

INCONCLUSIVENESS AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE?

SIX DECADES OF SOUTH KOREAN UNIFICATION POLICY

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When known criminal 55-year-old Kim Ki-jong attacked the Ambassador of the United States of America Mark Lippert with a knife during a breakfast meeting of the "Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation" in Seoul on the morning of 5 March 2015, seriously wounding the diplomat, news of the attack spread around all major media outlets world-wide. While South Korea's official initial reaction was a rush to explain that the incident did not cast a shadow on the long-standing alliance between the two countries, the analysis of Kim's motives by the South Korean media indicated that the act of violence was primarily an act of his vehement rejection of military cooperation between Seoul and Washington. Kim considered this cooperation, documented by the joint, simultaneous manoeuvre held by both powers annually, mainly at sea, to be the cause of the increasing alienation and frostiness between the two Korean states.¹

The question of the quality of inter-Korean relations and the inevitably associated debate on the reunification of the two countries on the Korean Peninsula generally do not lead to these kinds of escalations in everyday politics in South Korea. On the contrary, foreign observers are often given the predominant impression that this issue is on the country's political agenda particularly because it is considered "good form" for society and the key players in politics, the media and business have no choice but to address it. In terms of content, this discourse, seemingly artificial at time, has long been accompanied by a variety of institutions: Not only is there a Ministry of Unification,² but there is also a so-called

1 | Cf. Sang-ho Song, "U.S. envoy hurt in knife attack", *The Korea Herald*, 5 Mar 2015, <http://koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150305001232> (accessed 30 Jul 2015).

2 | There have been a total of 38 ministers since the ministry was established in 1969 (authors' own research).

National Unification Advisory Council. The Ministries house departments for unification issues, and in individual institutions, plans are already in place for how to proceed on “Day X” should this suddenly transpire, as learned from the case in Germany.

Table 1

South Korea’s total budget and the Ministry of Unification’s share between 2005 and 2014 in trillions of South Korean Won (KRW) and billions of U.S. dollars (USD)

Year	Total		Ministry of Unification		
	KRW	USD	KRW	USD	Share in %
2005	209.6	204.2	0.6	0.6	0.3
2006	224.1	238.5	0.8	0.8	0.3
2007	238.4	253.4	0.6	0.7	0.3
2008	257.2	190.4	0.8	0.6	0.3
2009	301.8	253.4	0.5	0.4	0.2
2010	292.8	258.3	0.5	0.4	0.2
2011	309.1	267.1	0.6	0.5	0.2
2012	325.4	303.1	0.5	0.5	0.2
2013	349.0	328.9	0.4	0.4	0.1
2014	355.8	322.3	0.3	0.3	0.1

Sources: For the total expenditures: Statistics Korea, http://index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2739 (accessed 10 Jul 2015); for the Ministry of Unification’s share: Ministry of Strategy and Finance, https://www.digitalbrain.go.kr/kor/view/statis/statis01_02_01.jsp?fscl_yy=2015&code=DB010102&fscl_div1_cd=1&x=46&y=5 (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

However, what have the governments of South Korea actually done since the end of the Korean War in 1953 to meet the requirement set out in Article 4 of the constitution,³ wherein South Korea seeks unification under the principles of democracy and freedom and aimed to implement peaceful policies? While Germany is now able to look back on 25 years of reunification, the division that

3 | Constitution of the Republic of Korea on the Constitutional Court of South Korea’s homepage, http://www.english.ccourt.go.kr/home/att_file/download/Constitution_of_the_Republic_of_Korea.pdf (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

has separated Korea for 70 years appears further than ever from reaching that goal.



A section of the Berlin Wall in Seoul: While it is already the 25th anniversary of Germany's reunification this year, Korea has been divided for almost 70 years. | Source: © Norbert Eschborn.

Although the need for unification is regularly expressed in Seoul, South Korea's current policy of reunification is characterised mainly by its inconclusiveness. Despite President Park Geun-hye pursuing highly ambitious targets with her foreign policy strategy of "Trust policy"⁴ on the Korean Peninsula, in Northeast Asia as a whole and ultimately throughout the Eurasian region, this policy lacks determination and the will to take politically courageous action. Despite every such announcement, no dialogue has yet been initiated with North Korea without preconditions.⁵ The reasons for this do not rest solely on the shoulders of the current government. Instead this lack of results has been the defining characteristic of South Korean unification policy since the end of the Korean War, with former Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun's "Sunshine Policy" between 2000 and 2007 marking a notable turning point. Since the inauguration of Park's predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, in 2008, however, a return to the classical guiding principles of South Korean North Korea policies has been observed, resulting in, among other things, the current standstill.

4 | Presented in: Geun-hye Park, "A New Kind of Korea", *Foreign Affairs* 90, 09-10/2011, p. 13-18, <http://foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-east-asia/2011-09-01/new-kind-korea> (accessed 21 Jul 2015).

5 | Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Fig. 1

East Asia: China, Japan, DPR Korea and ROK

Source: © racken.

SOUTH KOREAN UNIFICATION POLICY SINCE THE KOREAN WAR

In retrospect, we can differentiate between five phases of South Korean North Korea policy. These phases can be distinguished by their respective domestic political circumstances and developments in world politics, both of which massively influenced Seoul's reunification policies.

