Relations between the two Koreas since 1945 can be characterized as a permanent state of war in different forms. Reunification has been an existential national issue on the Korean Peninsula, while efforts to achieve a unified state have defined the approach of the two Koreas to one another. The division and inter-Korean relations are inseparable from the architecture of the Cold War. Even though the global Cold War has ended, its peninsular version persists and perpetuates the Korean partition. International relations involve interaction between different states, but the two Koreas have sought to represent the whole peninsula as a single state. Hence this is the first major feature of the North-South relations – competition to represent a single Korean entity either by unifying the Korean Peninsula or by gaining more international recognition than its rival. The premise of each Korean state is that the other Korean state is illegitimate and is not supposed to exist, which is the second characteristic of inter-Korean relations. The Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) still do not recognize each other and are technically at war. The mutually exclusive paradigm has determined very toxic and unpredictable relations. The northern and southern halves of the Korean Peninsula were temporarily divided along the 38th parallel, but the post-World War Two arrangement among the Allies became a long-term separate state solution, similar to the division of Germany. The paradox of the inter-Korean relations is that the foreign policy of each Korean state has been largely determined by the existence of the other, even though the peninsular interactions are founded on the principle of mutual exclusion.

Solutions to the Korean Question have been dominated by denial, rejection and conflict. The main forms of direct interaction between the two halves of the Korean Peninsula were diplomatic isolation, hostility, subversion or war. Since the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) sealed off the two Korean states from each other, the regional alliance systems became the main outlet for inter-Korean relations. There were attempts at dialogue and reconciliation, however, and we will also examine the episodes which marked a shift from confrontation to cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. Another feature of the inter-Korean rivalry is its longevity compared to its closest parallel during the Cold War era – inter-German relations. One of the main reasons for the persistence of the inter-Korean conflict is that the Koreans fought a fratricidal war which further deepened and cemented the division of Korea for generations to come.
Studies of the liberation, occupation, division of the Korean War reveal important aspects of the formative period of the interactions between the two halves of the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, the historiography of inter-Korean relations from a longer-term perspective is mostly confined within studies of the history of either South Korea or North Korea and their respective alliance systems, as the division of the peninsula led to division of its scholarship as well. This dichotomy seems inevitable, given the gravity of the nation-state as main point of departure in the investigation of international relations. But there are a few studies, such as the ones by Barry Gills, Don Oberdorfer, Taik-yong Humm and Eui-gak Hwang, which focus on the two Koreas and their interaction. This essay will briefly outline major events and stages in the history of inter-Korean relations from 1945 until 2013. The narrative will take into account internal and external factors that have shaped the relations between the two halves of the Korean Peninsula.

**Division and war, 1945–1953**

The Korean civil conflict was rooted in the colonial period (1910–1945) and deepened during decolonization. After Liberation on 15 August 1945, the internal strife took the form of deeply opposing political entities. Social cleavages provided the platform for the division of Korea, while the international framework structured the actual separation. On 10–11 August, 1945, the US State-War-Navy Committee decided to divide Korea into two occupation zones. The Soviet Union, which had joined the war against Japan (as agreed at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945), accepted the American proposal for the partition of Korea along the 38th parallel. The division of the Korean peninsula was a temporary solution during a trusteeship period (trusteeship was agreed by the Allies at Cairo and Teheran in 1943), leading eventually toward the full independence of a unified Korean state.¹

The three years between the Liberation and the creation of separate Korean states marked not only a process of molding two political entities but also growing alienation and isolation between them. While the negotiations between Allies for a unified Korean government were turning destructive, the administrations in the two zones were growing into proto-governments with distinct ideologies and political agendas. The peninsular division added to the economic chaos which ensued after the collapse of the Japanese economic zone. Still, for some time there were still exchanges between the two halves of the peninsula – the North supplied the South with electricity, for example. Movement of people between the two zones was still possible until 1947 despite the restrictions.²

The division and occupation of the Korean Peninsula was a transition from *intra*-Korean conflict between emerging separate polities. The divergence between northern Korea and southern Korea started from the beginning of the occupation by the Soviet and American armies of the two halves of the peninsula. The Soviet Union and the United States were still allies, but their irreconcilable political systems and ideologies and differing interests set the conditions for the diverging paths of their respective occupied zones. By 1947, the northern and southern halves of the Korean Peninsula were entangled in the global antagonism between liberal capitalism and communism. The United States referred the Korean Question to the United Nations after the US-Soviet Joint Commission failed to agree on a unified Korean government. The United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) was established to oversee democratic elections in Korea. The Soviet Union and northern Korean authorities boycotted the commission. The commission violated earlier agreements between the powers on Korea, according to the Soviet delegate to the UN, Andrei Vyshinsky, while Kim Il Sung called the commission’s delegates “running dogs” of the United States. The
Untocked-supervised elections in southern Korea in May 1948 presaged creation of a separate southern government (Cumings 1997: 211). Separate elections were held in northern Korea in August.

