

Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

From the early 1970s onward, inter-Korean relations have moved fitfully and gradually toward greater contact and mutual recognition, a process which has accelerated since the end of the 1990s. As Korean division and inter-Korean conflict were products of Great Power politics and the Cold War, movement in inter-Korean relations was largely the result of changes in Great Power relations during the Cold War period. However, since the end of the Cold War, the major impetus in inter-Korean relations has shifted toward an internally driven dynamic on the Korean Peninsula itself, especially under the initiative of South Korea. At the present time, inter-Korean relations are dominated by this internal dynamic. At the same time, however, they remain constrained and limited by external forces, in particular the nuclear confrontation between North Korea and the United States. While the two Koreas have moved toward a position of de facto peaceful coexistence, further integration between the two is necessarily linked to resolution of these external conflicts as well as greater integration among the countries of Northeast Asia.

Key Words: inter-Korean relations, conflict, confrontation, coexistence, integration

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From the time the two contemporary Korean states were founded in 1948, they have vied with each other for domestic legitimacy and international recognition. The devastating war between the two in 1950-3 intensified rather than resolved these rival claims, and the competition for legitimacy between Seoul and Pyongyang remained fierce for decades after the Korean War. However, from the early 1970s onward, inter-Korean relations have moved fitfully and gradually toward greater contact and mutual recognition, a process which has accelerated since the end of the 1990s. As Korean division and inter-Korean conflict were products of Great Power politics and the Cold War, movement in inter-Korean relations was largely the result of changes in Great Power relations during the Cold War period. However, since the end of the Cold War, the major impetus in inter-Korean relations has shifted toward an internally driven dynamic on the Korean Peninsula itself, especially under the initiative of South Korea. At the present time, inter-Korean relations are dominated by this internal dynamic. At the same time, however, they remain constrained and limited by external forces, in particular the nuclear confrontation between North Korea and the United States. While the two Koreas have moved toward a position of de facto peaceful coexistence, further integration between the two is necessarily linked to resolution of these external conflicts as well as greater integration among the countries of Northeast Asia.

Seoul-Pyongyang relations have evolved through four stages: The first stage, characterized by a zero-sum game of mutual antagonism, ended with the July 4 Communiqué of 1972, on the basis of which Seoul and Pyongyang for the first time established official contacts. The 1972 breakthrough in inter-Korean relations was a direct result of a dramatic change in the configuration of Cold War dynamics in the East Asian region: Rapprochement between the United States and China, the main Great Power allies of South and North Korea, respectively. The second stage, a period of on-again, off-again talks

and exchanges, culminated in the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Exchanges and Cooperation (Basic Agreement) of December 1991, the Agreement on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in February 1992, and the entry of the two Korean states simultaneously into the United Nations in September 1992. This second-stage set of agreements also resulted from changes in the Cold War environment, including the development of economic and diplomatic ties between South Korea and the communist countries of Eastern Europe and Asia, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and indeed the end of the global Cold War itself.

The third and fourth stages of inter-Korean relations have been driven more by internal dynamics on the Korean Peninsula itself, albeit inevitably linked to external factors. In the 1990s, after a period of severe domestic crisis in North Korea coinciding with a nuclear stand-off with the United States, a third stage began with the tentative opening of North Korea to external economic and political forces, culminating in the historic June 2000 summit meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. Whereas the breakthrough of the early 1990s had been preceded by the establishment of new links between South Korea and the communist bloc, strongly (if fruitlessly) resisted by the North, this time South Korea encouraged North Korea's openness to Western capitalist countries. However, this process reached an impasse when North Korea's cautiously evolving relations with Japan and the United States were halted by, respectively, the dispute over Japanese citizens abducted by North Koreans in the 1970s and 1980s, and a renewed crisis over North Korea's nuclear program that emerged in the fall of 2002.

