



# Norodom Sihanouk's special relationship with North Korea: A Preliminary Survey

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## Abstract

The article explores Norodom Sihanouk's ties with North Korea since his first meeting with Kim Il Sung in 1965 until his demise in 2012, by arguing that there were at least two factors for the solidification of relationship. The first factor was Sihanouk and Kim Il Sung, in their quest for national autonomy, shared a mentality of small state surrounded by dominant neighboring countries. The second was that, by the end of the 1970s, Cambodia had been devastated by years of wars and political turbulences, like North Korea after the Korean War (1950-1953). Sihanouk therefore saw North Korea's successes in postwar reconstruction as an example for the Cambodian people to rebuild their ravaged country.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, Kim Il Sung, Norodom Sihanouk, North Korea, Special Relationship

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## 1. Introduction

The late King-Father Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia was one of the prominent figures on the world stage during the Cold War. His relationships with foreign leaders played an important part in shaping post-independence Cambodia. His friendship with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, for example, which began in the 1955 Afro-Asian Summit in the Indonesian city of Bandung laid the foundation of Sino-Cambodian collaborations against the pro-American Lon Nol regime in the first half of the 1970s and the pro-Vietnamese Heng Samrin regime throughout the 1980s. However, one of the puzzling relationships Sihanouk maintained over decades was that he had with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, whom he described as the best friend and the honor of Asia [1]. Milton Osbourne, a biographer of Sihanouk, called it "bizarre relationship" for reasons that have never been clear [2].

## 2. Research Objective and Methods

In contrast to the hypothetico-deductive approach, this article aims to find out the preliminary reasons behind Norodom Sihanouk's intimate ties with Kim Il Sung by using grounded theory method, beginning with a question without formulating a hypothesis and

followed by the collection of qualitative data. The author utilizes primary sources including Sihanouk's written work and memoirs, along with scholarly studies and news reports. The collected data were then analyzed to find out influential elements (i.e., Sihanouk's subjective experiences and interpretations of events regarding Cambodia – North Korea relations) before reaching the conceptualization stage.

## 3. Sihanouk's Intimate Ties with Kim Il Sung

According to Sihanouk's memoirs entitled *Shadow over Angkor*, cordial and special relationship with Kim Il Sung was formed in 1964 when Sihanouk, claiming that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) was the only legal state for the country and the entire nation of Korea, decided to break off consular relations with the government in Seoul and established diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. Sihanouk's decision greatly impressed Kim Il Sung whose country was then ignored by the majority of non-aligned countries [3]. The two leaders held their first meeting in April 1965 at the Indonesian capital city of Jakarta, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Afro-Asian Summit. Shortly afterwards, the North Korea - Cambodia Friendship Association was formed in September [4] and Sihanouk made the first state visit to Pyongyang in October of the same year.

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The relationship between the two leaders solidified in March 1970 when Sihanouk was toppled through the U.S.-supported military coup led by General Lon Nol. In May 1970, Kim Il Sung recognized Sihanouk's government in exile based in Beijing. During his visit to Pyongyang in June 1970, Sihanouk was treated as a visiting head of state, being entertained in state banquets and welcomed in special mass rallies [5]. In addition, Kim Il Sung gave him the assurance of North Korean support, as described in his memoirs:

President Kim Il Sung gave me, in conclusion, the assurance that whatever might happen to me in the future, he, his party, his people, his state would never abandon me, would always support me in whatever I might undertake for my country especially for its national independence and its territorial integrity, and would always offer me the most generous and caring hospitality [3].

During Sihanouk's first period of exile (1970-1975), Kim Il Sung virtually made Pyongyang Sihanouk's second home by dispatching a construction crew to build a 60-room luxurious mansion at the foot of Mount Taesong, overlooking the Changsuwon Lake, north of the capital city. Sihanouk and his wife Monique had a movie theatre, a Buddhist shrine, a gymnasium and their own personal bodyguards. Eyewitnesses described a building which has its overall shape looked somewhat like Angkor Wat [6]. Reciprocally, Sihanouk spent these years composing political or revolutionary-style songs praising Kim Il Sung and the people of North Korea, as the following examples, translated by the author from Sihanouk's own French translations [7]:

Long live the Marshall  
Great leader of the Korean people  
Illustrious hero of Asia  
Flag bearer of the revolution  
Glory to President Kim Il Sung  
Light of new Asia  
Architect of the real paradise  
For the greater happiness of the people  
(From *Cambodian Tribute to Marshall Kim Il Sung*)

Oh dear Korean friends  
We Cambodians never forget  
Your continuous support for our people  
This support encourages us powerfully  
In the fight that we lead  
Against our enemy, imperialism  
(From *Cambodia-Korea Amity*)

After the Sihanouk - Red Khmers coalition supported by China had gained victory over the Lon Nol regime in 1975, Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh to be the titular head of state before being deposed by the Red Khmers leader Pol Pot in the following year and put under house arrest. His son, the future King Norodom Sihamoni, continued to study filmmaking in North Korea until he was called to join the family in

Phnom Penh in 1977. His second exile period began on December 1978 when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, expelled the pro-Chinese Red Khmers, and established the pro-Vietnamese Heng Samrin regime. Sihanouk flew to Beijing and soon afterwards, according to his memoirs, found that although China opposed Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, it preferred the Red Khmers to Sihanouk to become the leading faction in the anti-Vietnamese coalition. Therefore, he decided to go to Pyongyang for consolation [3].

During his second exile period (1979-1991), Sihanouk spent several months a year in Pyongyang, claiming that the environment there is quieter and more conducive to writing his memoirs than in Beijing [8]. However, the real reason might be his frustration with China and his gratitude for Kim Il Sung's support to put him as a leading figure in the anti-Vietnamese coalition, as revealed in his interview in North Korea to Western journalists in 1979:

Since my arrival, President Kim Il Sung has never asked me to cooperate with the Red Khmers. President Kim Il Sung told me: "I support only you ... Prince Sihanouk...only you, not the Red Khmers...only you". The embassy of the Red Khmers is still here, but its name is never mentioned. President Kim Il Sung said only one sentence: "I support only Prince Sihanouk!". In contrast, China never supports Prince Sihanouk. Never. China said: "Prince Sihanouk must support Pol Pot" [9].

After the endorsement of peace settlement by the International Conference on Cambodia in Paris in October 1991, Sihanouk returned to his country in the following month with 35 North Korean bodyguards, commanded by a general from Kim Il Sung's presidential bodyguards [10], and was reinstalled as king in 1993. To express his gratitude for the assistance Kim Il Sung gave to him during the two exile periods, Sihanouk decided to give Teaksin Phirom, his mother's house where he lived during his childhood, rent-free to be used as the North Korean Embassy in Phnom Penh [11].

#### 4. Reasons Behind the Relationship: the Quest for National Autonomy and Postwar Reconstruction

How could blue-blooded Sihanouk and Kim Il Sung, the lowly-born man from the peasant village in Pyongyang, maintain special relationship for decades? The question has never been answered clearly. Although both of them were prominent figures during the Cold War, they were not influential enough to concretely help each other in world politics, especially in relations with major powers like the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The author argues that, firstly, a shared mentality of "small state" played a role in forging relationship between the two leaders and,

secondly, Sihanouk eyed North Korea as a model of postwar national reconstruction.

Cambodia and North Korea are small countries surrounded by influential and dominant countries which have always tried to encroach upon smaller neighbors. Cambodia in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was a battlefield between the two traditional hegemons, i.e. Siam/Thailand and Vietnam, whereas the Korean peninsula since the late-19<sup>th</sup> century has been a contested area between China, Japan, Russia/the Soviet Union, and the United States. As Thai political scientist Surachai Sirikrai argues:

One of the problems that small states have faced throughout history is the issue of survival. i.e. how to maintain territorial integrity, culture, and freedom to determine their own political order and conduct of foreign relations [12].

Sihanouk came to the throne after the death of his maternal grandfather King Sisowath Monivong in 1941 and assumed the office of prime minister in 1952. He was successful in wresting national independence from the French in 1953, although it could not be denied that he played the nationalist card to suppress republican and social-revolutionary groupings. However, Cambodia's independence came during the height of the Cold War when the United States tried to contain the spread of Communism in South-East Asia with the establishment of South-East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), with Thailand and the Philippines as South-East Asian members, and establishing the pro-American South Vietnamese Government in 1954 and 1955 respectively. The United States was anxious for Cambodia to place itself under SEATO's protection but Sihanouk refused, partly because of Thai and American supports for his political opponent Son Ngoc Thanh [2]. Furthermore, his participation in the 1955 Afro-Asian Summit in Bandung served to convince him that non-alignment was the best guarantee for Cambodia's security against hostile neighbors like Thailand and South Vietnam, both of whom allied with the United States [13].