Institution building in the two occupation zones culminated with the establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) on 15 August 1948 with Rhee Syngman (Yi Sŭng-man) as president, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) a few weeks later on 9 September with Kim Il Sung (Kim Il-sŏng) as prime minister. The two leaders symbolized the different political paths and foreign affiliations that the two halves of divided Korea would follow. Kim, a 33-year-old former anti-Japanese fighter in Manchuria and military officer in the USSR, returned to northern Korea aboard a Soviet ship from Vladivostok to Wŏnsan with dozens of his comrades on 18 September 1945. The 70-year-old Rhee, an exile in the United States and graduate of Princeton University, was flown to Seoul on General MacArthur’s plane in mid-October 1945.

Foreign powers were instrumental in the territorialization of the civil conflict in Korea, which evolved to a stand-off between two state structures, thus amplifying the confrontation. The Korean War, 1950–1953, deepened and expanded the intra-Korean civil schism into an interstate war with enhanced military capabilities of the two rival sides which were further reinforced by international alliances. The Armistice Agreement, signed on 27 July 1953, ended the military operations on the Korean Peninsula, but not the war. The fault line between the two world blocs sharpened and deepened on the battleground of Korea. Even though the Korean War was a global conflict, the major powers tried to diminish the significance of their involvement or disguise it. For the Koreans, however, it was total war which resulted in horrific human losses and destruction. Three million Koreans (two million of them in the North), mostly civilians, were dead, injured or missing. The legacy of the Korean War is a major obstacle to reconciliation between the two Koreas. Coping with the war legacy has determined the history of the Korean Peninsula ever since.


The failure of the Geneva Conference in 1954, designed by the armistice agreement to reach a peaceful settlement of the Korean Question, reconfirmed the division of the Korean Peninsula. The two Koreas were too far apart in their positions on establishing a unified government, while the great powers implicitly agreed to maintain a divided Korea within their respective spheres (S. Lee 2001: 119). The DPRK and ROK each built fortifications along the DMZ and braced themselves for a protracted war of political and economic attrition. American troops remained in South Korea, and the United Nations Command, encompassing US forces and the ROK Army, continued to function as the supreme military body in South Korea. The Chinese People’s Volunteer Army withdrew from North Korea by 1958 and the Korean People’s Army (KPA) has been solely responsible for the defense of the DPRK. South Korea looked more dependent on the American security shield, but North Korea too was dependent on its alliances with the Soviet Union and China for both security and economic aid.

In the postwar period, the quest for supremacy and legitimacy by the two Koreas shifted from the battlefield to the areas of economy, diplomacy and propaganda. North Korea recovered from the rubble of the war and embarked on an impressive period of economic growth in the 1950s, while South Korea lagged behind. Socialist countries provided vital aid to the DPRK, but so did the United States to the South. A major part of the fraternal assistance to North Korea was in the form of industrial projects including financing, construction and technology
transfer, while the American aid was mostly supplies of food and consumer goods. Despite political repression accompanying the consolidation of Kim Il Sung’s power after 1956, the DPRK government was able to mobilize scarce labor and other resources through the centralized planning of the state-owned economy. The collectivization of farms expanded the allocation of resources to industries, although it also caused disruptions in food supply. Stronger economic results gave confidence to North Korea for a more active approach toward South Korea, seeking to set forth a peaceful unification process. The North’s initiatives also stemmed from the Marxist paradigm of the “inevitable” victory of socialism and communism, which meant that reunification would be achieved under Northern terms. Between 1954 and 1958, the DPRK made a flurry of proposals to the ROK, such as a non-aggression pact and mutual troop reduction, a peace agreement, cultural and economic cooperation, national elections under a neutral states’ supervision, inter-Korean conferences or joint sessions of the two legislatures, and for an international conference for reunification. The Rhee government viewed North Korea’s overtures as propaganda and rejected the proposals (Gills 1996: 59–60). The ROK was more vulnerable and the memories of the war, including the KPA invasion, were still too vivid for bridging the gulf between the two halves of the peninsula. An example of North Korea’s favorable position over its southern rival is the repatriation of Korean residents in Japan, who were mobilized as colonial laborers during World War Two. North Korea-sponsored repatriation programs started in 1959 with the support of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Ch’ongryŏnhap’o) and the Japanese Red Cross. The repatriation of Koreans was a big propaganda victory for the DPRK, particularly given that the majority of the repatriates to North Korea were originally from the South. From December 1959 to December 1961, 75,000 repatriates arrived in North Korea (Armstrong 2013: 116). After the postwar reconstruction, North Korea appeared to offer more opportunities for the Koreans living in Japan, many of whom also harbored political sympathies to the DPRK.