Finally, inter-Korean relations appear to be moving toward a fourth stage, a period of intensifying economic linkages on the Korean Peninsula within the broader framework of an evolving regional dialogue among the two Koreas, Russia, China, Japan, and the United

States, partners in the Six-Party Talks that began in Beijing in 2003. Although progress in the Six-Party Talks has been slow and inconclusive thus far, a peaceful and definitive resolution of the nuclear crisis could establish the basis for a stable regional security environment within which the two halves of divided Korea can become increasingly integrated. Much remains to be done to resolve the security question and especially US-North Korean confrontation, but despite these unresolved issues, inter-Korean relations are now more extensive and advanced than at any time in the history of divided Korea. Barring an unexpected calamity on the Peninsula – the sudden collapse of the North Korean regime, military confrontation between the US and North Korea, renewed war – the trend toward greater interaction, interdependence, and integration between the two Koreas will continue. Unification as such, however, may yet be many years away.

The Politics of Existential Antagonism, 1948–1972

Before and after the Korean War, inter-Korean relations were characterized by what could be called “existential antagonism”: Each Korean state saw the very existence of its rival as a threat to its own existence, and held as its explicit goal the elimination of the other. For the South, North Korea was an illegitimate and threatening regime that needed to be defended against at all cost. North Korea viewed South Korea as a weak and unstable regime that would collapse its own contradictions sooner or later, so therefore the North should bide its time and be prepared to move in and reunify the country when the opportunity presented itself. However, an outright invasion of the South, along the lines of June 1950, was never again attempted, for two reasons: The clear US commitment to the defense of South Korea, and the unwillingness of the USSR and China to support such a

venture.

In the area of inter-Korean relations, both Koreas at this time practiced their version of West Germany's Hallstein Doctrine or China's policy toward the Republic of China on Taiwan: Refusal to recognize the rival state's existence or to maintain diplomatic ties with any foreign country that recognized it. Both Koreas were entrenched in their respective Cold War blocs, which reinforced the North-South Korean confrontation and inhibited North-South contact. This external environment changed dramatically in the early 1970s, when the Nixon Administration made secret, and then public, overtures toward normalization with the People's Republic of China, North Korea's closest supporter. To preempt abandonment by their respective patrons, the two Koreas took matters into their own hands and began direct negotiations with each other, first through their respective Red Cross committees and then through a series of meetings between North and South Korean intelligence officers. Just under a year after Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing on July 9, 1971, Seoul and Pyongyang issued a Joint Communiqué on July 4, 1972, outlining their principles for peaceful unification.

Toward Cautious Coexistence, 1972–1992

The new movement in inter-Korean relations inaugurated by the July 4 Communiqué raised tremendous expectations in both the North and the South, but produced little in the way of concrete result. After a half-dozen meetings of the newly created South-North Coordinating Committee, the two sides reached an impasse and the North cut off talks in mid-1973.¹ North-South Red Cross dialogue was revived in

¹ Chuck Downs, "Discerning North Korea's Intentions," in Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings (ed.), *Korea's Future and the Great Powers* (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), p. 96.

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the mid-1980s and there was a brief flurry of cultural exchanges and visits of separated families in 1985, but this too quickly fizzled out. The next breakthrough in official inter-Korean relations would not come until the beginning of the 1990s, by which time the international environment had changed drastically, to the benefit of the South and the great detriment of the North.

The growing economic strength of South Korea in the 1980s found diplomatic expression in the Northern Policy or *Nordpolitik* of President Roh Tae Woo in the latter part of the decade. Focused on wooing North Korea's communist allies into economic and political relations with the ROK, and modeled on West Germany's *Ostpolitik* toward East Germany and the Soviet bloc, *Nordpolitik* was extremely successful at establishing ties between South Korea and the communist countries in Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union itself, which recognized the ROK in 1990. For the North, Roh outlined a broad vision of inter-Korean cooperation, and ultimately unification, into what he called a "Korean National Community."² The main North Korean proposal for unification, to which Roh's proposal was in part a response, was a "Confederation" of the two existing political systems on the Korean Peninsula, first outlined in 1980. While initially presented as a sudden union of the two system, over time the North has shown flexibility in its Confederation proposal, willing to see confederation not as the end-goal of unification but a transitory institution and giving more rights to the two "regional governments." By 1991, in fact, North Korean officials including Kim Il Sung were suggesting that there was room for negotiation with the South on the form of confederation and that both sides within a confederated Korean system could have considerable autonomy even in its foreign