1953 to 1970:

Antagonism as the defining feature

The relationship between North and South Korea has been marked by open conflict since the 1950s. Thus the Korean War ended in 1953 with a nearly identical return to the border demarcation along the 38th parallel, with a conflict-ridden truce that persists to this day.⁶ The prospect of violent reunification at the enemy's expense has united the two states. As early as 1953, the first South Korean president, Rhee Syngman, refused to sign the ceasefire agreement between the warring parties and insisted

6 | Japanese rule over the Korean Peninsula ended on 2 September 1945 with Japan's surrender in World War II. Korea was then divided between the victorious powers of the Pacific War, the USA and the Soviet Union, along the 38th parallel.

on continuing the war until Korea's ultimate reunification.⁷ In the years that followed, Seoul attempted to guard itself against the communist North through a strong military alliance with the U.S., while North Korea turned to the People's Republic of China and the USSR. Both constituent states pursued their own form of the Hallstein Doctrine, in which diplomatic relations were only maintained with those states that did not recognise the respective other Korean "enemy state".⁸ The first phase of North-South relations was therefore characterised by the formation of blocs and mutual rejection. Efforts in favour of a peaceful reunification were not seen on the South Korean side.



In 1950, UN combat forces withdrew from the 38th degree of latitude: Ever since this border was drawn, not much has changed in regard to the pacey conditions there. | Source: U.S. Army, flickr ©1999.

1971 to 1988:

Cautious rapprochement in the era of regional upheavals

This inter-Korean standstill was first broken in 1971. Seoul and Pyongyang both felt that U.S. President Richard Nixon's revolutionary visit to Beijing called into question the security guarantees provided by the superpowers. In the years following Rhee Syngman's resignation in 1960, an authoritarian military regime had been established in the Republic of Korea. Beginning in 1963,

7 | Cf. Karl-Gottfried Kindermann, *Der Aufstieg Koreas in der Weltpolitik*, München, 2005, p.118-122.

8 | Cf. Charles Armstrong, "Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective", *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, No.2, Vol.14, 31 Dec 2005, p.5.

President Park Chung-hee cemented his rule through economic development work, the accumulation of constitutional power and selective repression. The military ties to the USA became systematic supporting pillars

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of the state system of rule. In 1971, not least due to concerns surrounding the changing relationship between the world's superpowers, South Korea made contact with the North for the first time through the coordination offices of the Red Cross. In a remarkably proactive gesture, Park Chung-hee sent the head of South Korean intelligence, Lee Hu-rak, to Pyongyang to engage in direct negotiations one year later. Lee met with North Korean leader Kim Il-sung and they agreed on the need for consultation between the two countries. Further covert meetings ultimately resulted in the "North-South Joint Statement" in 1972. In addition to creating a North-South Committee, this 17-point program in particular included the North-South Joint Communiqué seeking non-violent reunification without seeking the involvement of foreign powers.⁹ However, by mid-1973, North Korea had already withdrawn from the newly created committee.¹⁰

Pyongyang attempted to use social tensions in South Korea resulting from sometimes civil war-like conditions for its own gain by exploiting the brutality of the South Korean government for propaganda purposes. The by then rapidly deteriorating North-South relations culminated in the failed assassination attempt on Park Chung-hee in 1974 (though his wife did fall victim to this attack),¹¹ before he ultimately died at the hands of an assassination plot devised by his own intelligence corps in 1979. Despite the failure of rapprochement between North and South Korea in the early 1970s, this marked the first break with previous reunification policy in Seoul. However, no additional significant rapprochement was achieved until the late 1980s, with the exception of a few coordinated family reunions.

1988 to 1997:

A rethink in the era of global change

With the inauguration of President Roh Tae-wo in 1988 came renewed drive in North-South relations. Through the initiative of rapprochement with the Warsaw Pact countries and communist

9 | Cf. Kindermann, n. 7, pp. 163-171.

10 | Cf. Armstrong, n. 8, p. 5.

11 | Cf. Park, n. 4, p. 13.

China, which became known as “North Policy”, Roh robbed Pyongyang of its monopolistic position as the only Korean constituent state to engage in relations with the world’s socialist countries. This resulted in a diplomatic asymmetry that continues to this day at the expense of North Korea.¹² With respect to the Korean Peninsula, Roh significantly distinguished South Korean reunification policy by its model of “national community”:¹³ the intention was for a two-state community with a common identity to arise through intensified cooperation and joint representation on the basis of which reunification would ultimately take place. Despite initial reluctance, North Korea proved willing to cooperate. The outcome of these policies was an end to the mutual Korean Hallstein doctrine, North and South Korea’s accession to the United Nations in 1991 and a further increase in bilateral contacts. During this phase, geopolitical upheavals forced Seoul and Pyongyang to accept more sovereignty and released them from the static equilibrium of the East-West conflict. However, the state of war that had existed between the two countries remained in place even after the end of the Cold War. As a result, an economically strong South Korea that embraced democracy in 1992 stood in opposition to a North Korea driven by weakness and uncertainty. In the wake of German reunification, the regime of Kim Il-sung feared the real risk of absorption by the economically successful South.

Due to the diplomatic asymmetry seen on the Korean Peninsula and the elimination of Soviet aid, North Korea soon fell into an existential crisis.

