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# **North Korea: The Last Remaining Bastion of Anti-Revisionism**

## **Abstract**

In communist discourse, revisionism is a self-proclaimed socialist policy that undermines the revolutionary essence of socialism. This article examines the meaning, purpose, and significance of North Korea's anti-revisionism. Each successive leader has emphasised different aspects of anti-revisionism, in accordance with the changing circumstances. Kim Il Sung made no concessions to revisionism. He endorsed Juche, the monolithic ideological system, and Korean style socialism to oppose revisionism. Under Kim Jong Il's leadership, economic cracks emerged in North Korea's anti-revisionist edifice, though he promoted Songun politics to mitigate them. These economic cracks have widened under Kim Jong Un's leadership, though he has promoted Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism to successfully maintain an anti-revisionist course. North Korea has upheld anti-revisionism to safeguard socialism and build communism. Anti-revisionism has played a central role in North Korea's development, by determining the evolution of its ideology, socialist system, and foreign policy. Today, North Korea is the last remaining bastion of anti-revisionism.

**Key words:** North Korea, anti-revisionism, Stalinism, socialism, Marxism-Leninism

## **Introduction**

In communist discourse, revisionism is a self-proclaimed socialist policy that undermines the revolutionary essence of socialism. Anti-revisionism upholds revolutionary socialism by opposing revisionism. Both policies can exist in theory and/or practice, both before and after the establishment of socialism (Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism n.d.).

The concept of anti-revisionism pervades contemporary North Korean discourse (Pateman 2021, 358-59, 369). In 2012, supreme leader Kim Jong Un (2012, 4) declared that "the Korean revolution was a serious political struggle, a class struggle against...revisionism". In 2015, Kim (2015, 7) stated that the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), North Korea's governing party, developed Juche (self-reliance), its governing ideology, during a "serious political and class struggle against...revisionism". The WPK's (2021) bylaws oppose "revisionism", as do recent official expositions of the party's history and ideology (FLPH 2016, 80-84, 91). According to a Juche textbook, published in 2014, the Soviet Union and eastern European socialist countries collapsed because they followed "revisionist policies", unlike North Korea, which retained its socialist system due to its anti-revisionism (Ri 2014, 18).

This evidence suggests that anti-revisionism is an important component of North Korean ideology. According to Kim Jong Un, the WPK's ideological growth is tied to its anti-revisionism, as is the development of North Korea itself. The regime even uses the concept to explain why North Korea survived the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. Accordingly, a focused discussion of the meaning, purpose, and significance of North Korea's anti-revisionism is long overdue. This article offers such a discussion.

North Korea's successive leaders have each emphasised different aspects of anti-revisionism, in accordance with the changing circumstances. Kim Il Sung made no concessions to revisionism. He endorsed Juche, the monolithic ideological system, and Korean style socialism to oppose revisionism. Under Kim Jong Il's leadership, economic cracks emerged in North Korea's anti-revisionist edifice, though he promoted Songun (military-first) politics to mitigate them. These economic cracks have widened under Kim Jong Un's leadership, though he has promoted Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism to successfully maintain an anti-revisionist

course. Today, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is the last remaining bastion of anti-revisionism.

In advancing these points, this article argues that anti-revisionism has played a central role in shaping North Korea's development, by determining the evolution of its ideology, socialist system, and foreign policy. This finding supports the literature highlighting the role of path dependence in understanding North Korea's development (Park 2014). According to the theory of path dependence, past decisions impact and determine present decisions, in the sense that "the behaviour, actions, circumstances and decisions of today and the future depend greatly upon those in the past" (Park 2014, 4). Anti-revisionism has played a powerful role in determining the range of policies available to North Korea's successive leaders.

This article argues that North Korea has upheld anti-revisionism to safeguard socialism and build communism. An opposing discourse claims that North Korea is not a socialist country, but a hereditary dictatorship designed to uphold the Kim family "dynasty" (Lim 2012), founded upon Confucianism and Japanese colonialism. This article does not deny the influence of these latter trends. Nevertheless, it supports the literature demonstrating that these do not contradict North Korea's socialist elements, which remain dominant (Scobell 2005). This literature presents North Korean socialism as the creative application of Stalin's interpretation of "socialism in one country" (David-West 2011b; Pateman 2021), a system that some external observers describe as Stalinism (Cheong 2000; David-West 2007; 2011a; Lankov 2013). North Korea's anti-revisionism expresses its conviction that Stalin got socialism right. Accordingly, the Kims have opposed revisionism to uphold Stalinist socialism, despite overlaying it with distinctive Korean elements. On this point, it is worth remembering that socialism is a contested concept with different interpretations. In the same way that some speak of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", with "socialism" as the primary element, and "Chinese characteristics" as the secondary element (Boer 2021), this article discusses "socialism with North Korean characteristics". It argues that North Korean socialism is in fact socialism and no other "ism". This socialism has developed "North Korean characteristics", most notably a tradition of hereditary succession, Confucianism, and militarism. However, anti-revisionism has prevented these secondary features from undermining socialism. In fact, this article argues that North Korean leaders have utilised hereditary succession, Confucianism, and militarism to oppose revisionism.

Finally, this article also argues that the DPRK has been more anti-revisionist than any other state. This is important for three reasons. First, many analysts overlook North Korea's principled anti-revisionism, thereby misunderstanding the country. Second, anti-revisionism has preserved the purity of North Korea's socialist system. Because the other socialist states failed to maintain the same level of anti-revisionism, they either collapsed or severely compromised socialism. These contrasting developments indicate that anti-revisionism is an essential policy for building Stalinist socialism in one country. Third, North Korea's anti-revisionism validates the regime's conviction that ideology is the *decisive* force of socialist construction. It is ideology that determines the economic and political destiny of socialism, and not the other way round.

To develop these arguments, this article draws primarily upon the works of North Korea's leaders. Some foreign scholars have dismissed these as unreliable, alleging that several have been fabricated, ghost written, or edited to suit the party's current line. It is important to weigh these potential limitations against an undeniable fact: the Kims have always played the decisive role in determining North Korean policy. On balance, an examination of their works can still offer a rough guide to North Korea's anti-revisionism. Where appropriate, however, this article augments and verifies the leaders' pronouncements with archival transcripts, foreign scholarly sources, and an analysis of North Korea's policies.