Similarly, Kim Il Sung had led guerilla warfare against Japanese imperialism more than a decade. Although the Soviet forces brought him to power after Japan's defeat in 1945 and his regime survived the Korean War (1950-1953) with massive assistance from China, Kim Il Sung harbored bitter memories of the interference by external powers, which became one of the factors leading to his idea of *juche* (self-reliance). Therefore, he thought that his expansion into the Third World would be the most convenient way to escape servitude to the Soviet Union and China [14] and thus throughout the 1960s and 1970s became busy in advocating the cause of non-aligned countries. In other words, Sihanouk and Kim Il Sung found common ground on their quest for national autonomy in international arena.

Besides, by the late 1970s, realizing that his country

**Table 1.** GNP of North Korea from 1960 to 1978

Year	GNP (USD Billion)
1960	1.52
1966	2.41
1970	3.98
1971	4.09
1972	4.62
1973	6.27
1974	7.29
1975	9.35
1976	9.68
1977	10.64
1978	13.32

had been devastated by wars and political turbulences, Sihanouk eyed North Korea as a model of national reconstruction. As shown in table 1, North Korea was quite successful in post-Korean War economic recovery. Although the growth was at a slower rate than South Korea, it was still regarded by countries outside the U.S. camp as a success, at least until the late 1970s, with its Gross National Product (GNP) rising steadily from 1960 to 1978 [15].

During his stay in Pyongyang in 1979, Sihanouk wrote a book entitled *The DPR Korea Seen by Norodom Sihanouk*, praising the developmental success of North Korea as an example for his own country. As he stated admirably in the introduction:

The DPRK which was devastated by the 1950-1953 destructive war recovered its war wounds only in a few years and has made an amazing, all-round progress ... The Cambodian people who will have to rebuild their ravaged country, though in great misfortune at present will, when time comes, learn from the splendid example of our great Korean friends with the same will to regenerate as the Koreans' though with less manpower and material resources [2].

## 5. Declining Ties after the Death of Kim Il Sung

As the special relationship between Phnom Penh and Pyongyang relied on a personal bond between Sihanouk and Kim Il Sung, the latter's demise in 1994 shook the foundation of such relationship. Meanwhile, with the rise of Prime Minister Hun Sen in the mid-1990s, Sihanouk's political influence gradually declined. He had to accept the decision made by the Ranariddh - Hun Sen coalition government in 1996 to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea's arch-rival, South Korea, although it was reported that he strongly condemned any change in Cambodia's position that there was only one Korea, i.e. the DPRK [16].

Personally, Sihanouk and his family in the late 1990s still showed their gratitude to North Korea by setting up a privately-owned shipping registry to be the

flag of convenience for North Korea. It was named the Cambodia Shipping Corporation (CSC) which became a scandal in 2002 when the ship was stopped at the western coast of Africa carrying a massive haul of cocaine [10]. Besides, on the occasion of the 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday of the late Kim Il Sung in 2004, Sihanouk stayed in Pyongyang from April 10 to August 3. When North Korea's second generation leader Kim Jong Il died in December 2011, Sihanouk issued a private message of condolence. Shortly before his death in October 2012, North Korea awarded him the International Kim Il Sung Prize. Sihanouk's passing marked the end of the special relationship between Phnom Penh and Pyongyang

## 6. Conclusion

Norodom Sihanouk's relationship with foreign leaders played an important part in shaping Cambodia's post-World War II history. One of the puzzling relationships was that he had with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, making Cambodia one of the few South-east Asian nations with close ties to Pyongyang, apart from Hanoi during the Vietnam War [17]. The article shows that the relationship between them was founded on a shared mentality of small state surrounded by dominant neighbouring countries, in quest of national autonomy. In addition, by the end of the 1970s, as Cambodia had been devastated by wars and political turbulences, North Korea was perceived by Sihanouk as a model of postwar reconstruction. Unfortunately, as the relationship relied on a personal bond, it did not outlive them. Nowadays, without the two leaders' linking arms, the two countries' destinies rarely link to each other.

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