²B. C. Koh, "A Comparison of Unification Policies," in Young Whan Kihl (ed.), *Korea and the World: Beyond the Cold War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 156.

relations, under the general rubric of military and diplomatic unity.³ This proposed “Confederal Republic of Koryo” was thus not dissimilar to Roh’s “Korean National Community.” Both proposals, however, remained fairly abstract; on the ground, inter-Korean relations moved cautiously toward government-to-government contacts.

As the 1990s dawned, high-level North-South talks began again. In December 1991, the fifth in this series of high-level talks produced an Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation, or “Basic Agreement.”⁴ This agreement was the most important declaration of North-South cooperation and coexistence since the 1972 Joint Communiqué, and was far more detailed than the 1972 agreement had been. It was followed in February 1992 by a joint “Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Once again, hopes were high for a major change in North-South relations and for a new momentum toward reconciliation and eventual unification. But once again such hopes would be unfulfilled. Regional and global circumstances had shifted dramatically, and the very survival of the North Korean regime became Pyongyang’s preoccupation. Movement toward inter-Korean reconciliation would be postponed as North Korea went through a series of profound crises. The collapse of every communist state in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991, including the USSR itself, came as a deep shock to North Korea and deprived Pyongyang of most of its important trade partners, political supporters and allies. Even before the communist collapse, East European countries had begun to normalize relations with the ROK; by 1992, Russia and even North Korea’s allegedly staunch ally China had established diplomatic relations with Seoul. It would take almost

³ Selig Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and US Disengagement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 76.

⁴ “The Politics of Inter-Korean Relations: Coexistence or Reunification,” in Kihl (ed.), *Korea and the World*, p. 135.

a decade for a reciprocal movement of Western countries normalizing ties with Pyongyang. Economically, South Korea had long since leapt almost unimaginably beyond the level of the DPRK. Far from the Basic Agreement ushering in a new age of equality between the two Koreas, the times seemed to call into question the continued ability of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to exist at all. Movement in inter-Korean relations seemed almost a moot point. German-style unification, with the South absorbing the North as West Germany had absorbed East Germany in 1990, was widely predicted, especially by Western analysts.⁵

Nuclear Crisis, Economic Catastrophe, and the Politics of “Sunshine”

The 1990s were a decade of disaster for the DPRK, beginning with the collapse of every communist state in Eastern Europe, proceeding to a crisis over international inspections of DPRK nuclear energy facilities that nearly led to war with the US in June 1994, the death of Kim Il Sung in July, and finally a series of natural calamities that pushed North Korea's ever-precarious food situation into full-scale famine.⁶ North Korea spent most of the decade simply trying to cope with these multiple crises, and its leadership seemed unsure of where to take the country. Meanwhile, many in the outside world expected an inevitable collapse of the DPRK.

The threat to the DPRK's very existence in the 1990s was greater than at any time since the Korean War. North Korea's response was to batten down the hatches and proclaim its continued adherence to

⁵See for example Nick Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1999).

⁶See Andrew Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001).

“socialism.”⁷ Pyongyang for the most part played a waiting game, maintaining the system while hoping for the “correlation of forces” to become more favorable toward the DPRK. As Paul Bracken has explained, the North Korean nuclear program was a way for the DPRK to “buy time for the regime to adapt to new international circumstances.”⁸ Bracken argues that the nuclear program was a defensive, even desperate attempt at ensuring state survival in an environment suddenly much more hostile. In this case the gamble almost backfired, as the US and North Korea came to the brink of war in June 1994, averted at the eleventh hour by the visit of former US President Carter to Pyongyang and discussions with Kim Il Sung that led, finally, to the US-DPRK Agreed Framework of October 1994.