To proceed, this article begins by outlining the origins and characteristics of North Korean anti-revisionism. It then shows how Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un have successively opposed revisionism. By examining their respective eras chronologically, the analysis does two things: it compares North Korea's stance on revisionism to those of the other socialist states; and it compares the Kims to each other, thereby revealing each leader's distinct approach to revisionism. The conclusion ponders the significance of North Korea's anti-revisionism for the country's past, present, and future.

### **The origins and characteristics of North Korea's anti-revisionism**

North Korea's anti-revisionism has Marxist roots. The concept arose after the death of the revolutionary communist Karl Marx, when his followers disputed the meaning of Marxism. Communists used the term "revisionism" to identify self-proclaimed Marxist principles that eroded the revolutionary essence of Marxism, thereby undermining the communist movement. Accordingly, revisionism is a pejorative concept amongst communists (Kolakowski 2005, 433).

Although there have been multiple interpretations of Marxist revisionism, Stalinism established the dominant modern conception. Stalinism denotes the policies enacted in the Soviet Union and its affiliated parties during the premiership of Joseph Stalin, who led the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) from 1924 until his death in 1953. Since then, revisionism has described self-proclaimed socialist policies that undermine the revolutionary policies of Stalinism, including its interpretation of "socialism in one country". Likewise, modern anti-revisionism entails the defence of Stalinism (Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism n.d.). Note that Stalinists themselves eschew the term "Stalinism", which has become a pejorative descriptor for communist totalitarianism. They typically endorse "Marxism-Leninism", the ideology that Stalin coined. Nevertheless, the term Stalinism remains analytically useful for defining anti-revisionism, since some of its policies differ from post-Stalinist interpretations of Marxism-Leninism and communism (Cheong 2000).

Although the DPRK has never described its ideology as Stalinist, the word encapsulates North Korea's anti-revisionism. Kim Il Sung embraced Stalinism during his struggle to liberate Korea from Japanese colonialism. Kim visited the Soviet Union during World War II, where he learnt the fundamentals of Stalinism first hand. Stalin and the Soviets subsequently helped Kim take power in North Korea after the war, where he proceeded to establish a "Stalinist Utopia" (Lankov 2013; see also Cheong 2000, 135-36; David-West 2007; 2011a; 2011b). North Korea's anti-revisionism defines this label. In their works, the Kims have associated revisionism with ten policies, which derive from their Stalinist interpretation of communism:

1. *The abandonment of the socialist revolution.* North Korean ideology maintains that only a revolution can abolish capitalism and build socialism. It rejects reformism as a revisionist strategy that will always fail (Kim 1984a, 149).
2. *The policy of peaceful co-existence with imperialism.* North Korean ideology maintains that the masses of every country have the inviolable right to determine their national affairs. It is therefore essential to oppose imperialism, which violates national sovereignty. Anti-imperialism means supporting global anti-imperialist struggles and eschewing peaceful and friendly relations with the imperialists. Revisionists reject anti-imperialism and claim that socialism can peacefully co-exist with imperialism (Kim 1984a, 149).
3. *The abandonment of communist party leadership.* North Korean ideology maintains that the socialist revolution and construction of communism can succeed only under the leadership of a political party devoted to communism. It is therefore essential, both before and after the revolution, for a single communist party to try and obtain a leading role in every sphere of society. Revisionists seek to weaken the party's leadership (Kim 1984a, 149).

4. *The rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat.* North Korean ideology maintains that the socialist transition can progress only under the dictatorship of the proletariat, a form of state power manifesting the rule of the working class and the suppression of counterrevolutionaries. Revisionists seek to repudiate the proletarian dictatorship prior to the global socialist revolution (Kim 1984a, 149).

5. *The abandonment of the class struggle.* Kim Il Sung argued that the class struggle drives the socialist revolution. He also insisted that it continues under socialism because people retain capitalist ideas, and because there are other classes besides the proletariat that lack its revolutionary standpoint. Accordingly, the socialist state must continue the class struggle to uphold the proletarian standpoint, oppose bourgeois ideology, and “working-classise” the entire society. Revisionists reject, deny, or downplay the class struggle (Kim 1986, 300).

6. *The abandonment of communist ideological education.* North Korea views ideology as the decisive force of the socialist revolution and construction of communism. The main values are collectivism and anti-materialism. Collectivism encourages people to identify their individual interest with the good of the community, and to prioritise the wellbeing of the collective over their own welfare. Anti-materialism encourages people to eschew the yearning for consumer goods, and to work primarily for a moral cause: human independence. It promotes ideological over material incentives. Revisionists promote individualism and materialism over collectivism and anti-materialism (Kim, 1999, 70).

7. *The abandonment of agricultural collectivisation.* To assimilate the peasantry into socialism and promote their working-classisation, Kim Il Sung presided over the collectivisation of North Korean agriculture (Jong 2016, 39). According to North Korean ideology, opposition to agricultural collectivisation undermines socialism and strengthens revisionism (Kim 1984b, 436).

8. *The abandonment of state-owned enterprises.* Kim Il Sung oversaw the transition to near total state ownership of the means of production in North Korea. According to North Korean ideology, the restoration of private enterprise will strengthen revisionism (Kim 1995, 272).

9. *The abandonment of economic planning.* North Korean ideology maintains that socialist production must develop upon the basis of a planned economy (Jong 2016, 1). Revisionism develops to the extent that the market, rather than the state, guides economic development.

10. *The rejection of the leader’s prestige and supremacy.* North Korean ideology maintains that socialism can arise only under the direction of a supreme leader, whose ideology must imbue the entire society. If the people worship the leader, they will internalise the leader’s policies, fulfil them faithfully, and cement the socialist system (Kim 1999: 164-65). Only a revolutionary communist with exceptional abilities can qualify as a leader, since they alone can successfully guide socialist construction (Han 2016, 23-24). Those who oppose the leader’s supremacy and prestige undermine the socialist movement and strengthen revisionism (Kim 1999, 249, 426; Kim 2014a, 59-60, 106).

