taken. First, Romania's deviant behaviors are numerous and have more variety in terms of target area. They not only include bloc issues but also the West and their world. Although North Korea also has shown disagreement with the Soviet Union in non-socialist areas, policy disagreement was largely limited to Sino-Soviet disputes, superpower relations and Asian continent. This reflects North Korean foreign policy environment where North Korea maintains self-imposed limit in choosing international membership due to its confrontation with the South and the United States. Romania, on the other hand, does not have such limitation. This provides Romania with flexibility in flirting with the

West, and this is the source of variety in the types of policies.

This leads to the third point that as expected, Romania's manipulation of Sino-Soviet conflicts is limited in dealing with the Soviets. It is natural that geopolitical location of Romania is different from that of North Korea in relations to Sino-Soviet conflicts, and thus Romania could not go as far as North Korea in identifying itself with China. However, what is also important is the fact that Romania did not share such a strong anti-imperialistic posture as China and North Korea had, due to the differences in domestic political situation, one important of which is the division of country and confrontation with the United States. This difference led to Romania's partial agreement with China only in the area of the relationship among socialist countries based on equality and mutual respect.

On the other hand, for North Korea, Sino-Soviet conflicts took a bulk of its external relations, and close identity of views on crucial issues such as the way to deal with imperialism and domestic policy priority left not much choice but to tilt to China. Such a strong identification with China led North Korea to take bolder measures such as convening Asian Economic Seminar than Romania.

Thus Romania does not have many cards to pull in dealing with the Soviet Union. Especially lacking is a critical card which would force the Soviets to pay attention to her. On the other hand, North Korea had two cards to play. One was China and the other, which may be more important and negative in nature, is the fact that North Korean confrontation with the South and directly with the U.S.. North Korea can easily disrupt Soviet relations with the U.S. by incurring some sort of skirmishes with the South. Soviet concern about it has manifested on different occasions. One important example is the fact that the Soviets included in the preamble of the Friendship Treaty with North Korea in 1961 the statement that the two parties should follow the purposes and principles of the United Nations. But it needs to be pointed out that North Korea's card has limited North Korean flexibility in foreign policy as mentioned and that it also makes North Korean dependence upon the Soviet Union inevitable as long as it defines a unification of Korea as its primary revolutionary goal.

Then, an obvious question becomes, how can one explain Romanian policy deviations? One prevalent view is that the Soviets attach differentiated importance to East European countries in terms of strategic and ideological importance. According to this view, Romania's location in the Southern part of Europe takes on low priority for the Soviets. Along with this view, those who view the issue from Romanian perspective argue that Romanian domestic control by Romanian Communist Party gives them leverage in foreign policy areas. In this view, the Soviets do not allow autonomous policies in both domestic and

foreign policy areas. Thus East European countries cannot have both. Also stressed is Romanian combat readiness and willingness to resist with Russian threats that deter the Soviet intervention. One variant of this view emphasizes the skillful diplomacy of Romania. These views have their own merit in themselves. However, usually they are too much micro and oriented toward the question of whether and why the Soviets do not invade any socialist country. Thus, a more fundamental question regarding structural characteristics which give rise to the kind of relations as exist between the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

Before the discussion of the issue, however, several words are in order as regards the tactics and styles of diplomacy of small socialist countries, based on the experiences of Romania and North Korea. The first and most frequently used tactic is theoretical justification. Theoretically or ideologically socialist relations are supposed to be different from those among capitalist countries. Equality and autonomy are supposed to be guiding principles. At the same time, non-Soviet socialist countries were told to follow the experiences of the Soviet Union. Small socialist states use these principles and experiences for the justification of their own situation (e.g., Romanian and North Korean emphasis on the importance of heavy industry). Another tactic is ambiguity manipulation. It refers to the situation where small states take advantage of ambiguity uncertainty and contradiction in the general lines suggested by the Soviet Union (e.g., the use of Moscow declaration of 1960). The aspect of ambiguity manipulation is to leave the position and argument of small states ambiguous or neutral. Thirdly, exaggeration or extension of the lines of the Soviet Union is widely used. Small states go one step further in their argument from the lines of the patron states, basically leaning on the core of the lines (e.g., Romanian position on nuclear issues). Fourthly, small states take advantage of the policy failures of the patron. A good example of this is that Romania and North Korea used Soviet failure in the Cuban missile crisis. Finally, related to the use of policy failure, selecting a good timing is frequent. For example, small socialist states anticipate policy changes as a new regime emerges in the Soviet Union. Although one may find all these tactics used by the two countries, Romania has used extension strategy quite extensively which is not the case with North Korea.

