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Book Review

Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa

Tycho van der Hoog

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In the introduction to this work, based on his Leiden University doctoral thesis, Van der Hoog (now Assistant Professor at the Netherland Defence Academy) muses how 'historically informed scholarship can be connected to … contemporary policy analysis'.[1] *Comrades Beyond the Cold War* skilfully rises to the occasion. As the title of the book suggests, it spans the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, expanding on the typical periodisation of historical studies that examine ties between sub-Saharan Africa and the (wider) communist bloc. This accomplishment is particularly noteworthy as the author not only had to cope with a notoriously secretive state as his subject, but also began his fieldwork amidst the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this jarring obstacle, he still managed to consult 32 archives on four continents in countries as varied as South Korea, South Africa, and Sweden.[2]

The work focuses on three core themes (in order): 'Blood' (diplomatic ties), 'Bullets' (military cooperation), and 'Bronze' (cultural heritage). *Scientia Militaria* readers will undoubtedly be drawn to the intermedial 'Bullets' section (Chapters 6 to 10), but the book deserves to be read as a whole. A joint consideration of all three pillars (sections) ensures a full appreciation of how the historical trajectory of Southern African–North Korean relations influenced liberation struggles in Southern Africa as well as more recent governance dynamics. Readability is enhanced as, unlike many theses turned books, the account is not a mere four or five lengthy chapters, but 15 empirical chapters (equally split across the three sections) that bring a welcome, readable tempo.

The strength of Van der Hoog's analysis rests on his realisation that, 'unlike most Western actors, North Korea did not treat African liberation movements as non-state actors, but rather as states-in-waiting'.[3] The success of this seemingly pragmatic approach ensured that critical figures, such as Samora Machel (Mozambique), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), and Sam Nujoma (Namibia), who all visited North Korea during the liberation struggle, sustained their connections. Each made return visits within about a year of coming to power.[4] Van der Hoog shows that virtually all of the post-independence leaders of the region travelled to Pyongyang, with Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia) and Julius Nyerere

(Tanzania) also making multiple visits to the country. Even the notorious pro-Western leader of Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, eventually recognised North Korea in 1982.[5] More details on that turnabout would have been fascinating.

The corollary to this point is that North Korea invested in relationships with liberation movements cum ruling parties. In cases, such as Zambia, where Kaunda was turned out of office in 1991, this resulted in Pyongyang losing influence. Although Van der Hoog rightfully reflects upon the consequences of regime change in other Southern African countries on relations with North Korea, less attention is paid to the diminishing presence of the liberation generation due to the passing of time. A deeper analysis of the evolution of Tanzanian–North Korean ties might have been helpful to project how relations might unfold in the Southern African countries where independence was attained later and the leadership has remained restricted to individuals with direct roles in the liberation struggle (e.g. Zimbabwe, which has only seen two heads of government since independence, both boasting extensive ties to the liberation struggle in the 1960s and 1970s).

Confusion emerges from the author's analysis of the trajectory of democracy and governance in Southern Africa. In the last empirical chapter of 'Bullets', Chapter 10, Van der Hoog dubs the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe – a chaotic renewed attempt at internal decolonisation in the early 2000s by the Mugabe administration, a troubling 'authoritarian turn'.[6] The periodisation (or chronology) of this deterioration is jarring. In the preceding chapter (one of the strongest in this military focused sub-section), Van der Hoog repeatedly refers to the state-sanctioned Gukurahundi assaults perpetrated by a North Korean trained military brigade in the early years of the Mugabe administration as 'genocide'.[7] While these security links comprise a critical connection that demonstrates the depth of Zimbabwean–North Korean ties, engaging in genocidal atrocities would seemingly be the 'authoritarian turn'.[8]

Similarly incongruous claims appear in short succession elsewhere in the book. Just a few pages after declaring the liberation movements 'fought for democracy',[9] Van der Hoog refers to Southern African 'anti-democratic reflexes [that] are … rooted in the experiences of the liberation struggle'.[10] There is a consistent assertion that North Korea helped consolidate 'the authoritarian tendencies of Southern African political culture'.[11] Still, more could be done to assess the interplay between authoritarian tendencies in the liberation movements and Pyongyang. The author could have explored to what extent pre-existing authoritarian sentiments made North Korea an appealing partner, and to what degree North Korea was responsible for nurturing that attitude.

While *Comrades Beyond the Cold War* convincingly demonstrates that North Korea was hardly a "hermit kingdom" at the peak of its relations with the continent in the 1970s and 1980s, the restrictive nature of contemporary North Korea looms over the book. Despite Van der Hoog's exhaustive research, the most contemporary of the three units, 'Bronze', which draws on substantial open-source material, is arguably the strongest.

This last section of the book ('Bronze'), explores the visible influence of North Korean art studios on cityscapes across the region. This includes monuments in Botswana and Mozambique and burial grounds, memorials, and museums in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Angola. Van der Hoog emphasises the importance of recognising African agency, and this is where this agency emerges most vividly. As the author notes about these projects, 'in each and every case, African leaders had *options* – and they chose North Korea'.[12]

Throughout the five chapters (Chapters 11 to 15) that make up 'Bronze' – there is a strong equilibrium between the deployment of empirical data, analysis of the various design projects, and the pacing of the narrative, which strikes a welcome balance between depth and concision. Here, Van der Hoog remains fixed on his stated geographic scope, Southern Africa.

In 'Blood' and 'Bullets', geographical emphasis occasionally wanders to other regions of the continent. Van der Hoog generally justifies these departures. The final chapter of 'Blood' (Chapter 5), which invokes the case study of a North Korean agricultural aid project in Ghana in the 1980s, however is dubious.[13] The author attempts to justify the inclusion of Ghana, because of the strong Ghanaian support for Southern African decolonisation, and he notes the activities of its Bureau of African Affairs, which supported Southern African liberation struggles.[14] This position however changed dramatically following a coup in Ghana in 1966 that resulted in the permanent closure of the Bureau.[15]

One of the most important contributions of this book, is the way Van der Hoog documents just how widespread North Korean ties with Southern Africa were, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Virtually all of the post-independence leaders of the region travelled to Pyongyang. As Van der Hoog aptly notes, 'Southern Africa is governed by the past'.[16] The formative ties thus remain more pertinent than customary. While the book may not fully penetrate the opaque networks between the region and North Korea, it certainly illuminates their importance and provides a masterful template of how to link historical study to contemporary policy analysis.

Scholarly quibbles aside, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War* constitutes a valuable expansion of the literature on relations between Africa and the communist bloc. The book represents a particularly adroit example of employing transnational research and an array of archives to examine a vastly underacknowledged diplomatic relationship. In a closing archival note, Van der Hoog suggests that the documentary record for North Korea and Africa is perhaps richer in other regions on the continent.[17] One can only hope that future studies focusing on other parts of Africa, will meet the bar set here.

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Endnotes

1 T van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa* (London: Hurst, 2025), 8.
2 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 9.
3 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 34.
4 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 64–67.
5 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 40.
6 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 162.
7 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, chapter 9 passim.
8 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 162.
9 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 237.
10 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 237.
11 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 238.
12 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 249.
13 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 85–96.
14 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 90.
15 M Grilli, 'Nkrumah, Nationalism, and Pan-Africanism: The Bureau of African Affairs Collection', *History in Africa*, 44 (2017), 300.
16 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 235.
17 Van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the War*, 252.