These policies constitute a comprehensive understanding of revisionism. By opposing them, North Korea has developed a complete understanding of anti-revisionism. That said, anti-revisionism has never been homogenous. There have been different strands within it, and North Korea is in its own category. The most prominent anti-revisionist currents have been the Communist Party of China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong (FLP 1958), and the Party of Labour of Albania, under the leadership of Enver Hoxha (Lange 1979). Although Mao and Hoxha had their disagreements, they and their contemporary followers have been more “orthodox” in their anti-revisionism than North Korea, and in three respects.

First, whereas orthodox anti-revisionists present themselves as Marxist-Leninists (Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism n.d.), North Korea has changed its presentation of anti-revisionism over time. Kim Il Sung was orthodox. He typically described revisionism as the

violation of Marxism-Leninism (Kim 1984a, 147). Kim Jong Il was semi-orthodox. During the mid 1970s he began presenting his father's ideology as original, in works like *On Correctly Understanding the Originality of Kimilsungism* (Kim 1984). In doing so, Kim Jong Il started criticising revisionism with irregular reference to Marxism-Leninism. Kim Jong Un is unorthodox. Whilst defending the originality of "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism", in addition to opposing revisionism, his published works have not mentioned Marxism-Leninism (Pateman 2021, 353).

Nonetheless, these presentational changes have not modified North Korea's anti-revisionism. Despite various attempts to hide its Marxist-Leninist roots, the regime has upheld the ideology in theory and practice (Stock 2019; 2020; Pateman 2021). The WPK (2021) has even retained an explicit commitment to "Marxism-Leninism" in its bylaws. North Korea's main reason for discarding the language of Marxism-Leninism is that it thought revisionists spoiled the ideology after Stalin's death (Pateman 2021). Regardless, the constituent elements of revisionism can exist independently of Marxism-Leninism, which is a broader ideology.

A second distinguishing factor of North Korean anti-revisionism is its emphasis on the leader's prestige and supremacy. Hypocritically, orthodox anti-revisionists have criticised these Stalinist phenomena as anti-socialist in theory, whilst promoting or allowing them in practice. Mao, for example, criticised Stalin's "personality cult", even though a cult developed around Mao himself (Leese 2007). North Korea, by contrast, is not hypocritical. The defence of the leader's prestige and supremacy is an explicit feature of North Korea's anti-revisionism. To reinforce this policy, official discourse promotes the deep-rooted indigenous Confucian value of "filial piety", or devotion to one's parents. By presenting the leader as the "fatherly leader", the government has utilised Confucian familism to oppose revisionism (Armstrong 2005).

A third distinguishing factor of North Korean anti-revisionism is its approach to foreign revisionism. Orthodox anti-revisionists have tended to clash with foreign revisionism. Mao and Hoxha broke diplomatic relations with the socialist countries that they denounced as revisionist, most notably the Soviet Union post-Stalin, which resulted in the Sino-Soviet and Soviet-Albanian splits (Marku 2020). The Kims, by contrast, have generally maintained more amicable relations with revisionist governments and organisations (Lee 1971). One reason for this is that North Korea has always depended upon socialist countries for economic aid and trade (Rowley 2021). Another reason is that North Korea has always valued international communist solidarity. Even if communists disagree, North Korea does not want this to undermine unity and cooperation (Kun 1967).

For these reasons, many orthodox anti-revisionists have denounced North Korea as revisionist. Hoxha (1979a, 18), for instance, disparaged Kim Il Sung's "sentimental desire for 'unity for unity's sake'". Since North Korea maintained diplomatic relations with revisionist countries, Hoxha (1979b, 516) denounced the WPK as revisionist. Likewise, during China's Cultural Revolution, Maoists denounced Kim Il Sung as a "fat revisionist", in reference to his personality cult and support for the post-Stalin Soviet Union (Lee 1977, 1089). Today, the online "Encyclopedia of anti-Revisionism" (n.d.) champions Mao and Hoxha as the exemplars of anti-revisionism, but it ignores North Korea, presumably because the country no longer mentions Marxism-Leninism. This article, by contrast, shall argue that the attempt to deny North Korea's anti-revisionist credentials is unjustified. Although North Korea has presented, emphasised, and applied anti-revisionism differently to its more orthodox proponents, the constitutive elements of their respective conceptions are identical, and this means that North Korea's anti-revisionism defines the concept itself. More accurately, this article discusses "anti-revisionism with North Korean characteristics". North Korea's understanding of anti-revisionism is generalisable, but its presentation, emphases, and application, are nationally specific.

## Anti-revisionism under Kim Il Sung

Like many Stalinists, Kim Il Sung instigated his anti-revisionist struggle in the 1950s, when N. S. Khrushchev became leader of the Soviet Union following Stalin's death (Rowley 2021, 59). Unlike his orthodox counterparts, Kim rarely named individuals, organisations, or countries when publicly criticising foreign revisionism. He did this to avoid antagonising his benefactors and undermining socialist unity. Nevertheless, these considerations did not prevent him from criticising foreign revisionism (Szalontai 2005, 184). Kim did so in his first major contribution to North Korean ideology.

In December 1955 Kim launched Juche, the DPRK's new guiding philosophy. He associated Juche with anti-dogmatism and the creative application of Marxism-Leninism. The doctrine expressed Kim's conviction that North Korea should not copy the Soviet socialist model, and that it should instead pursue its own path to communism, in accordance with the country's unique conditions (Kim 1982, 395).