Rho’s “national community” model remained vague, but has nevertheless generated a hitherto unseen cooperation between North and South Korea since 1972. The basic treaty set out between the two countries in Decem-

ber 1991 and the “Joint Declaration on the Denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula” of 1992 are considered highlights of this development.¹⁴ However, due to the diplomatic asymmetry seen

12 | While South Korea was able to engage in diplomatic relations with the former Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China in 1991/1992, an equivalent normalisation of North Korea’s relationship with Japan and the USA has as yet failed to materialise. However, between 2000 and 2003, Pyongyang was able to open embassies in Canada and some EU countries, including Germany, in 2001. For a more detailed overview of North Korean diplomatic relations, see: The National Committee on North Korea, “DPRK Diplomatic Relations”, <http://ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/dprk-diplomatic-relations> (accessed 19 Mar 2015).

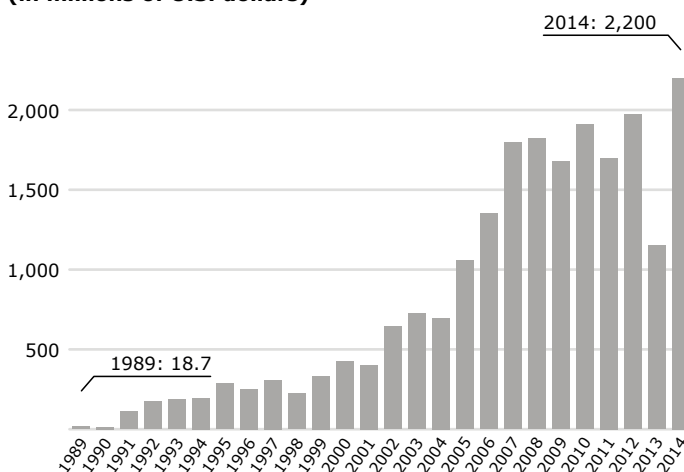
13 | Cf. Young-Ho Park, “South and North Korea’s Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations”, The 2nd KRIS-Brookings Joint Conference, 2014, <http://brookings.edu/~media/events/2014/1/21%20korean%20peninsula%20unification/park%20young%20ho%20paper.pdf> (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

14 | Cf. Armstrong, n. 8, pp. 6-7.

on the Korean Peninsula and the elimination of Soviet aid, North Korea soon fell into an existential crisis. The 1990s were marked by economic collapse, devastating food shortages and desperate attempts to preserve the regime. At the same time, the decision makers in Seoul and Washington failed to exploit North Korea's isolation starting in the mid-1990s to push for further de-escalation. Instead, they increased pressure on the regime, which in turn encouraged the desperate attempts to secure the regime through aggression and radicalisation.¹⁵

Fig. 2

Inter-Korean Trade Volume 1989 to 2014
(in millions of U.S. dollars)



Sources: Nicole M. Finneemann et al., "Tomorrow's Northeast Asia. Prospects for Emerging East Asian Cooperation and Implications for the United States", *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, Vol. 11, 2011, http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/jukas_2011-08_lee.pdf (accessed 21 Jul 2015); "Inter-Korean trade hits 8-year low in 2013", N.K. News, via: Yonhap News Agency, 23 Feb 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2014/02/23/21/0401000000AEN20140223001700315F.html> (accessed 21 Jul 2015); "Inter-Korean Trade Hits New High", Arirang News, via: *The Chosun Ilbo*, 29 Jan 2015, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/01/29/2015012901713.html (accessed 21 Jul 2015); "KOTRA on DPRK trade", North Korean Economy Watch, 19 Sep 2012, <http://nkeconwatch.com/2012/06/01/15690> (accessed 21 Jul 2015).

15 | Cf. the notable achievements of the former South Korean foreign minister in the Roh Moo-hyun government, in Young-kwan Yoon, "Nordkorea-Problem hätte längst gelöst sein können", *Die Welt*, 7 Apr 2013, <http://welt.de/115062316> (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

1998 to 2007:

Sunshine Policy

The most important era in South Korean reunification policy began in 1998 with the election of Kim Dae-jung as the head of state. Kim Dae-jung's inauguration in 1998 heralded the first peaceful transfer of power between two democratic governments in South Korea. Kim took office with the intention of fundamentally changing his country's policy towards North Korea.

One of the most decisive moments of the birth of his so-called Sunshine Policy was Kim Dae-jung's speech at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2000. In his speech he declared that the aim of South Korea's unification policy was by no means to absorb North Korea, but instead to propose a rapprochement and foster coexistence with intensified economic, infrastructural and political cooperation.