III. Conceptual Discussion

Efforts to conceptualize Soviet-East European relations have not been extensive. Given the limited research, results are less than satisfactory. The main issue is how to make conceptually sensible the relationship which is

neither under total domination of the Soviet Union nor is the fully Western type of international relations. That is, it is a task to conceptualize neither full independent nor completely dependent relations between East European countries and the Soviet Union.

Any specific review of the literature on this issue is done elsewhere by Ken Jowitt, thus making it unnecessary here to repeat. However, one important conceptual distinction made by Jowitt will be elaborated further. The significance of his work is in the attempt to conceptualize the nature of relations among Leninist regimes at different revolutionary stages. According to him, an inclusionary state began after the death of Stalin as Khrushchev refined the relationship between the party and Soviet society in much less invidious terms. Under such circumstances, the nature of relations among socialist countries changed from "regime indivisibility" during Stalin's period to "regime individuality" during Stalin's period to "regime individuality" where the interests of the whole are still important but flexibility to recognize diversity is possible. Another concept suggested is "regime individualism" which refers to the relations based on procedural norms and sovereignty. Further, a distinction was made between autonomy and independence with roughly corresponds to the difference between individuality and independence.

It is a useful distinction to illuminate the behaviors of Romania and North Korea. However, it would require more operational definitions of the two terms. Autonomy can be defined as the capacity or conditions which enable a country to contradict with the basic domestic and/or foreign policy lines of the Soviet Union, while structural dependence cannot be overcome in a fundamental way. Independence refers to the capacity or conditions which enable a country not only to contradict with basic policy lines but also to do without structural dependence.

From this perspective, both Romania and North Korea belong to the cases of autonomy. Romania has insisted on his own domestic political lines and bloc policies, while she has followed Soviet foreign policy line, that is, peaceful coexistence. North Korea has not been following basic policy lines in both domestic and international areas. That is, North Korea has yet to change her two-camp perception of the world and to redefine the regime-society relation in North Korea. Such is the difference between Romanian and North Korean autonomy. And the difference can be attributed to China factor. One commonality of autonomous behaviors of the two countries is ambivalence toward the Soviet Union which can be explained by their structural dependence.

In order to determine whether a policy taken by any socialist country would constitute deviation, the criteria set by the Soviets must be clear against which

the behavior can be evaluated. In general terms, it has become increasingly difficult for the Soviets to set criteria because since the death of Stalin the nature of the party control is such that it cannot set positive goals and criteria, a high level of uncertainty exists between what the party wants and actual outcomes. Thus the Soviets domestically and blocwise can only set negative limits and within such limits a considerable degree of maneuverability is available for small socialist countries. This is a general background for small socialists to have diversity in policies.

For the Soviets as a superpower socialist country, small socialist states have different weights in terms of political, ideological and military importance. Their differentiation of weight may explain different degrees of policy diversity for different small socialist states. One may hypothesize here whether North Korea could have been Romania in Northeast Asia even without China. Thus the Soviets would not take so-called deviant behaviors as deviant in many cases, and they might think that these policies of small socialist states are intended for domestic political purposes of the regimes of these countries. The Soviets must be keen on the intentions of policies. Given the lack of the means of domestic political influence in Romania and North Korea, for example, the Soviets do not have much say in the efforts of these regimes to take advantage of foreign policies for domestic political purposes.