Juche was never just about anti-dogmatism. Kim launched the doctrine to oppose revisionism (FLPH 2001a, 199). By the end of 1955, he had become suspicious of Khrushchev. Kim suspected that Khrushchev had softened Soviet anti-imperialism by "advocating peaceful co-existence with the West", and the US in particular (White 1975, 76; see also Suh 1988, 143; Rowley 2021, 59). This conviction posed Kim with a dilemma. On the one hand, he wanted to reject this revisionist policy. North Korea could not afford to peacefully co-exist with imperialism. As far as Kim was concerned, the DPRK had emerged out of anti-imperialist struggle, including the Korean revolution and the Korean war. Moreover, his goal of liberating the Korean peninsula from imperialism was not accomplished. South Korea was under the control of US imperialism, which was threatening North Korea's existence with an aggressive military force on the border. These considerations made peaceful co-existence unacceptable. On the other hand, Kim did not want to denounce this revisionist policy openly. Doing so would anger the Soviets and undermine socialist unity. Juche provided a solution to this dilemma. By launching it, Kim repudiated Soviet revisionism under the fraternal guise of anti-dogmatism, a Soviet slogan. Kim's 1955 Juche speech provides evidence to this effect. Whilst omitting the term revisionism, he remarked that a WPK cadre, "on returning to the Soviet Union, said that as the Soviet Union was following the line of easing international tension, we should also drop our struggle against US imperialism". Kim denied this request. It undermined "revolutionary initiative. It would dull our people's revolutionary vigilance" (Kim 1982, 401). Reminiscing upon 1955 several years later, Kim confirmed that he began North Korea's anti-revisionist struggle when he established Juche. The two were intertwined. Kim realised that "if Korea failed to establish the Juche orientation, revisionism might infiltrate from outside and bring grave consequences to the revolution" (FLPH 2012, 293). Accordingly, he launched Juche to oppose both dogmatism and revisionism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kim's reflections were published in 1984, so they may possibly misconstrue his 1955 thoughts. Myers (2006) defends this view. He denies that Kim's 1955 Juche speech repudiated Soviet ideology. Myers (2015) reiterates this argument in his book on Juche, where he also claims that North Korea's real guiding ideology is neither Juche, nor Stalinism, nor anti-revisionism, but ethno-nationalism. Myers' arguments are contentious. David-West (2007) argues that his "formalist" approach underestimates the role of Stalinism (anti-revisionism) as a guiding (if sometimes unspoken/unwritten) force of Kim's Juche speech. There is also substantial evidence to show that Juche is North Korea's guiding ideology and not merely window dressing (Pateman 2021).

In 1955, therefore, our Party set forth the definite policy of establishing Juche, and has been persistently urging an energetic ideological struggle to carry it through ever since. The year 1955 marked a turning point in our Party's consistent struggle against dogmatism. It was also at that time, in fact, that we started our struggle against modern revisionism that had emerged within the socialist camp. Our struggle against dogmatism was thus linked up with the struggle against modern revisionism (Kim 1984c, 260).

Kim's anti-Soviet suspicions were validated in 1956, when Soviet revisionism revealed itself openly. At the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress, held in February, Khrushchev delivered his "secret speech" denouncing Stalin's leadership and personality cult. Khrushchev called for a return to collective leadership and the glorification of the party, rather than its leader. De-Stalinisation had officially begun.

As the leader of global communism, the CPSU expected its affiliated parties to support Khrushchev's critique. Many did so. Throughout the Soviet Bloc, communist parties inaugurated campaigns against personality cults, and they deposed the general secretaries who modelled themselves after Stalin (Filtzer 1993). For Kim, however, such changes were impermissible. They threatened socialism and his leadership.

In April 1956, the WPK held its Third Congress. Despite Khrushchev's wishes, Stalin received no criticism. Kim ignored the topic and "kept his own counsel, never once publicly criticising Stalin during the de-Stalinisation campaign" (French 2007, 54; see also Suh 1988, 146, 177). In line with his wishes, "the North Korean press did not report on Khrushchev's speech" (Lee 1971, 45).

That said, not all WPK cadres opposed revisionism during this period. A pro-Soviet faction supported Khrushchev's anti-Stalinism, and it revolted at the Plenum of the WPK Central Committee in August 1956 with the Soviet ambassador's support (Lee 1971, 45). The faction insisted that trade unions should be independent of the party and reserve the right to strike. The faction also criticised Kim's emerging personality cult, and demanded collective leadership in light of its alleged degeneration under Stalinism. These demands came to nothing. Kim denounced the factionalists as revisionists, and his supporters purged them from the party (Suh 1988, 150-52).

Soviet revisionism re-surfaced in November 1957, when Moscow hosted an International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties, the first since the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU congress. The meeting sought to reaffirm support for de-Stalinisation. Most prominent communist figures delivered reports. A tribute to Khrushchev was a critique of Stalin. Kim, who attended the conference, was one of the few communist leaders who did not criticise Stalin's personality cult. In his speech, Kim did not mention Stalin (Lee 1971, 46). He "firmly disagreed with Khrushchev and the 'revisionists' on the issue of the cult of the personality" (Lee 1971, 46).

The split in the communist movement from the 1960s onwards foregrounded the debate over revisionism. By this time, it was evident that Khrushchev's peaceful co-existence policy rejected socialist revolutions in the West in favour of reformism and the parliamentary road to socialism. Additionally, his domestic liberalisation reforms had weakened the party's control over economics, ideology, and culture. During the CPSU's 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress in October 1961, Khrushchev (1961, 4) announced that the Soviet proletarian dictatorship had given way to a "universal people's state, a state representing the interests and will of the whole people". The class struggle inside the Soviet Union was officially over. It was a harmonious society composed of friendly classes. The Congress also confirmed the removal of Stalin's remains from Moscow's Lenin Mausoleum, in addition to the renaming of several cities named after Stalin and Stalin-era politicians (Khrushchev 1961, 625).

Anti-revisionism hardened during and after the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress. Hoxha's Albanian delegation publicly denounced Soviet revisionism. Khrushchev was so indignant that he broke Soviet



diplomatic relations with Albania. China criticised Khrushchev's treatment of Albania during the Congress, and by late 1962 Mao had also cut diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union (Marku 2020).

Kim, who also attended the Congress, rejected the new Soviet line in his own way. The WPK Central Committee discussed the CPSU's 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress on the 27 November 1961. In his speech, Kim forbade discussion of the personality cult issue within the party or country. Following that, the party delivered lectures to its cadres in February and March of 1962 highlighting the revisionist character of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress, and in February the press started publishing articles criticising modern revisionism (Wilson Center 1962). On the 8 March 1962, Kim delivered a speech *On Improving and Strengthening the Organisational and Ideological Work of the Party*, and he dedicated a section to the topic "On Strengthening the Struggle Against Revisionism". This constituted Kim's lengthiest discussion of revisionism to date. Kim set the scene by tracing the rise of revisionism after the death of Marx and Engels. He then launched a tirade against "a certain person" (Kim 1984a, 151), i.e., Khrushchev:

The modern revisionists deny the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist party and the dictatorship of the proletariat which together constitute the general principles of the socialist revolution. They maintain that the aggressive nature of imperialism has changed and that, therefore, socialism can get on well with imperialism; they madly proclaim that the transition from capitalism to socialism can be accomplished peacefully by means of parliamentary struggle...As they are afraid of the revolution and do not want it, the revisionists are...overhauling the theory of the class struggle (Kim 1984a, 149-150).