In exchange for abandoning its nuclear weapons program, South Korea declared itself willing to assuage North Korea's security concerns and extricate Pyongyang from its diplomatic isolation.¹⁶ This speech soon resulted in secret negotiations between representatives of the two countries at the end of which the first Inter-Korean Summit was agreed. With the world watching, the heads of state of North and South Korea met directly with one another in June of 2000 in Pyongyang. In the "June 15 Joint Declaration", both sides agreed to a cooperative reunification process without the use of force and without absorption. In addition to the reunification of separated families, the declaration agreed to the intensification of a cultural and economic exchange. As

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the first step towards a hypothetical nation-state, a loose vision of a supranational union modelled after the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the early European

Community was to be sought.¹⁷ However, the real milestone of the Summit was the North Korea's willingness to officially negotiate with the South on an equal footing. In the same vein, instead of striving for all-out reunification with no alternative, South Korea now prioritised a gradual shift in its relations with the DPRK that included North Korean interests. The rapprochement between the two countries thus became the ultimate goal of reunification policy, whereas addressing the question of actual unity or other uncomfortable issues was tactically tabled. The "normalisation"

16 | Cf. Kindermann, n. 7, pp. 325-326.

17 | Cf. Chung-in Moon, *The Sunshine Policy*, Seoul, 2012, pp. 44-50.

of North Korea became the absolute priority. What followed was a fundamental break with classical reunification policy of South Korea and the previous relationship between the two constituent states with one another.¹⁸ At the same time, however, the tensions between North Korea and the USA massively limited the success of Kim Dae-jung's policies. While a normalisation in U.S.-DPRK relations seemed to emerge during Bill Clinton's last year in office, this trend ultimately collapsed after the election of George W. Bush in 2000. Despite all this, Kim Dae-jung's successor, Roh Moo-hyun, attempted to continue "Sunshine Policy" upon taking office in 2003. This then led to another Inter-Korean Summit in 2007, which included the "4 October Joint Declaration". In it, both sides stated their desire to end the war permanently. Though a revival of the dynamics of 2000 was achieved for another few months, by 2007, newly-elected President Lee Myung-bak had declared that the previous policy had failed.

Since 2007:

A return to stalemate and alienation

President Lee's leadership instead saw the reversion of the "Sunshine Policy". South Korea's relations with its U.S. allies were prioritised, while reactionism became the defining aspect of the country's policy towards North Korea. This was based on the erroneous perception that the North Korean regime was close to collapse. Accordingly, the drafting of joint intervention plans between Seoul and Washington in the event of such a breakdown was ramped up, while the previous policy of rapprochement with Pyongyang was in turn abandoned. With Lee's "Vision 3000", Seoul presented the North with a proposal of economic assistance from South Korea spanning ten years in exchange for immediate denuclearisation

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18 | Nevertheless, "Sunshine Policy" also had its downsides. As became known in late 2003, the Hyundai Group had apparently paid the North Korean regime nearly 500 million U.S. dollars on behalf of the South Korean government shortly before the first Inter-Korean Summit. This scandal, which became known as the "cash-for-summit" scandal, saw Kim Dae-jung accused of having bought his Nobel Peace Prize and inter-Korean rapprochement with high bribes. Upon learning of the scandal, the Supreme Court of South Korea ruled in an investigation that 100 million U.S. dollars had been verifiably illegally paid on behalf of the government. Many members from Kim Dae-jung's sphere were convicted of this, with some even committing suicide. Kim himself went unpunished, though the public's perception of his "Sunshine Policy" did suffer badly as a result of the scandal; cf. Moon, n. 17, p. 36 f.

by Pyongyang. This proposal had no intention of appeasing North Korean security concerns, nor did any of Lee's subsequent proposals (including a three-stage reunification plan with the introduction of a reunification tax). Any rapprochement failed to materialise, and North-South relations once again dropped to a low point.¹⁹ The consequences of these policies based on false expectations are still felt to this day. Under the leadership of President Park Geun-hye, who took office in early 2013, South Korean unification policy has been based on the principles of what is known as *Trustpolitik*. As part of cross-regional initiatives (in particular the "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative"), this policy officially aims at overcoming the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula and actively working towards the "national jackpot" of reunification.²⁰ The process of building trust as a necessary condition here is eponymous. However, so far the Park administration has not been able to achieve any appreciable success with its continued foreign policy dependence on the U.S.²¹ The impression is given that Park Geun-hye's North Korea policy is dominated by inflexibility and a lack of willingness to take risks. No results-oriented policy of reunification has been observed, at least as yet.

DETERMINANTS OF REUNIFICATION POLICY

The historical view taken by Seoul's North Korea policy reveals a complex system of factors that influence one other, the effects of which are responsible for the development of South Korean unification efforts.

Diverging interests and the South Korean public

Since the end of the Cold War, the absorption of North Korea by the economically superior south has established itself in South Korea as the reunification scenario that is generally expected. However, this view has proved problematic. Against the backdrop of the 1990s, which were disastrous for North Korea, the primacy

19 | Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 3-8.

20 | The Korean term "daebak" used by the President is also translated differently by South Korea's English-speaking media as "bonanza" or "jackpot". Cf. Tae-ho Kang, "Unification Bonanza (Daebak) Buzz and the Absence of a Peace Process", *EAF Policy Debates*, No. 1, East Asia Foundation, 10 Apr 2014, [http://keaf.org/book/EAF_Policy_Debates_No1_Unification_Bonanza_\(Daebak\)_Buzz_and_the_Absence_of_a_Peace_Process](http://keaf.org/book/EAF_Policy_Debates_No1_Unification_Bonanza_(Daebak)_Buzz_and_the_Absence_of_a_Peace_Process) (accessed 21 Jul 2015).