By the late 1990s the domestic situation had somewhat improved. The economy, which had fallen precipitously throughout the 1990s, appeared to turn around at the very end of the decade, due in considerable measure to a sharp increase in foreign aid following the natural disasters of 1995-7. According to ROK Bank of Korea estimates, the North Korean GDP had been consistently negative from 1990 to 1999, reaching as low as minus 6% in 1992 and minus 6.3% in 1997. In 1999, GDP was above zero for the first time in a decade, at 6.2%, and remained positive in subsequent years.⁹ At the same time, Kim Jong Il made public the consolidation of his political rule. Three years after the death of his father, the younger Kim was named General Secretary of the Korean Workers’ Party in 1997, and the following year was re-appointed Chairman of the National Defense

⁷Charles K. Armstrong, “A Socialism of Our Style: North Korean Ideology in a Post-Communist Era,” in Samuel S. Kim (ed.), *North Korean Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁸Paul Bracken, “The North Korean Nuclear Program as a Problem of State Survival,” in Andrew Mack (ed.), *Asian Flashpoint: Security and the Korean Peninsula* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1993), p. 86.

⁹Cited in Korea Economic Institute, “North Korean Economic Data,” <http://www.keia.org/>, accessed on December 15, 2005.

Committee, putting him firmly at the apex of the North Korean power structure. By 1998 the “Arduous March” through hunger and distress was declared over, and the new slogans of the DPRK were Kangsong Taeguk (“Rich, Powerful and Great Country,” or simply “Powerful Nation”) and Songun chongch’i (Military-first Politics).¹⁰ No longer preoccupied with sheer survival, North Korea in the new millennium could return to inter-Korean relations with a modicum of internal strength and unity.

Meanwhile, South Korea had come some distance since the early 1990s, when the Kim Young-Sam government viewed US-North Korean negotiation over the Agreed Framework with suspicion and concern. President Kim Dae Jung, elected at the end of 1997, considered improvement of North-South relations as one of his highest priorities in office. Kim stressed that his Administration would actively pursue inter-Korean dialogue and exchanges in a wide range of fields, including culture, trade, tourism, family exchanges, and humanitarian assistance. In particular, Kim focused on increasing inter-Korean economic relations, separating the economic from the political, in the hopes of encouraging greater openness and economic development within North Korea itself.¹¹ President Kim stepped up South Korean trade with the North, which had grown steadily since 1991, and lifted restrictions on South Korean investment in North Korea in March-April 1998. By 2001, South Korea was North Korea’s largest trading partner after China.¹²

Kim’s policy of stepping up economic and cultural ties with

¹⁰ These two “guiding principles” have been elaborated at length in, respectively, *Sahoejuui kangsong taeguk konsol sasang* (The Ideology of Constructing a Powerful Socialist Nation), (Pyongyang: Sahoe Kwahak Ch’ulp’ansa, 2000) and *Kim Chong-il Changgunui songun chongch’i* (General Kim Jong Il’s Military-First Politics), (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Ch’ulp’ansa, 2000).

¹¹ Yung-Sup Han, *Peace and Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula* (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 2005), p. 209.

¹² Korea Economic Institute, “North Korean Economic Data.”

North Korea in the hopes that positive inducements would encourage internal reform and inter-Korean dialogue, dubbed the “Sunshine Policy,” put Seoul in the lead in engagement with North Korea. The Clinton Administration in the US, despite the 1994 Agreed Framework, moved slowly and sporadically toward normalization with Pyongyang, not least because of a highly critical, Republican-controlled Congress. A crisis over North Korea’s test-firing of a missile over Japan led to a new crisis in US-DPRK relations in 1998, which led to a renewed attempt at engagement. American engagement with Pyongyang reached a peak in the fall of 2000, when North Korean Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, the de facto number-two ruler in Pyongyang, met with President Clinton in Washington. Shortly thereafter Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. The two sides renewed their commitment to work toward normal relations, and North Korea appeared to be on the verge of agreeing to curtail its missile development and exports, one of Washington’s chief concerns. However, such promises could not come to fruition before Clinton left office, and the Bush victory in the 2000 presidential election effectively halted US momentum toward normalization with the DPRK.