What is important, however, is the fact that Romanian and North Korean regimes strategies of externalizing domestic politics have degenerated political situations in these countries. The Soviets do not have any indirect and moral influences over such situations because of the nature of their regime which is drifting with the decline of economic growth, quality of life, social morality and political authority of the regime. It is important to point out here that such a lack of ability to set an example provides conditions for the continuation of the regimes in Romania and North Korea. Given the nature of the regimes where foreign policy plays a very important role for the existence of the regimes, atavistic emergence of "deviant behaviors" are bound to continue. In this connection, it is important to distinguish Khrushchev regime from Brezhnev regime in that the ability and attempts to set political and economic examples which other socialist countries may emulate was significantly weakened. The Soviet Union became the target of negative emulation under Brezhnev. Romanian and North Korean responses to Gorbachev's Reforms.

In Soviet domestic economic and political reform, Gorbachev proposed radical restructure toward decentralization and democracy based on glasnost. In the area of relations among socialist countries, Gorbachev declared "unconditional respect in international practice for the right of every people to choose the

paths and forms of its development." Gorbachev seldom mentioned the word of socialist internationalism.

On the surface, what Gorbachev is saying to socialist countries is to do house cleaning in your own ways, leaving much room for leverage. However, not only the Soviet Union is using more sophisticated techniques for socialist integration, such as in economic fields, but also it is a great political challenge for Romania and North Korea.

Gorbachev's new policies preempts the validity of so-called autonomous policy orientations of Romania and North Korea. The two regimes' policies have been basically defensive in nature. Now they lose much of the target against which their policies were defensive. Thus Gorbachev's reforms are strong pressure which are not imposed by the Soviets. Such indirect pressure is more powerful and forces these two regimes to review their domestic and foreign policies lines.

It is thus obvious that the Romanians have not been eager to support Gorbachev's initiatives, especially domestic reforms. What is more interesting is the responses of North Korea. On the surface, it seems that closer relationship is developing between the Soviet Union and North Korea. Upon closer examination, however, the nature of the relationship is bound to be superficial. Kim Il-Sung and other North Korean leaders seldom address domestic reforms in the Soviet Union in any serious manner. Nor they seem to be interested in discussion of their own domestic problems. Mostly they have been paying attention to Soviet foreign policy initiatives.

What this means is that on the part of the Soviet Union, the importance of North Korea has increased in recent years as it is directing more attention to the Far East in positive and negative senses. Positively the Soviets find some policy affinity with North Korea in the issues such as non-nuclear zones in various parts of the world, including Korean peninsula. Negatively as the Soviet Union expects a more stable international and regional environment for domestic changes, it would not want to see any trouble in Korean peninsula. All in all, the value of North Korea, at least in the short run has increased.

As for North Korea, the policy affinity with the Soviet Union enables Kim Il-Sung regime to justify the correctness of his policies and to maintain his political prestige. This means the postponement of domestic reforms still are possible for the time being by using the enhanced value of the negative card and the policy affinity. Perhaps this explains why North Korea has been less resistant than the Romanians to the Soviet reforms.

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However, the affinity may be of short duration in nature, especially so when the surrounding environments for North Korea are increasingly putting pressure on North Korean system for changes in domestic and foreign policy lines. Changes in the Soviet Union, China and above all in South Korea are and will be forcing North Korea to feel an acute sense of underdevelopment. It will take some time, however, before such structural and environmental pressures will be translated into measures for real changes. Whether the temporary affinity with the Soviets will last until that time remains to be seen.

The nature of Romania and North Korean autonomy is such that it was possible between the regimes fought with domestic political problems. As the Soviet regime seeks for changes, the basis for autonomy is weakened. North Korean and Romanian cases of autonomy which was meaningful by resisting Soviet domestic and foreign policy lines and thus defensive in nature is becoming very difficult if not possible, and the changes in Sino-Soviet conflicts will make North Korean foreign policies quite obsolete. Assuming the redefinition of the norms in the relations among socialist countries continues in earnest, the distorted autonomy will be replaced by a new forms of autonomy. In the process, this would mean a difficult adjustment lies ahead for both the Soviet Union and small socialist countries.