Major General Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) led a relatively bloodless coup d’état in Seoul on 16 May 1961. This military takeover can be viewed in the context of political and social instability following the April 1960 revolution, when student and public protests toppled Rhee Syngman’s administration, and as a reaction to the corruption in the army and the administration. The inability of the South Korean government to respond adequately to the economic competition from the North was detrimental to the South’s security. As director of army operations before the coup, Park was well aware of North Korea’s economic superiority at that time. The junta in South Korea was inseparable from the inter-Korean Cold War matrix. North Korean officials harbored a short-lived hope that the abrupt change in government in the South could advance inter-Korean dialogue. It took only two days for the North Korean leadership to shift its opinion on the forces behind the coup from “progressive” to “reactionary,” which reflected Park’s actions against the opposition in the South immediately after he took power. Still, there were secret inter-Korean talks initiated by Park in September which did not make much progress, but for a while the atmosphere between the two Koreas was not as hostile and acrimonious as before. The North and South withdrew to their Cold War shells after the prospects for improving their relations disappeared by the end of 1961.

Both Koreas embarked on militarization in the 1960s with the help of their allies. The militarization was rooted in the inter-Korean rivalry and had significant domestic and external implications. Park Chung Hee’s regime cracked down on dissent and launched an ambitious economic program. The South Korean government expanded the ROK’s military capability and was involved in the Vietnam War by committing 320,000 troops to Indochina, which further strengthened the US-ROK military alliance. Park’s strong anti-communist bent and the ROK’s participation in the Vietnam War fueled more tensions on the Korean Peninsula.
Soviet split evolved into an intra-socialist cold war which posed a dilemma for the DPRK. At first, North Korea sided with China, but after 1965 it reinvigorated its relations with the Soviet bloc at the expense of the PRC. The Cultural Revolution in China created tensions in Sino-DPRK relations, while the North Korean leadership felt the economic costs of strained relations with the Soviet bloc countries and was determined to mend fences with them. The cracks and uncertainty in the socialist world compelled the North Korean government to rely more on its own resources for defense and economic development. North Korea evolved into an “impregnable fortress” as the regime called for simultaneous development of the economy and defense – holding a “sickle in one hand and a gun in the other.” DPRK’s militarization escalated after 1966 and involved allocation of considerable resources to the military (between 30 and 50 percent of the budget), the creation of a huge militia force, the mobilization of labor, and the tightening of political and social controls. The creation of a garrison state in North Korea was parallel to more militant posture against the South.

The North Korean military infiltrations in the South occurred after 1953, but they increased in the 1960s, shifting the strategy from intelligence gathering and building a revolutionary base to attempts at destabilizing South Korea and instigating insurgency. A new wave of infiltrations in 1966 involved commando raids and incidents along DMZ, which sometimes escalated into firefightes, including artillery. Thirty South Korean soldiers and ten civilians were killed in clashes with infiltrators by October 1966, which made the ROK army stage a retaliatory attack. Firefights along the DMZ intensified between 1966 and 1969, which is referred as the “Second Korean War.” In 1967, there were around 100 reported infiltrations by the Northern forces in the South, while in 1968, they doubled. The culmination of North’s subversive campaign was the assassination attempt against Park Chung Hee on 21 January 1968. Unit 124 of the KPA with 31 commandos reached several hundred meters from the Blue House, the presidential palace, before they were repelled and eliminated by ROK security forces. Infuriated, Park planned a retaliatory operation against Kim Il Sung by establishing a Unit 684 – a commando group composed of former convicts who were trained more than three years on Silmido Island in ROK waters near Inch’ŏn. The operation was aborted in 1971 in lieu of improved chances for inter-Korean dialogue. Kim Il Sung’s plan to fuel a revolutionary movement in the South suffered a setback after Park’s regime cracked down on the Revolutionary Party for Reunification in the summer of 1968 and executed its founder, Kim Chong-t’ae, a South Korean communist. North Korea’s guerrilla activities in the South, coupled with the seizure of the American intelligence ship Pueblo in January 1968 and the shooting of an EC-121 spy plane in 1969, escalated tensions on the Korean Peninsula to a boiling point. Kim Il Sung purged militant generals in the KPA whose guerilla tactics against the South had backfired. After 1968, the North Korean infiltrations decreased, as their goal shifted to intelligence gathering and covert networks.