21 | In a one-on-one discussion with the author, N.E., on 8 Oct 2014, a senior South Korean presidential official expressed scepticism in regard to the chances of success.

of safeguarding sovereignty and power has risen to become the main theme of the regime. Seeking reunification modelled on that of Germany, perceived to be a model of absorption, therefore contradicts these ideas and continues to generate fierce opposition in Pyongyang today.²² At the same time, the South Korean public is gradually drifting towards a collective conformity of prosperity. According to popular opinion, socio-economic stability is preferable to a costly reunification, while the sense of a nation-state community is currently massively diminishing amongst South Korean teenagers.²³



Park Guen-hye at a ceremony commemorating national independence: Under the office-holding president, South Korea's unification policy orients itself toward the principles of the so-called trust policy. | Source: Jeon Han, Korean Culture and Information Service, flickr ©©©.

With respect to the alternative option of a cooperative, integrative reunification systematically executed over a longer period of time, divergent ideas in North and South Korea limit Seoul's flexibility here. The "Korean National Community Formula" has formed the basis for the official reunification policy of every government from 1989 up to Park Geun-hye's administration, while the North Korean vision of a "Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo" has defined Pyongyang's stance since 1980. Both approaches combine

- 22 | Observations from the author's (N.E.) discussions with staff of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of [North] Korea between 2011 and 2014.
- 23 | Cf. Steven Denney, "The Generation Gap on Korean Unification", *The Diplomat*, 29 Jan 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/the-generation-gap-on-korean-unification> (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

the vision of a supranational community of two political systems existing in parallel as a basis for later reunification. However, the DPRK's focus here also aims at securing its survival within a loose confederation; it in no way seeks to merge with South Korea to become one liberal democratic Korea. However, while Pyongyang's stance would nevertheless provide enough manoeuvrability for rapprochement with a correspondingly rational formulation of interests, public opinion in South Korea is cause for far greater problems. In addition to the fears the public has adopted concerning the exorbitant costs of reunification and the waning interest, the focus here lies primarily on the "bunker mentality" towards the DPRK.



A stockpile of ammunition of the U.S. army in South Korea: South Korea's desire for military ties with the United States is unbroken. | Source: Expert Infantry, flickr ©.

Influenced by the experiences of a merciless fratricidal war, radical anticommunism and unconditional military ties to the United States were promoted as cornerstones of South Korea's self-perception between 1953 and 1970. Government-mandated patriotism generated an atmosphere characterised by a lack of empathy for the North, while values such as democracy, freedom and liberality were primarily abused as fighting words meant to maintain the south's position of power. As a result, North Korea unintentionally became a source of identity for South Korean nationalism. This only changed with the onset of change in North-South relations in the late 1980s and the democratisation of South Korea. Subjects

such as the forced prostitution of Korean “comfort women” by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II or the fate of North Korea, which have previously been considered taboo, have been the focus of increased public debate. Kim Dae-jung attempted to co-opt this moment of awakening in civil society and mobilise public opinion for a radical change in North-South relations. However, these efforts were quite obviously a failure. Ever since Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008, a declining trend has been apparent in South Korea. Indifference and apathy towards North Korea are once again on the rise, whilst the sense of community as part of a supranational Korean people is now decreasing rapidly amongst young people. According to recent studies, 33.7 per cent of all *yishipdae*²⁴ indicate that different perceptions of values (instead of divergent political and economic systems) are the primary reason for the social distance between North and South Korea. Fewer than 71.8 per cent are interested in reunification (compared to 77.1 per cent in 2012). This places this group at the bottom of all age groups surveyed. In addition, only 36.3 per cent of young South Koreans specify a common nationality as the main driver for reunification (again compared to 46.3 per cent in 2012), while economic interests dominate the opinion of all age groups under 50. This has resulted in a progressive general loss in the sense of national unity with the people of North Korea.²⁵ The expected high costs of reunification massively reinforce this trend. According to the South Korean Financial Supervisory Service’s latest calculations, unification with North Korea would consume at least 400 billion euros, while the Finance Ministry estimates expenditures of nearly 800 billion U.S. dollars in a similar study. Given the fact that South Korea’s nominal gross domestic product (GDP) is estimated at forty times higher than that of North Korea’s (in comparison: in 1990 West Germany’s GDP was ten times that of the GDR),²⁶ these massive economic concerns are not surprising. Nevertheless, this way of thinking is increasingly eroding the foundations for shaping a successful reunification policy. Instead of counteracting this trend by cooperating with civic groups and through educational projects, however, South Korean leadership prefers to apply a policy of inaction.

24 | This is a colloquial term in Korean for young people in their twenties.

25 | Cf. Jiyeon Kim/Karl Friedhoff/Chungku Kang/Euicheol Lee, *Asan Public Opinion Report. South Korean Attitudes toward North Korea and Reunification*, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2014 http://thediplomat.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/thediplomat_2015-01-29_13-53-09.pdf (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

26 | Cf. “Einheit mit Kim würde 500 Milliarden Dollar kosten”, *Die Welt*, 19 Nov 2014, <http://welt.de/134496873> (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

Influential personalities

A defining factor in the development of South Korea's policy on North Korea has always been the president himself. These variable personalities, dominated either by ideological narrow-mindedness or, alternatively, by pragmatism, therefore play a major role in determining a policy's success or failure. Reviewing key moments in North-South relations demonstrates just how closely policy development is linked with this.