Inter-Korean Relations and the United States

The new millennium began with the third major symbolic breakthrough in inter-Korean relations, the Kim Jong Il-Kim Dae Jung summit in Pyongyang in June 2000. At the same time, with Seoul’s encouragement, North Korea began to emerge from its diplomatic isolation. In the space of two years, Pyongyang established diplomatic relations with most countries in Western Europe and Southeast Asia, along with Canada, Australia, the Philippines, Brazil, and New Zealand; in July 2000, North Korea joined the ASEAN

Regional Forum (ARF) for East Asian security dialogue.¹³ Meanwhile, North Korea began to make cautious but potentially far-reaching steps toward internal economic reform, including unprecedented wage and price reforms undertaken in the summer of 2002.¹⁴ Improvement in inter-Korean relations was part and parcel of this trend toward North Korea becoming a more “normal” country.

While North-South Korean relations were on a generally upward trend, US-North Korean relations took a decided turn for the worse after George W. Bush became president. Bush condemned North Korea as part of an “Axis of Evil,” along with Iran and Iraq, in his State of the Union address in January 2002. North Korea responded with predictable outrage. A Foreign Ministry spokesman called the Bush speech “little short of declaring war against the DPRK” and accused the US Administration of “political immaturity and moral leprosy.”¹⁵ North-South relations, having already lost a great deal of momentum since the summer of 2000, were dampened considerably by the Bush Administration’s statements. It took a visit to Pyongyang by Kim Dae Jung’s special envoy Lim Dong Won in early April to get inter-Korean dialogue restarted. On April 28, Pyongyang agreed to resume reunion meetings of separated family members and to move forward with high-level contacts and economic cooperation. On August 11-14 the first ministerial-level North-South meetings in nearly a year took place in Seoul. At the same time, the two sides marked the 57th anniversary of liberation from Japanese

¹³ Samuel S. Kim, “North Korea in 2000,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (January/February, 2001), p. 20.

¹⁴ “North Korea Undergoing Economic Reform,” *Chosun Ilbo* (July 26, 2002); “Stitch by stitch to a different world,” *The Economist*, July 27, 2002, pp. 24-26.

¹⁵ “DPRK Denounces Bush’s Charges: Statement of FM Spokesman on Bush’s State of the Union Address,” *People’s Korea*, February 9, 2002, p. 1. The response is also available online as “Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry Slams Bush’s Accusations,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 31, 2002, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/january>.

colonial rule on August 15th with an unprecedented joint celebration, including the visit of more than 100 North Korean delegates to Seoul.¹⁶

Washington-Pyongyang relations also showed signs of a thaw in late July and early August 2002, when Secretary of State Colin Powell met briefly with North Korea's foreign minister at an ASEAN meeting in Brunei, and the Bush Administration sent Jack L. Pritchard as its first official envoy to the DPRK. Pritchard, who had met with Pyongyang's ambassador to the UN several weeks earlier in New York, went to North Korea in early August for the ceremony marking the start of construction on the first light-water nuclear reactor to be built by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the US-South Korean-Japanese consortium formed under the auspices of the 1994 Agreed Framework.¹⁷ Moreover, on the DPRK-Japan side, Prime Minister Koizumi's unprecedented summit meeting with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in September, where Kim made his extraordinary admission that North Korea had abducted over a dozen Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, seemed at first to open up a new era in Japan-North Korea relations and start the two countries on the road to normalization.¹⁸ Kim Jong Il's revelations, presumably intended to clear the path for DPRK-Japan normalization, had the opposite effect: The Japanese media and public responded to these revelations with such feelings of hostility toward North Korea that the "abduction issue" became a major impediment to improved ties between North Korea and Japan.