**Vacillations between reconciliation and conflict, 1971–1991**

Despite the intractable ideological and political divide, the DPRK and ROK shared similarities of developmental dictatorship in their quest for military and economic supremacy which would solve the reunification problem on their own terms. The militarization of the two Koreas in the 1960s was interconnected, the same was true of the political process in the two parts of the Korean peninsula. The Yushin (revitalization) constitution, adopted in November 1972, turned Park Chung Hee’s presidency into a legal dictatorship by granting him enormous powers, such as ruling by decree and an unlimited term in office. The Yushin regime coincided with the 1972 North Korean constitution. The new DPRK constitution elevated Kim Il Sung to the new post of President; affirmed suryŏngje (leader’s system); and enshrined chuch’ê (self-reliance)

Meanwhile, South Korea was gaining momentum at the expense of its Northern rival on the back of an industrialization drive and export promotion. Park Chung Hee initiated the Heavy and Chemical Industries Promotion Plan in late 1971, focusing on six industries: iron, steel, nonferrous metals, shipbuilding, chemicals, and machines. The industrialization program, tailored along the Japanese model, was very ambitious, particularly given the lack of natural resources in the South and the skepticism of the American advisors. The plan was born out of the inter-Korean rivalry and aimed at enhancing the defense capabilities of the ROK. A similar preoccupation with national defense prompted the North Korean government to promote its own machine industries in the 1960s.

Park Chung Hee followed keenly the DPRK’s economic performance and reportedly had comparative charts of economic data of the North in his office. By the mid-1970s, South Korea had surpassed North Korea in living standards, even though the DPRK was still ahead of the ROK in terms of GNP per capita based on official exchange rate (Hwang 1993: 123). Between 1965 and 1976, North Korea’s GNP doubled, still a respectable performance despite the slowdown caused by declining exports and rising foreign debt. But the South Korean GNP tripled during the same period, which laid the foundation for the long-term economic disparity between the two Koreas.

International recognition and support were key factors for enhancing the legitimacy of the two Korean states. The Third World became an arena for North-South competition, as the two Koreas were already integral parts of the opposing Cold War blocs. The two Korean states were involved in their own “scramble” for ties in Africa and Asia. The North had an upper hand in engaging developing nations. Independence, anti-imperialist struggle, solidarity movements and commercial interests were the foundation for building the DPRK’s relations with Third World countries, such as Indonesia, India, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, and Congo, among others. Even though the DPRK continued to be denied participation in the UN debate on the Korean Question, while ROK had the sole right to represent Korea, the Pyongyang government was gaining ground in the inter-Korean diplomatic competition. The increased presence of postcolonial countries in the United Nations started to shift the balance in favor of North Korea after 1958. North Korea’s active policy toward liberation movements and emerging nations in the 1960s and the 1970s increased its international support. As a result, by 1975, North Korea reached diplomatic parity with South Korea (Gills 1996: 261).

New regional dynamics and internal developments in the two Koreas led to a détente on the peninsula in the early 1970s. The thaw between the United States and the Soviet Union, the normalization of Sino-American relations in 1971 and the American policy in Asia – known as the Nixon Doctrine – shaped the international background for the beginning of inter-Korean dialogue. Both sides had their own rationale for approaching each other: Kim Il Sung believed that the time of revolutionary change in the South was close and thus peaceful unification could be possible. The American decision to withdraw 20,000 troops from South Korea encouraged Kim’s optimism. A proclamation of the Supreme People’s Assembly to South Korean people on 13 April 1971, stated that the DPRK was ready to solve the unification peacefully in the event that after the removal of Park Chung Hee’s “faction” in South Korea, a people’s rule was established, or a democratic figure came to power. But on 6 August, Kim Il Sung expressed readiness to negotiate with various parties in the South, including Park Chung Hee’s Democratic Republican Party. During a meeting with the visiting Nicolae Ceausescu in Pyongyang in June 1971, Kim reasoned that in the absence of American forces, the South Korean
people could install a “democratic progressive government” which would draw the Koreans close to each other so that the unification could be achieved peacefully. For his part, Park Chung Hee was increasingly concerned with perceived weakened American commitment to South Korea’s security in line with the Nixon Doctrine. The American position at the Paris Peace Talks for a settlement in Vietnam must have further undermined the Park regime’s trust in its American ally. The South Korean government was concerned about the possibility of US-DPRK relations in the wake of the US-PRC breakthrough. In addition, President Park grew more confident in South Korea’s economic performance vis-à-vis its Northern rival and he felt that the Seoul government could engage in inter-Korean dialogue from an enhanced position.