Kim accepted the right of foreign countries to pursue revisionism themselves, but he opposed their attempt to impose revisionism on others. In this vein, Kim chastised Khrushchev's dismissal of his Albanian and Chinese critics: "They call the revolutionary Marxist-Leninists who refuse to follow their revisionist line... 'Stalinists', rejecting them and trying to isolate them from the socialist camp. This is the modern revisionists' most absurd act and presents a serious danger to us" (Kim 1984a, 150-151). Kim had no intention of following Soviet revisionism.

The winds of international revisionism appeared to change in October 1964, when L. I. Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev as the new Soviet leader. Brezhnev was less revisionist. He centralised power around himself and the party, halted Khrushchev's liberalisation reforms, and ordered Soviet troops to crush the Prague Spring, an attempt to liberalise Czechoslovakian socialism in 1968. How did North Korea respond to these developments? According to one commentator, "the staunch anti-revisionism which used to characterise North Korean speeches and statements" dissipated (Kun 1967, 48). The evidence suggests otherwise. In December 1965 Kim told China's Vice Premier that "[t]he new leadership of the CPSU are revisionists", and that "our basic position against revisionism is unchanged" (Wilson Center 1965). Earlier, in April, Kim delivered a speech further elucidating Juche. Until then, he had rarely mentioned the term or expanded upon its meaning. Now, however, Kim identified political independence, economic self-sustenance, and military self-reliance as Juche's three guiding principles. Once again, Kim explained that he advocated these principles not only to avoid dogmatism, but to also defend the "the purity of Marxism-Leninism against revisionism". By adopting a self-reliant political, economic, and defence system, North Korea could maintain its anti-revisionist path. Kim argued that the failure to establish Juche would mean a decline into revisionism (Kim 1984c, 258-259).

With these concerns in mind, in March 1967 Kim (1985, 116-121) demanded the establishment of a "monolithic ideological system" within the party. This entailed the establishment of his own ideology as the party's (Cheong 2000, 139). In promoting the

monolithic ideological system, Kim sought to cement his leadership and Stalinist ideology, thereby safeguarding North Korea against “the revisionist elements lurking in the Party” (FLPH 2001a, 237). Several years later, Kim made this aim explicit: “The work to establish the monolithic ideological system of the party amongst cadres cannot be divorced from the fight against revisionism” (Kim 1986, 141).

In response to Kim’s call, the party convened several high-level meetings to consolidate its monolithic ideological system and purge revisionists from its ranks. At the 15<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the Fourth Central Committee of the WPK, which occurred in May 1967, Kim denounced the party factionalists who “distorted the WPK’s class line...and sought to undermine its class position in a bid to...compromise with the class enemy”. Their “crimes” included eschewing the party’s “revolutionary traditions”, rehabilitating “the remnants of the overthrown exploiting class” and encouraging “their counterrevolutionary moves”, opposing communist education, endorsing “revisionist economic ‘theories’”, and abandoning the struggle for an anti-imperialist “revolution in South Korea and national reunification” (FLPH 2016, 105-106). Kim’s clampdown bore fruit. “As a result of a vigorous struggle to establish the Party’s monolithic ideological system, the virus spread by the...revisionist elements was swept away” (FLPH 2001a, 238).

North Korea’s anti-revisionism intensified after Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet leader in 1985. Gorbachev’s Perestroika (reconstruction) and Glasnost (openness) reforms were the most drastic yet. They liberalised every aspect of Soviet socialism. To varying degrees, the Eastern Bloc states followed suit (Brown 2007). In the 1980s, significant changes were also underway in China, the USSR’s major socialist rival. Following Mao death in 1976, his successor Deng Xiaoping instituted major economic reforms. Under Deng’s policy of reform and opening up, centralised planning and state-owned enterprises gradually gave way to private enterprise and the limited operation of markets (Boer 2021). Similar developments occurred in Vietnam, which initiated its Doi Moi reforms in 1986 to establish a “socialist-oriented market economy” (Beresford and Phong 2000).

Changes of this scale and magnitude were not underway in North Korea. Kim Il Sung denounced the foreign socialist reforms in 1986, when he stressed that “the people’s government must guard against the poisonous ideas of capitalism and revisionism and resolutely fight against all attempts to infringe upon the socialist system” (Kim 1995, 216). At the same time, Kim called to accelerate “the complete victory of socialism” in North Korea, in conscious defiance of revisionism (Kim 1995, 214; FLPH 2001a, 292).

In January 1987, Kim dispelled the presentation of Perestroika as the creative development of socialism. “On the pretext of ‘reforming’ and ‘reorganising’ socialism, the modern revisionists are following the road to capitalism and abandoning internationalist principles” (Kim 1995, 230). In March, whilst observing that some socialist countries were introducing private ownership, Kim urged officials to “strongly oppose revisionism and...establish the revolutionary habit of living our own way” (Kim 1995, 271). North Korea would prosper for as long as it maintained its “own style of socialism” (Kim 1995, 272). Thus, the WPK advanced the slogans “let us live our own way!”, “Korean style socialism”, and “socialism of our own style” in the 1980s to combat revisionism (FLPH 1998, 66; FLPH 2001a, 292).

By the end of 1990, most recognised that Soviet and Eastern Bloc socialism had all but collapsed. Even Albania had fallen. In response to these changes, Kim substituted his veiled criticisms of foreign revisionism for direct criticisms, in which he named individuals, organisations and countries. Kim identified revisionism as the root cause of the socialist collapse. Kim Il Sung reiterated that revisionism arose in the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death, and subsequently spread across the socialist world like a disease (Kim 1999, 249-50).