The belated and tentative moves toward re-starting US-DPRK dialogue in late summer and early fall 2002 were dramatically derailed by the "Kelly revelations" of October. On October 5th,

¹⁶"Inter-Korean Festival Kicks Off in Seoul," *Korea Times*, August 14, 2002, p. 1.

¹⁷"Work Starts on North Korea's US-Backed Nuclear Plant," *New York Times*, August 8, 2002, p. A14.

¹⁸Howard W. French, "North Koreans Sign Agreement with Japanese," *New York Times*, September 18, 2002, p. A1.

Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly visited Pyongyang to meet with DPRK foreign ministry officials. To the North Koreans great surprise, Kelly presented them with evidence that North Korea had been secretly pursuing a program to develop highly enriched uranium (HEU), whose only purpose could be the manufacture of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ According to US accounts (North Korea publicly neither confirmed nor denied the accusation), the DPRK officials acknowledged the existence of this program and declared their right to possess such weapons. While it could be argued that the HEU program was technically not a violation of the Agreed Framework, as it only covered the plutonium program, this was clearly a violation of the spirit if not the letter of the agreement, and did directly violate the Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea, for its part, accused the US of failing to abide by the Agreed Framework through its slowness in lifting the economic embargo against the DPRK, not removing North Korea from the State Department's list of countries that supported terrorism, and failing to move with due haste on the construction of light-water reactors. The two countries were at an impasse. The US insisted that Pyongyang cease all of its nuclear-related activities before there could be any new negotiations, and in November Washington suspended deliveries of fuel oil to North Korea as required under the Agreed Framework. This was followed by a rapidly escalating set of moves on the part of North Korea toward re-starting its plutonium program, frozen by the 1994 Agreement: Pyongyang announced its intention to re-open its nuclear power plant at Yongbyon, expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors at the end of December 2002, announced its withdrawal from the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003, and began to remove spent nuclear fuel rods from storage in

¹⁹ US State Department Press Statement, “North Korean Nuclear Program,” October 16, 2002, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/14423pf.htm>.

February – the latter an act which had brought the US and North Korea to the brink of war in 1994.

While the crisis in US-DPRK relations deepened in 2003, North-South relations continued to move forward. Indeed, a distinctive aspect of the 2002-3 crisis was the common ground Pyongyang could find with the Seoul government in criticizing the American approach to Korea. This was the reverse of the 1993-4 crisis, in which the ROK government of Kim Young-Sam deeply feared US-DPRK “collusion” at the expense of South Korea’s national interest. This is not to say that Seoul-Pyongyang relations became cordial or that Seoul suddenly broke its ties with Washington; Seoul decried North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons, and Pyongyang attacked the Roh Moo-hyun government for agreeing to send South Korean troops to Iraq.²⁰ Roh visited Washington in May, and he and President Bush tried to put a unified face on their policy toward North Korea; Pyongyang condemned the Roh-Bush joint statement as “a perfidious act which runs counter to the basic spirit of the June 15 North-South Declaration.”²¹ However, various agreements and meetings between the ROK and DPRK went ahead despite the new nuclear crisis, including a seven-point agreement on inter-Korean economic relations, signed by the representatives of North and South Korea in Pyongyang in late May. The two sides agreed on the establishment of a special industrial zone in the North Korean city of Kaesong, reconnection of east and west coast railway lines, and other joint projects.²² For its part, the US proposed a multilateral forum to resolve

²⁰ “Pyongyang Hits Seoul’s Decision to Dispatch Troops to Iraq,” *People’s Korea*, April 22, 2003, p. 1.

²¹ “North, South Conclude 7-Point Agreement in Inter-Korean Economic Talks,” *People’s Korea*, May 31, 2003, p. 1.