At a speech on 15 August 1970, which marked Liberation Day, Park proposed the beginning of humanitarian talks between the two Koreas and “peaceful competition” with North Korea. In September 1971, the two Korean states held Red Cross negotiations regarding divided families, following the South Korean initiative. In turn, Kim Il Sung proposed a peaceful treaty between the DPRK and ROK in January 1972. The dramatic visit of the newly-appointed KCIA director Yi Hu-rak to Pyongyang on 2–5 May 1972 and his meeting with Kim Il Sung led to further conciliatory measures. The détente on the Korean Peninsula produced the historic 4 July 1972 Joint Communiqué, which was the first attempt at achieving peaceful unification. The Communiqué proclaimed three principles of unification: 1) the problems must be solved without foreign interference and with the Korean people’s own forces; 2) unification must be implemented in a peaceful manner; and 3) a unified nation should be created despite the ideological differences of the political systems. The two sides established a North-South Coordinating Committee, co-chaired by Kim Yong-ju, Kim Il Sung’s brother and a Politburo member, and Yi Hu-rak. Park Chung Hee and Kim Il Sung announced separate plans for unification in June 1973. The announcements revealed growing discord between the two sides as well. The North Korean leader proposed a confederation-type of unification in which the two Korean states would preserve their political systems and govern their domestic policy, while foreign policy could be entrusted to a unified body.

In October 1973, Kim Il Sung explained to his visiting Bulgarian counterpart, Todor Zhivkov, that such a confederation system would require reduction in military spending and would lead to the elimination of the “reactionary regime” in South Korea, because without an army the people would rise. The North Korean leader admitted that the proposed confederation would be very difficult to materialize under the current circumstances and that it was a “political slogan” intended to “draw the workers and the peasants” and demonstrate to “democratic forces” in the South that North Korea was for peaceful unification, while South Korea was against it. Kim blatantly stated that if “more democratic government” was established in the South, the DPRK would not bring up the slogan for confederation, but simply “call a revolution.” The North Korean leadership grew increasingly suspicious and uneasy about the Yushin constitution, which strengthened anti-communism in the South and played a significant role in the DPRK’s decision to withdraw from the inter-Korean dialogue. On 28 August 1973, North Korea suspended meetings within the North-South Coordinating Committee reportedly in response to Kim Dae Jung’s kidnapping by KCIA agents. The abduction incident served as pretext for North Korea to withdraw from the dialogue.

The failed détente on the Korean Peninsula pushed the two Korean states into a new cycle of confrontation. Kim Il Sung seemed to have abandoned his peaceful approach toward unification and returned to the more militant posture which characterized North Korea’s policy in the 1960s. With the North Vietnamese army poised to capture Saigon and unify the country, Kim Il Sung declared optimistically in Beijing on 18 April 1975 that Asia was on a “high tide
of revolution.” Kim unsuccessfully prodded the Chinese leadership to support armed unification of Korea during his visit. China wanted to prevent the Korean question from derailing its relations with the US and Japan or from getting involved in a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. By 1974, an ailing Mao had modified his revolutionary view, stating that “we may not mention that the current world tide is a revolution.” As a result of the cold Chinese response, Kim II Sung gave up military means to achieve unification.