The Soviet collapse was a watershed moment for North Korea’s anti-revisionism. Observers described the collapse as the end of communism (Minogue 1993), even though China, Cuba,

Vietnam, Laos, and North Korea remained standing as self-proclaimed socialist states governed by communist parties. There is some justification for the “end of communism” narrative. Except for North Korea, the other surviving socialist countries had introduced revisionist policies, especially in the economic sphere. Already in the 1980s, China (Boer 2021), Vietnam (Beresford and Phong 2000), and Laos (Stuart-Fox 1989) had begun the transition from centralised economic planning to mixed market socialist economies. Cuba was less revisionist, though after the Soviet collapse the country experienced a “Special Period” of economic hardship due to the loss of Soviet economic support. This forced Cuba to introduce free market reforms, including tourism, the US dollar, foreign investment, self-employment, and agricultural market liberalisation (Enríquez 2003). These economic reforms in the socialist states coincided with political-ideological changes, including the weakening of anti-imperialism, communist education, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the class struggle, and the party’s leading role. These developments left North Korea as the last remaining anti-revisionist state.

The Pyongyang Declaration symbolised this fact. On the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1992, the delegates from 70 communist and anti-imperialist parties met in Pyongyang to celebrate Kim Il Sung’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Whilst there, they signed the Pyongyang Declaration, officially titled “Let us Advance the Cause of Socialism”, which vowed to uphold the unity of the socialist camp and safeguard socialism in light of the Soviet collapse (Kim 1999, 74-75). It is significant that North Korea hosted the Pyongyang Declaration. The regime conveyed that it was the leading force of anti-revisionism. This claim received support from the fact that China, Cuba, Vietnam, and Laos did not sign the declaration. The world’s remaining socialist states effectively surrendered the mantle of anti-revisionism to North Korea, which made no concessions to revisionism under Kim Il Sung’s leadership.

### **Anti-revisionism under Kim Jong Il**

Following Kim Il Sung’s death in 1994, his son Kim Jong Il took over, thereby establishing a tradition of alleged “hereditary succession” (Lim 2012). Some have suggested that hereditary succession in North Korea arose as a tool of anti-revisionism. The rise of revisionism in the Soviet bloc after Stalin’s death had taught Kim Il Sung of the significance of leadership succession (Lee 1982, 435). If a revisionist like Khrushchev became leader, then they could undo the revolutionary socialist policies of their predecessors, and even destroy socialism (Kim 1999, 98). Bearing this lesson in mind, Kim Il Sung promoted his son to be his successor, with the conviction that he would be loyal to himself and avoid revisionism. Kim Il Sung had educated Kim Jong Il first hand in the fundamentals of Stalinism, and so the former saw the latter as uniquely qualified to maintain these fundamentals (Lee 1982, 435). North Korean ideology has supported this narrative by highlighting Kim Jong Il’s anti-revisionist credentials. Kim’s official biographies contain sections dedicated to his anti-revisionist struggle, which they trace back to the 1960s (FLPH 2001b, 31-33; FLPH 2005, 140-143). They claim that Kim’s “Juche-based outlook on the world took root as a revolutionary faith through the struggle to reject the arbitrariness of the revisionists” (FLPH 2005, 50).

This does not mean that Kim Jong Il made no policy changes. Upon taking office, North Korea experienced a crisis period. Kim Il Sung’s death, the loss of Soviet economic aid, economic mismanagement, and a poor harvest precipitated an economic collapse and a deadly famine known as the “Arduous March”, similar to Cuba’s “Special Period”. In a bid to stabilise socialism, particularly its economic system, Kim Jong Il introduced several reforms (Haggard and Noland 2007).

One of them was Songun, or military first politics. Songun granted the Korean People’s Army (KPA) a more prominent position. The military stepped in to maintain the essential

economic and administrative functions, including agricultural and construction work. The state and economy also prioritised the KPA's needs above everything else, including the working class (Kim 2014, 334-335).

Several commentators have described Songun as a revisionist policy, on the basis that it substituted military leadership for party leadership, military dictatorship for proletarian dictatorship, and military struggle for class struggle (Kim 2006, 70). These claims ignore several points to the contrary, which Kim emphasised during a talk outlining Songun in 2003. First, the military could never usurp the WPK, a working-class party. The army was dutybound to remain "unfailingly loyal to the party", which made it an instrument of the proletarian dictatorship (Kim 2014b, 338). Second, Kim promoted Songun to wage the class struggle. He said that imperialist aggression demanded the sharpening of the "class struggle...and the working-class principle" in all spheres (Kim 2014b, 342). Songun facilitated this objective:

Our Party has upheld the banner of Songun in the acute confrontation with imperialism. Our rifle is the rifle of class, the rifle of revolution, and it is the most powerful weapon for anti-imperialist class struggle. The revolutionary soldier spirit of the People's Army is the highest expression of the class consciousness and revolutionary spirit of the working class (Kim 2014b, 342).

Kim Jong Il presented the army as the revolutionary detachment of the working class. When the people acquired the soldiers' revolutionary spirit "the socialist class position" would be "further cemented" (Kim 2014b, 342). Third, Kim presented Songun as an anti-revisionist policy. The party advanced military first politics to avoid economic collapse, safeguard socialism, and defend the revolution (Kim 2014b, 337).

Songun did not violate Stalinism. Under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union became a "military state". The military assumed a prominent position within the political system, and economic production prioritised the military's needs. Although, under Songun, the military became even more powerful, military first politics was an extreme variant of Stalinism, not a deviation from it (Scobell 2005, 251). There is therefore little basis for the view of Songun as a revisionist policy. It has an anti-revisionist rationale (Pateman 2021, 366).