In his twelve years as South Korea's first president, Rhee Syngman had a significant and lasting effect on both policy development and national identity. However, against the backdrop of domestic disputes and the Korean War, Rhee's government failed in creating a democratic system of government. As a radical anti-communist

As a radical anti-communist and nationalist, Rhee refused on principle to accept the existence of North Korea. He introduced an era of dogmatic inflexibility and lack of political pragmatism.

and nationalist, the self-perceived "Father of the Nation" refused on principle to accept the existence of North Korea. As such, he refused to sign the ceasefire agreement in Panmunjom in 1953 and insisted the war be continued. In striving to implement crucial

elements of a Confucian state and political understanding in a democratic and liberal state as set out by the constitution, Rhee ultimately introduced an era of authoritarian presidential governments, which could only then yield decades of dogmatic inflexibility and lack of political pragmatism.²⁷

As a result, the first steps towards inter-Korean rapprochement only took place in 1972 under the leadership of Park Chung-hee. Beginning in 1964, Park established an authoritarian police state, which, among other things, mercilessly persecuted political opponents using the notorious secret KCIA (Korean Central Intelligence Agency). Park's political style was characterised by military discipline coupled with a coolly calculated articulation of interests. Despite repeated provocations from the North, in 1971 he acknowledged the need for contact with the antagonistic DPRK. In doing so, Park was also prepared to take proactive steps, resulting in him personally sending former KCIA chief Lee Hu-rak to Pyongyang to conduct secret negotiations in 1972. However, due to increasing social instability this brief period of inter-Korean rapprochement soon crumbled. North-South relations reached a new low when the president's wife was killed in 1974 during a

27 | Cf. Kindermann, n. 7, pp. 67-69 and pp. 134-137.

failed North Korean assassination attempt on her husband's life.²⁸ President Park himself died in 1979 at the hands of former KCIA chief Kim Jae Kyu.²⁹

The pragmatism that had become evident in sections of the South Korean military in the case of President Park Chung-hee reached its peak with the "Northern Policy" put in place by General Roh Tae-woo, who became president in 1988. He skilfully applied his expertise in psychological warfare in the negotiations with South Korea's opposition and the North Korean leadership.³⁰ Roh used his foreign policy campaign to rob the North Korean regime of its exclusive position in China and Eastern Europe, thus forcing Pyongyang to cooperate. Seoul benefited from this significantly, and it set the stage for its rise to a Northeast Asian middle power. This break with the static policies of his predecessors ushered in a new political era in the Republic of Korea.

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Kim Dae-jung's election nearly ten years later likewise marked a historical milestone. Never before had South Korean reunification policy assumed such a high profile. The driving force behind this development was President Kim himself, whose own biography was closely tied to the history of Korea. Kim Dae-jung had been the victim of the repressive governments in Seoul for decades. Kim took office in 1998 with the intention to bring about a new beginning in South Korea and the desire to implement a policy of "national reconciliation and unity".³¹ In addition to cross-party cooperation and the mobilisation of civil society, this also included proactive outreach to North Korea. Honouring his "Sunshine Policy" and the rapprochement it brought about between the two Korean constituent states, Kim was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000.³²

However, in 2008, North-South relations once again toppled when former Hyundai CEO and mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung-bak, took office. Taking a hardline policy, South Korea abandoned the path taken by Kim Dae-jung and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, instead returning to a confrontational policy of reunification.

28 | Cf. Park, n. 4, p. 13.

29 | Cf. Kindermann, n. 7, pp. 139-183.

30 | Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 239-247.

31 | Cf. *ibid.*, p. 314.

32 | Cf. Bernd Weiler: "Ein Mandela für Korea", *Die Welt*, 14 Oct 2000, <http://welt.de/538505> (accessed 10 Jul 2015).

Increasingly complex decision-making processes

In addition to the programmatic orientations of South Korea's presidents, systemic processes also have considerable effects on the shaping of South Korean unification policy. As a result,

Ever since Rhee Syngman's administration, the South Korean president has directed the nation's foreign policy based on their far-reaching constitutional powers.

in this context the current system of political decision-making is based on a complex construct of mutual control and participation, whilst the responsibility for policy-making during the authoritarian regimes until 1992

lay almost exclusively with the president. However, the democratisation of South Korea was also accompanied by a massive increase in the complexity of state policy formulation. Ever since Rhee Syngman's administration, the South Korean president has directed the nation's foreign policy based on their far-reaching constitutional powers (and, in practice, powers that go beyond even that). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs then tacitly implements these instructions in collaboration with the South Korean intelligence services. Parliament has only functioned as a "rubber stamp", whilst the important decisions were taken at the highest level behind closed doors. This has resulted in the president taking control of shaping policy with relatively few obstacles. There was no functioning system of separation of powers in place; the judiciary was under governmental control and the opposition was kept in check through repression. It was only the private sector that gained increasing political influence beginning in the late 1960s. However, the President remained the formative designer of foreign policy.³³

Yet this considerable power to shape policy ceased in the early 1990s. The authoritarian construct of governance gave way to a more Western-style presidential system together with democratic checks and balances. Although the president, who is elected directly, has continued to hold the policy-making power, the ratification of international treaties requires a majority vote by the South Korean National Assembly. Government officials may be summoned to testify before the Assembly upon request to give their opinion, and impeachment proceedings may be initiated if the president is suspected of overstepping his or her authority.