A new assassination attempt against Park Chung Hee on 15 August 1974 marked renewed hostility between the two Koreas. President Park was delivering a speech for the twenty-ninth anniversary of the Liberation in the National Theater in Seoul, when Mun Se-kwang, a Japanese-born Korean, fired shots that missed Park but killed his wife Yuk Yong-su instead. It is widely believed that Mun acted under instructions from Pyongyang, but the DPRK link has not been categorically proven. Military tensions on the Korean Peninsula increased dramatically following the “axe murder incident” on 18 August 1976, when KPA soldiers killed two American officers in the Joint Security Area (JSA) of the DMZ. The American officers were attacked when their team, composed of American and South Korean soldiers, attempted to trim a tree hindering the view between posts. The UN Command responded with deployment of disproportionate force to cut the tree in an attempt to intimidate the North Korean side. The show of force was considerable, involving US helicopters and bombers circling around the zone. The DPRK expressed “regret” over the incident in the JSA, which was an admission of responsibility. The crisis can be seen in the broader context of the tense atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula following the first Team Spirit military exercises held by the US-ROK forces several months earlier. North Korea was involved in the kidnapping of Japanese and South Korean citizens. The most high-profile South Korean victims were film director Shin Sang-ok and his former wife and actress Ch’oe Un-hui, who were abducted in 1978 to develop the film industry of North Korea. They managed to escape from their North Korean minders during a visit to Vienna in 1986.

After the botched inter-Korean dialogue, the DPRK tried to engage the United States in direct negotiations concerning a peace treaty, starting with Kim Il Sung’s letter to the US Congress in 1973. In 1976, the North Korean leader even sent a letter to president-elect Jimmy Carter seeking direct contacts. Kim also conveyed similar messages to the American president through Ceausescu in 1978 and Tito in 1979. The United States would not start negotiations with North Korea without South Korean participation. President Carter even briefly entertained the idea of meeting both Kim Il Sung and Park Chung Hee in order to reach a North-South settlement, following the model of the Camp David peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. The American president in fact proposed a three-way meeting of diplomats during his visit to Seoul in June 1979, but North Korea rejected his initiative (Oberdorfer 1997: 104–105).

The anti-government protests and the assassination of Park Chung Hee by the KCIA director Kim Chae-gyu on 26 October 1979 threw South Korea into turmoil. Major General Chun Doo Hwan (Chôn Tu-hwan), Commander of the Defense Security Command and investigator of his mentor’s assassination, initiated a bloody coup with fellow generals from hanahoe (literally “group of one”) – a secret officer circle in the army. On 12 December, Chun diverted army units from the area close to the DMZ, including part of the Ninth Division under the command of General Roh Tae Woo (No T’ae-u) – Chun’s classmate from 1955 class of the Korean Military Academy – and launched a daring attack on the Army headquarters in Seoul as a first step in installing a new military regime. The Kwangju Uprising in May 1980, which the South Korean propaganda falsely attributed to North Korean communist agents, further increased the uncertainty and tension on the Korean Peninsula. Still, the two Koreas engaged in ten “preliminary” meetings between February and August 1980 – the first encounter since dialogue
ended in 1975. And for the first time, they referred to each other by their official names – DPRK and ROK (C.-S. Lee, 1985: 122). In 1981, the two sides held high-level meetings through their Red Cross organizations.

The DPRK resorted to subversive tactics to undermine Chun Doo Hwan’s military regime, which continued Park Chung Hee’s anti-communist policies. North Korea’s foreign clandestine operations were put under the control of Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏng-il) – an official successor of his father Kim Il Sung from the Sixth Congress of KWP in 1980. North Korean agents attempted to assassinate Chun Doo Hwan during his visit of Rangoon (Yangon) on 9 October 1983. A bomb explosion in a mausoleum of the national cemetery missed the South Korean president, but killed 17 officials, including three South Korean cabinet ministers and three Burmese officials. Two of the three conspirators were captured and one of them, Kang Min-chul, admitted that he was a KPA officer. The bombing happened before Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting opened in Seoul. The incident led to the suspension of DPRK-Burmese relations, but it also strained Sino-North Korean relations, as the Chinese had proposed trilateral talks between DPRK, ROK and US on behalf of its ally, shortly before the bombing in Rangoon.

The 1983 crisis was followed by attempts to resume the inter-Korean dialogue. North Korea reiterated its proposal for a three-way meeting in January 1984, in order to conclude the peace treaty. DPRK’s initiatives aimed to prevent an increase of American forces in South Korea and to “expose the United States’ excuses” for its military presence. In September of the same year, the North Korean Red Cross sent food and other supplies for flood victims in South Korea. The two Koreas held parliamentary meetings in 1985 and organized the first family reunions, as 35 South Koreans visited Pyongyang on 20 September. After 1985, the two sides used a secret diplomatic channel, through which they discussed even a possible summit between Kim Il Sung and Chun Doo Hwan, among other issues (Oberdorfer 1997: 147–149). The inter-Korean dialogue made little progress, however, and the relations deteriorated again in 1986. By this time, the Team Spirit US-ROK military exercises had reached 200,000 combined personnel. The DPRK viewed the two-month maneuvers south of the DMZ as threatening and suspended all inter-Korean exchanges in January 1986, after the ROK declined to call off Team Spirit.