Alongside military first politics, Kim Jong Il also facilitated economic reforms to help North Korea survive the Arduous March. Besides permitting informal markets, the government promoted "partial external opening, decentralisation of planning to the firm/district level, and 2002's so-called July 1 measures" (Greitens and Silberstein 2022, 223). These loosened the command economy by dissolving the rationing system, raising wages and prices, officially permitting street markets, and granting state enterprises profit-making incentives (Yang 2010). "Over time, private actors and interests became sufficiently powerful to penetrate state owned enterprises, producing a hybrid form of state-business relationship known as pseudo-state enterprises" (Greitens and Silberstein 2022, 212). Although it may be tempting to describe these changes as revisionist, it is worth considering that they were smaller in scale and scope than the economic reforms in China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Laos. Unlike the other socialist states, North Korea's economic reforms "stopped short of private ownership and market coordination" (Greitens and Silberstein 2022, 223). The 2002 "measures were designed only to smoothly manage the planned economy, rather than introduce the merits of the market economy" (Yang 2010, 73). When they failed to achieve this, the government rolled them back in the mid 2000s (Yang 2010), whilst simultaneously strengthening Songun, an anti-revisionist policy. Although, to be clear, one should not sweep Kim Jong Il's significant economic reforms under the rug, North Korea's centrally planned economy remained intact during his era (Fahy 2015).

That said, Kim Jong Il's anti-revisionism differed from Kim Il Sung's in several respects. For one thing, he paid less attention to contemporary foreign revisionism. Although Kim Il

Sung maintained friendly relations with revisionist states, he still routinely denounced their deviations from Stalinism. Contrastingly, Kim Jong Il rarely criticised similar foreign developments. A possible explanation for this is that Kim did not want to alienate his few remaining socialist allies. As mentioned previously, North Korea had always depended upon other socialist countries for economic aid and trade. Before the Soviet collapse, North Korea could pick and choose amongst many socialist benefactors. The Kims could therefore risk alienating some countries without detrimental economic consequences, since they could always rely upon others. The Soviet collapse greatly reduced North Korea's options in that regard. Moreover, during its economic crisis in the mid 1990s, the DPRK became even more reliant upon foreign aid. As such, it is likely that Kim Jong Il mostly ignored foreign revisionism to avoid antagonising his benefactors.

Kim also downplayed domestic economic revisionism. This was probably in acknowledgement of the desperate economic situation in North Korea. Private markets emerged as a means of survival during the Arduous March.

Finally, Kim Jong Il emphasised the “leader” component of revisionism more than his father. He gave unprecedented attention to denouncing opponents of the leader's personality cult and supremacy (Kim Jong Il 2014a, 59-60, 66, 106-07, 114-15). This change reflected Kim's attempt to strengthen his own leadership. Upon taking office, Kim had fewer revolutionary accomplishments than his father, and he had earned less respect. The economic crisis also tested popular support for North Korea's political system. Kim therefore focused more attention upon anti-leader revisionism to shore up his own supremacy and legitimacy.

To sum up: under Kim Jong Il's leadership, the first economic cracks appeared in North Korea's anti-revisionist edifice. Nevertheless, these cracks were small, and they did not represent the crumbling of North Korea's anti-revisionism. Rather than being binary opposites, revisionism and anti-revisionism are on opposite ends of a spectrum, and with Songun's help Kim Jong Il kept North Korea closer to the anti-revisionist end.

### **Anti-revisionism under Kim Jong Un**

Following Kim Jong Il's death in 2011, his son Kim Jong Un took office. Continuing the tradition of hereditary succession established by his father, Kim Jong Il promoted Kim Jong Un as his successor due to the latter's loyalty (Lim 2012), which, by definition, included a commitment to anti-revisionism. Nevertheless, some commentators have observed that Kim Jong Un appears to be less enthusiastic about promoting his predecessors' ideological contributions. Over time, Kim's published works have advocated Juche and Songun less often and in less detail (Tokola 2020). Likewise, unlike his predecessors, who referenced revisionism frequently, Kim Jong Un has mentioned it on only a few occasions in his published works, the most recent being in 2015 (Kim 2015, 7). His works have not referenced the term in seven years. Do these facts indicate the “death of North Korean ideology” (Tokola 2020), as one commentator has suggested? Not really. A reduction in anti-revisionist terminology does not indicate a rejection of anti-revisionist principles. A closer examination of Kim Jong Un's pronouncements and policies reveals that he has maintained an anti-revisionist stance.

It is evident, most explicitly, in Kim's decision to reformulate Juche and Songun as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. His aim, in coining this term, was to cement the ideas of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as permanent principles of socialist construction (Kim 2014, 7). The significance of this fact is that both these leaders opposed revisionism. By making it the party's supreme goal to model the whole society on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, Kim Jong Un has upheld anti-revisionism in a powerful fashion. Kim has essentially declared that he will not abandon his predecessors' Stalinist policies.

Kim has also presented the party's internal anti-revisionist struggle as the key to its longevity. In a 2014 speech to WPK ideological workers, Kim identified Kim Il Sung's victory over the party revisionists during the August 1956 Central Committee Plenum and the 1967 15<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the Fourth Party Central Committee as key landmarks in the WPK's development (Kim 2014, 10). In reference to these events, Kim warned of the rise of a "modern version of a factionalist group", an "ideologically degenerate entity...contaminated with bourgeois ideology and culture" (Kim 2014, 6). To combat the emergence of future revisionist factions, Kim emphasised the importance of "firmly establishing the Party's monolithic leadership system". This meant implementing "the instructions of the President [Kim Il Sung] and the General [Kim Jong Il] to the letter" (Kim 2014, 5).

Kim also has a distinguished record of opposing "anti-socialist" phenomena in a style and tone reminiscent of his predecessors' anti-revisionist polemics. In 2014, he ordered the party's ideological workers to oppose the foreign infiltration of "bourgeois" ideas (Kim 2014, 15-16). "In late 2018, the regime launched 'a war of annihilation against anti-socialist behaviour', another campaign to quash the influx of foreign media and culture" (Greitens and Silberstein 2022, 224). In December 2020, North Korea passed laws banning "reactionary thought", including foreign radio broadcasts, video content, books, or any other published materials (Jang 2020). In April 2021, Kim (2021a, 18) warned the Socialist Patriotic Youth League that "anti-socialist and non-socialist practices" were the most dangerous threat to the country. It was essential to wage "an uncompromising struggle against the capitalist ideology, selfishness, and other reactionary ideological elements which run counter to socialism and collectivism" (Kim 2021a, 10). In May 2021, Kim urged trade union officials to oppose "alien", "anti-socialist and non-socialist practices" in "a do-or die battle to defend the working-class purity" of North Korean socialism. It was essential to "leave no room in [the workers'] minds for even the smallest non working-class element to infiltrate" (Kim 2021b, 21). In January 2022, Kim urged agricultural workers to intensify the "class struggle" against "alien phenomena", most notably "individualism", "selfishness", "anti-socialist and non-socialist practices" (Kim 2022, 16-17, 9). Reports also indicate that the regime is expanding its prison camps for those who display anti-socialist tendencies (Hui 2021). This suggests that the proletarian dictatorship, the class struggle, and communist ideological education remain prominent in North Korea.