33 | Cf. Scott A. Snyder/Leif-Eric Easley, "South Korea's Foreign Relations and Security Policies", in: Saadia M. Pekkanen et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of The International Relations of Asia*, New York et. al, 2014, p.449.

In practice, in addition to providing checks to the executive, these instruments also allow foreign policy efforts to be delayed or even stopped on the basis of ideological motivations. The South Korean Constitutional Court also has this power at its disposal, albeit in a weakened form. In 2011 the court directly influenced Lee Myung-bak's policy towards Japan by ruling that the state be obligated to demand the payment of damages for pain and suffering to those Korean "comfort women" who were still living. Given the constitutional definition of the North Korea complex of problems as an intra-state problem, the judiciary may yet play an important role in future reunification issues. Furthermore, the Republic of Korea has for years exhibited a deep-rooted "culture of mass demonstrations". Many a time since the early 1990s the public has been able to successfully formulate its own opinion regarding topics that have historically been considered highly sensitive and has successfully contributed to the political decision-making process through various methods (petitions, picketing, etc.). However, there is still a risk that well-organised interest groups may be able to influence public opinion by through mobilisation measures, thereby torpedoing policies concerning North Korea they view as risky.

Since the early 1990s has the public has been able to contribute historically highly sensitive topics to the political decision-making process through various methods.

The biggest hurdle in the Republic of Korea's current political system is the high degree of inter-institutional integration in the complex process of policy formulation. The president remains the central figure. However, the multi-layered nature of the problem necessitates constant cooperation with several core ministries (Unification, National Defence, Trade and Foreign Affairs), the intelligence services and other states. This communication is undertaken internally via joint coordination committees, whilst in the case of multilateral negotiations, simultaneous internal communication is necessary. The decision-making process is made considerably more difficult by conflicting interests, overlapping spheres of power and the additional influence held by private sector stakeholders, and the policy design options actually available to the president are therefore massively limited.³⁴

Given the social "inertia" that can be observed and the complexity of the policy-making process, it is clear that the issue of reunification threatens to systemically degenerate to become a "universal

34 | Cf. *ibid.*

issue". Due to the public's low expectations, such an escape to engaging in the rhetoric of reunification provides a cost-effective means of successful self-profiling, both at home and abroad. This is particularly true in mobilising voters in the run-up to elections and distracting them from domestic policy failures or uncomfortable topics. This trend has re-emerged since 2008, and can be observed in the practical formation of South Korean reunification policy.

Global lines of conflict

Despite the economic and political success story that is the Republic of Korea after 1953, the dynamics on the Korean Peninsula are significantly affected by external influences even today. This is the continuation of a historical constant: For centuries, the fate of Korea was determined by competing regional powers, until the powers that emerged victorious from World War II ultimately decided to divide the country. Korea remained a geopolitical pawn in the game of foreign interests.

Influenced by the experiences of the Korean War, existential uncertainties returned to take center stage in foreign policy in North and South Korea in the 1950s. The countries' subsequent alliances with protective forces with conflicting interests then

massively increased their influence. Regional and global lines of conflict were the defining factor of inter-Korean relations, and rapprochement was only undertaken in times of structural upheaval. Since the end of the

Since the end of the Cold War, the USA have immense power in shaping policy through its presence on the Korean Peninsula and its hostility towards North Korea.

Cold War, this role has been taken up by the United States, which wields immense power in shaping policy through its presence on the Korean Peninsula and its hostility towards North Korea. Washington has therefore been promoted to a key player in South Korean reunification efforts.

In the same vein, the initial rapprochement between North and South Korea in 1971 was the result of regional power shifts. As a result of the surprising rapprochement between China and the USA, the South Korean leadership suddenly found itself at the heart of a security dilemma within the alliance: Would the U.S. continue to be willing to defend South Korea? Could the leadership in Washington drop their South Korean allies in favour of more advantageous agreements with Beijing? Against the backdrop of the USA's break with Taiwan, such fears did not appear

unfounded. In fact, in 1971 the Chinese national government, with the USA's support, excluded Taiwan from both the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations, nullified the relations between Taipei and Washington and announced an end to the 1954 joint alliance treaty. The United States broke with its previous "One-China Policy" in favour of normalising relations with Beijing. The consequences of this "Nixon Shock" reverberated in Seoul to great concern, especially since the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, William J. Porter, had announced in 1970 that the USA had no obligation to station American troops in Korea and would advise the leadership in Seoul to take up contact with Pyongyang if at all possible.³⁵ It is against this backdrop that structural changes compelled the South Korean leadership to pursue rapprochement and break with South Korea's previous policy on reunification.