On 29 November 1987, a bomb explosion on Korean Air Flight 858 (from Abu Dhabi to Bangkok) was another dark episode in inter-Korean relations. Two North Korean agents planted a time bomb, which exploded midair and destroyed the plane, killing all 115 people on board, mostly South Koreans. The purpose of the terrorist attack was reportedly to destabilize the South Korean government and intimidate countries from participating in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. One of the bombers, a female agent, Kim Hyŏn-hŭi, survived a suicide attempt (her partner died in the hospital after taking cyanide) and was arrested in Bahrain. Kim confessed to the attack and was sentenced to death in South Korea, but President Roh Tae Woo pardoned her. As a result of the bombing, the US State Department listed DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s “new thinking” in Soviet foreign policy and the improvement of Soviet-American relations laid the foundation for the final phase of the Cold War. Gorbachev’s Krasnoyarsk speech in September 1988 also signaled a readiness to forge economic ties between the Soviet Union and South Korea. In this new international environment, President Roh Tae Woo tried to reach out to the DPRK by pursuing Nordpolitik, which resembled Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik toward Eastern Germany. The South Korean president proposed the promotion of trade between the two Koreas, exchanges of visits, and further humanitarian contacts between the two Koreas. On August 15 1988, Roh proposed an inter-Korean summit. Kim Il Sung replied that if the South accepted his proposal for confederation, the two leaders could hold a summit in Pyongyang. Kim also declared a non-aggression policy line toward South
Korea. Inter-Korean contacts also involved the South Korean opposition. North Korean foreign minister Ho Dam met opposition leader Kim Young Sam in Moscow in June 1989, and unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to visit North Korea.

As Soviet perestroika, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratization of Eastern Europe started to break down the Cold War order, Roh’s “northern politics” was accompanied by efforts to establish ties with North Korea’s socialist allies. Hungary announced the exchange of permanent missions with ROK on 13 September 1988. Other Eastern European countries also established diplomatic relations with the ROK. The Soviet Union followed suit, as economic considerations played a part in promoting relations with South Korea. On 4 June 1990, Gorbachev and Roh Tae Woo met in San Francisco, and in September, Moscow decided to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul. Kim Il Sung was so upset with the Soviet “betrayal” that he declined to meet the Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who was visiting Pyongyang in September 1990 to explain the shift in Soviet policy toward the ROK. DPRK foreign minister Kim Yong-nam told Shevardnadze that normalization of relations with South Korea would increase pressure on the North to open up in order to “overthrow the socialist regime in our country” and annex DPRK like the German scenario. Kim threatened his guest, saying that Soviet recognition of the South would nullify the 1961 Soviet-North Korean Alliance Treaty and that North Korea would be free to develop nuclear deterrents against American nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula, since the Soviet defensive “umbrella” stipulated in the treaty would no longer offer protection.

There was more to come in a series of setbacks for the DPRK’s diplomacy by the end of Cold War. The Sino-North Korean “blood alliance” also suffered when China expanded economic ties with South Korea. In May 1987, Kim Il Sung visited China in an attempt to persuade Deng Xiaoping to terminate contacts with South Korea. Deng recommended that Kim not rely on military force and to try to improve relations with Japan and the US in order to seek a “realistic solution” for the problems on the Korean Peninsula. The PRC and the ROK established diplomatic relations on 24 August 1992.

The collapse of the Soviet Union further shifted the strategic situation on the Korean peninsula. The cross-recognition between North Korea’s (former) allies and South Korea was not reciprocated by establishing diplomatic relations between North Korea and the West and Japan. The increased uncertainty prompted Pyongyang to pursue more active inter-Korean dialogue. The diplomatic exchanges culminated with two prime ministerial talks, held in Seoul on 4–7 September and in Pyongyang on 16–19 October in 1990. The director of National Security Planning, Sŏ Sŏng-wŏn, secretly visited Pyongyang in early October and met Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, while KWP secretary Yun Ki-bŏk and Roh Tae Woo met in Seoul in November. The meetings failed to reach an agreement on a joint declaration dealing with unification and the idea of a Korean summit did not materialize. But the two prime ministers met again in Pyongyang in October 1991 and also in Seoul in December of the same year, achieving a breakthrough in relations, similar to the 1972 development. On 12 December, the two sides signed the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation, which has been most promising in their bilateral relations. The accord included mutual recognition of each other’s systems, but fell short of recognizing the existence of the two states on the peninsula. The agreement called for transforming the armistice into a “state of peace” and non-use of force against each other. The document also envisioned economic, cultural and scientific exchanges.