²² “Fifth Meeting of North-South Committee for Promotion of Economic Cooperation Concludes,” *Choson i’ongsin* (Korea Central News Agency), May 24, 2003, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/> index-k.htm.

the new nuclear issue, a six-way dialogue among North and South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the US. The Six-Party Talks began in Beijing in April 2003.

Two Koreas, Six Parties, One Superpower

In the midst of this impasse in US-North Korean relations, George W. Bush was elected to a second term as US President. North Korea seemed to find the second Bush Administration just as hostile as the first, if not more so. Pyongyang seized upon Condoleezza Rice's reference to North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny" in her inauguration speech as the new Secretary of State, claiming that this and other statements proved that the "true intention of the second-term Bush Administration is not only to further its policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK pursued by the first-term office but to escalate it." On February 10, 2005, the DPRK Foreign Ministry confirmed that North Korea had "manufactured nukes" and was now a "nuclear weapons state." Nevertheless, North Korea insisted that nuclear weapons were purely for self-defense against a hostile United States, and the official Korea Central News Agency reiterated that "[t]he DPRK's principled stand to solve the issue through dialogue and negotiations and its ultimate goal to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula remains unchanged."²³ In the meantime, until US attitudes and policy toward North Korea shifted to one of peaceful coexistence, the nuclear issue could not be resolved and the North Korea would stay out of the Six-Party Talks.²⁴ North Korea thus blamed the United States for the suspension of the Six-Party Talks, but left the door open for their resumption.

²³<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>, February 11, 2005.

²⁴ An Sang Nam, "Why North Korea Isn't Talking," *Asian Times*, June 11, 2005, http://atimesol.atimes.com/atimes/archives/6_11.2005.html.

There were, however, indications that the second Bush Administration, unlike the first, was serious about negotiating with the North Koreans. Christopher Hill, a career diplomat who had been a key negotiator for the Balkan crisis under Clinton, was appointed ambassador to Seoul and then, less than a year later, chief US representative to the Six-Party Talks. While the US engaged in official dialogue with North Korea in Beijing, a team led by Ambassador Joseph DeTrani pursued “informal” dialogue with North Korean representatives in New York. This helped to get the Six-Party Process back on track. In June 2005, the movement toward renewed US-DPRK formal dialogue rapidly picked up momentum. On June 10, President Bush met with ROK President Roh Moo-hyun in Washington. On June 17, as part of a South Korean delegation visiting Pyongyang for the fifth anniversary of the June 15 North-South Summit, ROK Unification Minister Chung Dong Young met with Kim Jong Il, and Kim conveyed to him North Korea’s desire to return to the Six-Party Talks by the end of July. Later, Minister Chung explained that South Korea had promised to supply electricity to the North in order to help resolve the nuclear issue, as North Korea had long insisted that its nuclear program was primarily intended to alleviate its severe energy shortages.²⁵ Finally, on July 10, North Korea announced that it would return to the talks. Secretary Rice insisted that the US position had not changed: “We are not talking about enhancement of the current proposal,” that is, the proposal of June 2004.²⁶

During the 13 months in which the talks had been suspended, both the United States and North Korea insisted they would not move from their respective positions. However, close reading of each side’s

²⁵ Joel Brinkley, “South Korea Offers Power if North Quits Arms Program,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2005, p. A6.