Like his father, Kim has made changes. His main innovation has been Byungjin, an economic line that he officially launched in 2013. Byungjin aims to combine economic and nuclear arms development (Kim 2013). It has increased the number of special economic zones like China's, where foreign businesses operate outside DPRK law (Yeo 2021). In industry, Byungjin has promoted "significant decentralisation of management and production planning in the state sector...limited private investment in small businesses", and the practice of enabling businesses to keep some of their profits and offer bonuses. In agriculture, Byungjin has enabled collective farmers to keep 60% of what they grow for private consumption or market resale (Greitens and Silberstein 2022, 217-18). The government has also encouraged greater consumption, and state firms have skyrocketed their advertising (Abrahamian 2016).

These developments indicate that North Korea is taking the Chinese-Vietnamese path to "Market Leninism", a system combining markets with strong party-state regulation. Still, it has some way to go before it gets there, and policy reversals along the lines of those seen in the mid 2000s are possible. The government has not "legalised fully private management of firms in industry or dismantled its equivalent of people's communes, and agricultural land remains fully state-owned" (Greitens and Silberstein 2022, 218). Although, again, one should not dismiss or downplay Byungjin's impact, it has not yet transformed North Korea's centrally planned economy (Pateman 2021, 361).

In comparison to his predecessors, Kim Jong Un's anti-revisionism represents a continuation in some respects, and a departure in others. Like his father, and unlike his grandfather, Kim

Jong Un has neglected foreign revisionist developments and domestic economic revisionism. His reasons for doing so are probably the same as Kim Jong Il's. An additional potential explanation is that Kim Jong Un's Byungjin line is itself vulnerable to the charge of incipient revisionism. Kim may not want to criticise foreign revisionism if some may describe his own economic policies in similar terms.

Whereas Kim Jong Il's anti-revisionism placed unprecedented emphasis upon the leader, Kim Jong Un's has focused primarily upon communist ideological education and the class struggle under socialism. That is, Kim has prioritised the ideological aspect of revisionism. Once again, this focus reflects the circumstances. Byungjin has enlarged private market activity and the middle class, which has in turn nurtured "anti-socialist" ideas like individualism and materialism. Within this context of economic and ideological change, Kim has found it imperative to crush the ideas that threaten socialism.

The fact that Kim Jong Un has referenced revisionism less often than his predecessors does not indicate his surrender to it, though it may indicate his increased openness to economic reform. With Byungjin, Kim Jong Un has widened the cracks of North Korea's economic revisionism. Still, these cracks remain small, and few, if any, have emerged in the political-ideological edifice comprising two thirds of the DPRK's socialist system. By contrast, the other socialist states introduced not only a greater degree of economic revisionism, but also substantial political-ideological revisionism. On balance, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has kept North Korea closer to the anti-revisionist end of the spectrum.

## **Conclusion**

North Korea views itself as "a lone voice of firm and sensible anti-revisionism, alone in being untouched by the madness of straying from the staunchest of socialist paths towards reform and 'opening up' to the capitalist West" (Rowley 2021, 57). This article has argued that this view is largely justified. Compared to the other remaining socialist states, which have each, to varying degrees, adopted revisionist policies, North Korea has remained steadfast in its communist course. It is the last remaining bastion of anti-revisionism.

North Korea's anti-revisionism has played a core role in determining the country's ideological evolution. The Kims have promoted Juche, the monolithic ideological system, Korean style socialism, Songun, and Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism to oppose domestic and foreign revisionist dangers. Some of these dangers have arisen from North Korean policies, such as its economic reforms.

North Korea's anti-revisionism has also determined the reform of North Korea's socialist system. Due to its anti-revisionism, North Korean socialism has undertaken limited change in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. This has important implications. For as long as North Korea upholds anti-revisionism, the WPK will continue to dominate society, the violent dictatorship over the enemies of proletarian power will persist, the class struggle against capitalist tendencies will continue, communist ideological education will remain pervasive, agriculture will remain collectivised, the commanding heights of industry will remain state owned and controlled, the economy will remain centrally planned, the party leader will remain supreme, and the leader's personality cult will deepen. These policies will not radically change for as long as anti-revisionism remains a component of North Korean ideology.

North Korea's anti-revisionism has also determined its foreign policy, and it will continue to do so for as long as the principle is upheld. This means that North Korea will continue to support revolutionary anti-imperialist struggles, denounce capitalist democracy, oppose imperialism, and refuse to co-exist peacefully with the imperialist countries. Anti-revisionism will deter North Korea from dismantling its nuclear weapons programme, since the regime views this programme as a safeguard against imperialist aggression. More generally, anti-

revisionism will ensure that the regime remains on a war footing, since the ideology denies the possibility of co-existing peacefully with imperialism.

Those who define North Korea as a hereditary dictatorship may claim that its leaders have maintained anti-revisionism primarily to cement their own power, and not because they believe in its principles. Undeniably, The Kims defeated many of their rivals by denouncing them as revisionists. However, this strategy comes with an important qualifier: anti-revisionism only justifies the protection of revolutionary communists. North Korean leaders have succeeded in using anti-revisionism as a tool for self-preservation only because they have demonstrated their broader commitment to revolutionary communism.

Will North Korea uphold anti-revisionism going forward? The preceding analysis suggests that it will, because anti-revisionism has successfully defended socialism. For good or for worse, anti-revisionism has helped North Korea resist the political, economic, and ideological reforms that either destroyed or de-Stalinised the other socialist regimes. The process of capitalist restoration in the extinct and surviving socialist states has convinced the North Korean leadership that anti-revisionism is an essential policy for safeguarding Stalinist socialism in one country. More generally, North Korea is convinced that ideology is the driving force of socialism, and it may well be right.

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