With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR looming, the South Korean leadership under Roh Tae-wo sovereignly exploited global power shifts and skilfully transferred those dynamics to a regional level. As a result, Seoul freed the inter-Korean conflict from the solid structures of the Cold War and generated a new configuration on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang was diplomatically isolated and feared being absorbed by the South, similar to the German scenario. However, it was precisely these fears that the South Korean leadership took advantage of until 1998, and, with its "Sunshine Policy", it pursued a hitherto unseen policy of rapprochement between the two Koreas. This success was made possible structurally by the upheaval the U.S. was experiencing at the same time with respect to its own North Korea policy: Based on a White House study spearheaded by former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, the Clinton administration publicly supported the South Korean leadership, eased sanctions against North Korea and sought to normalise bilateral relations in exchange for Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear weapons program. This led to a breakthrough rapprochement between North Korea and the USA, which culminated in U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang in late October 2000. Whilst the North Korean newspaper *The People's Korea* had already heralded the start of a new era in bilateral relations, a visit by the U.S. President seemed imminent.³⁶ Since the

The Clinton administration publicly supported the South Korean leadership, eased sanctions against North Korea and sought to normalise bilateral relations in exchange for Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear weapons program.

35 | Cf. Kindermann, n. 7, pp. 159-165.

36 | Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 343-345.

efforts of the South Korean leadership at this time largely correlated with the regional interests of the USA, a productive policy of rapprochement was able to be achieved.



Permanent surveillance: North Korean border guards focus their eyes on the country's southern border. | Source: U.S. Army, Edward N. Johnson, flickr ☺☹☺☹.

This development collapsed with the inauguration of George W. Bush and saw a return to a more confrontational North Korea policy. A conflicting constellation of interests unfolded on the Korean Peninsula, which ought to have strongly called into question the problem-solving capacity of South Korea's "Sunshine Policy". Tensions between North Korea and the United States intensified in view of U.S. non-proliferation efforts and the global "War on Terror" following the 11 September attacks in 2001, among other things. In his State of the Union address in January 2002, Bush called North Korea part of the "axis of evil" that threatens the world with weapons of mass destruction – a situation the United States would not permit. The Foreign Ministry in Pyongyang then announced that it understood these statements to be a declaration of war against North Korea.³⁷

Against this supra-regional backdrop, the North Korean leadership ultimately decided that the development of nuclear weapons combined with apocalyptic war rhetoric was the ultimate deterrent

37 | Cf. *ibid.*, p. 354.

against external threats. South Korean efforts to continue its “Sunshine Policy” have failed given this massive confrontation between the regime in Pyongyang and the USA.

Due to this new and immediate threat to South Korea posed by nuclear weapons, as of 2008 President Lee Myung-bak joined in the USA’s hardline policy. Since then, the

three powers have diametrically opposed one another: Whilst Washington and Seoul call for North Korea’s nuclear disarmament as a precondition for the resumption of mutual talks, Pyongyang first demands extensive security

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guarantees and the normalisation of relations with the USA. The resulting inconclusiveness has persisted for years now and has blocked all attempts at inter-Korean rapprochement against the backdrop of an immovable nuclear confrontation between North Korea and the United States. Again, the future of Korea has become a pawn for foreign powers since the formulation of a successful South Korean policy towards North Korea requires a complex balancing act of simultaneously pursuing rapprochement with a cornered North Korea and projecting a confident attitude towards South Korea’s powerful allies in Washington.

CONCLUSION

Between two faceless office blocks in an unremarkable part of downtown Seoul stands a section of the Berlin Wall. Nothing gives the impression that the location is a memorial of some kind, nor is there any recognisable trace of a reference to this historical object. It seems as though this section of the wall was placed here without thought to its significance. For foreign observers, it offers a parallel to South Korea’s reunification policy: It exists, but it is neither passionate nor pragmatic. As a result, it is unconvincing.

In the 1980s, the regular exchange of specialist officials between the West German Ministry of Intra-German Relations and the South Korean Ministry of Unification at the time found one point of agreement: that Korean reunification would happen before German reunification and that it would be easier. When German reunification took place a short time later, South Koreans were shocked.³⁸ Since then, they have filled entire libraries with analyses

38 | Discussions held by the author, N.E., with contemporary witnesses from the Ministry.

of German reunification, primarily concerning the problems and putative errors involved. In reading such publications, one sometimes gets the impression that the people of South Korea are looking for excuses to avoid its own unification. The reason for this: the issue only appeals to some. Unification seems to place the younger generation's dreams for their own lives in jeopardy. Above all, this includes the hope of maintaining the prosperity of the middle generation, which has just been so recently achieved. It is only the older generation, those bearing witness to the civil war that took place between 1950 and 1953, who still carry the desire for national unity. But how long will this continue? In 1990, Helmut Kohl warned that a country that avoids reunification for financial reasons will disappear into the backwaters of history;³⁹ in South Korea, this does not appear to concern anyone much at present.

South Koreans live well even without national unity. Germans are admired for their historic achievement in mastering the coalescence of East and West, despite all the difficulties. Yet it is for this reason that 9 November is far from being a day of hope for South Koreans for the unification of their people (and neither is 3 October, which marks their "National Foundation Day", the day on which the first Korean state was founded). That Koreans exhibit a certain essence of contradiction cannot be denied, despite ample unification rhetoric. In Seoul there is no truly formative monument urging Korean reunification and would be present in the minds of South Koreans. If so, it would possibly only represent a phantom pain that is South Korean society.

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39 | Cf. Helmut Kohl, *Vom Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung. Meine Erinnerungen*, Munich, 2009, p. 269.