²⁶ Joel Brinkley, “Setting the Table for North Korea’s Return,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/11/international/asia/11assess.htm>.

rhetoric and actions during that time suggested otherwise. North Korea had begun to speak of “peaceful coexistence” rather than outright normalization or a peace agreement in the immediate future; the United States referred to North Korea’s “sovereignty” and quietly pursued bilateral discussions with the DPRK both in New York and Beijing. As the talks began on July 25, North Korean and American diplomats met in Beijing for extensive one-on-one discussions, despite the longstanding US resistance to bilateral talks. Ambassador Hill described a step-by-step process of each side working simultaneously to resolve the nuclear standoff, rather than North Korea conceding everything up front; he described this as “words for words and actions for actions,” exactly the phrase the North Koreans had long used. Hill’s North Korean counterpart, chief negotiator Kim Kye Gwan, opened his remarks with a more conciliatory, less belligerent tone than earlier North Korean statements.²⁷ When the six parties met for a fourth round of talks in September, they produced for the first time a joint statement on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.²⁸ The six-point statement was notable for its vagueness; issues of procedure, much less implementation, were far from resolved, and little progress was made toward resolution in the fifth round, held in early November.²⁹ Nevertheless, the very existence of such talks signified a considerable improvement in US-North Korean relations since the tense days of late 2002 and early 2003, when – as in the 1993–4 crisis – the two seemed on the verge of military confrontation. As the world’s sole superpower and the most important external presence on the Korean Peninsula, the US was an essential factor in

²⁷ Jim Yardley and David E. Sanger, “US Tries a New Approach in Talks with North Korea,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2005, p. A10.

²⁸ “Full Text of Joint Statement from Six-way Nuclear Talks,” *Vantage Point* (October, 2005), p. 11.

²⁹ Joseph Kahn, “North Korea and US Spar, Causing Talks to Stall,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2005, p. A6.

any resolution of the inter-Korean conflict. North-South Korean relations could not proceed very far without US cooperation and encouragement. Despite important differences, by the end of 2005, after three years of growing divergence, the US and South Korea were again converging on how to approach North Korea. However, it remains to be seen how far this convergence will proceed. Without a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear crisis, US-DPRK relations cannot move toward normalization, and consequently inter-Korean relations will remain constrained.

Inter-Korean Relations toward the Future

Inter-Korean relations have come a long way since the days of mutually exclusive antagonism in the post-Korean War period. Nevertheless, relations remain quite limited, and the two sides have only moved toward a situation of *de facto* mutual recognition, coexistence, and emerging interdependence. Substantial interdependence, much less integration, has yet to occur. Unification remains a distant possibility, and at present neither North nor South Korea speaks much of unification in the near future. Since the June 2000 summit, both sides have acknowledged that unification is likely to be a long, gradual process. For the South, sudden unification could have powerful, disruptive near-term consequences in its economy and society, turning back decades of hard-earned economic growth and creating social turmoil. For the North, the last thing its leaders want is a German-style absorption by the South, which would mean the end of their system and their privileged position in it. Additionally, for all of the surrounding countries in Northeast Asia, a gradually and peacefully integrated Korean Peninsula is far preferable to unification resulting from a sudden collapse of North Korea, with all the problems of instability, masses of refugees, and loose weapons that could

produce.

Military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula has not ceased. The North and the South remain technically in a state of war with one another. They both maintain enormous conventional forces facing each other across the DMZ, and it is increasingly likely that the North has nuclear weapons as well. Furthermore, the presence of tens of thousands of American troops in the South, as well as American forces elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific that could be deployed to the Korean Peninsula should war break out, help make Korea one of the most potentially dangerous military flashpoints on earth. Nevertheless, while the two Koreas are not officially at peace, the chances of either side going to war with the other have lessened as ties between them have gradually grown. In a small but symbolic gesture, the ROK Ministry of National Defense no longer refers to the North Korea as the “main enemy” in its most recent White Paper.³⁰ This gradual thaw in the military confrontation occurs in the midst of growing economic interaction and exchange within the Korean Peninsula, and much more extensively among the countries of Northeast Asia, including South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan. A less confrontational, more cooperative and increasingly integrated Korean Peninsula is in the interest of all the countries of the region, above all the Koreans themselves.

³⁰ Jung Sung-ki, “English Defense Paper Issued,” *Korea Times*, May 15, 2005, <http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/nation/200505/kt2005051517390011990.htm>. For the text of the White Paper, see www.mnd.go.kr.