On the back of the North-South reconciliation agreement and Roh Tae Woo’s announcement that South Korea was free from nuclear weapons in December 1991, the two Koreas reached another historic nuclear pact on 19 February 1992. In their Joint Declaration
on the Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula, the two sides pledged not to “test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons.” They also agreed “not to possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities” and to set up a Joint Nuclear Control Commission for reciprocal inspection of other’s facilities.

**Nuclear Korean Peninsula, 1992–1997**

The nuclearization of North Korea was part of its regime’s security efforts in a perceived hostile environment, which became increasingly unstable after 1991. But the nuclear problem was rooted in the unfinished Korean War. The arms race between the two Koreas was an essential element in their battle for supremacy. The US threat of using nuclear weapons during the Korean War and the deployment of nuclear warheads in South Korea in 1957 had an impact on North Korea’s perception of its vulnerability. DPRK started to acquire knowledge and technologies on nuclear energy as early as 1956, when North Korean scientists worked at the Nuclear Research Institute in Dubna, USSR. The Soviet government agreed to assist DPRK in building a nuclear research center in 1959. In 1965, the Soviet Union delivered a research nuclear reactor (two to four MW) to North Korea, which started operations in 1967. The North Koreans built an experimental gas-graphite moderated reactor (five MW) in Yŏngbyŏn, which used natural uranium fuel. The reactor, designed after an old British prototype, became operational in 1986, and a processing facility started to separate plutonium (needed for atomic bombs), approximately in 1989. In 1985, the Soviet Union also agreed to help DPRK build a nuclear plant (the Soviets had declined earlier North Korean requests, dating from the 1960s), while the Pyongyang government signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The project made little progress, however, in the face of a declining Soviet economy and deterioration of Soviet-North Korean relations. DPRK’s intention to acquire atomic bomb dates perhaps from the 1970s and its clandestine nuclear program underscores the limitations of the Soviet Union and China to contain their ally’s nuclear ambitions. North Korea’s resolve to become a nuclear power strengthened after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. When the inter-Korean denuclearization talks were held in December 1992, a nuclear reprocessing plant in Yŏngbyŏn was near completion.

Possession of nuclear weapons became a strategic priority of the North Korean regime as a guarantee for its existence in the uncertain post-Cold War environment.

South Korea became more concerned over its security after the partial withdrawal of American troops from ROK in 1971. The fall of South Vietnam in 1975 hastened Park Chung Hee’s aspirations to acquire nuclear weapons. The South Korean government officially abandoned its plans under American pressure and the ratification of the NPT in 1975. Still, a secret nuclear program continued until Chun Doo Hwan shut it down in 1980. The United States withdrew its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, while the ROK remained under the protection of the American nuclear umbrella.

The beginning of 1992 looked promising for the Korean Peninsula in light of the inter-Korean denuclearization agreement and DPRK’s efforts to normalize relations with the United States. Following a meeting between US Under-Secretary of State Arnold Kanter and KWP Secretary Kim Yong-sun in New York on 22 January 1992, the DPRK signed a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna eight days later. But the IAEA inspections of Yŏngbyŏn complex raised the suspicions that the DPRK was running a clandestine nuclear weapons program. At the same time, inter-Korean relations entered a new crisis by the end of 1992, as the Joint Nuclear Control Commission reached a deadlock on the short-notice inspections. Also, presidential elections in South Korea cooled the enthusiasm for
the inter-Korean dialogue, while the US-ROK decision to resume Team Spirit exercises, which had been suspended in 1992, further deteriorated the atmosphere between the two Koreas. The DPRK refused IAEA’s demand for “special inspections” in Yŏngbyŏn.11

The North Korean government announced its withdrawal from the NPT in March 1993, which was to be implemented three months later. However, in June, a last-minute joint US-DPRK statement, negotiated and agreed upon by Under Secretary of State Robert Gallucci and Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sŏk-ju “suspended” North Korea’s withdrawal from NPT in exchange of American security assurances to Pyongyang. It was somewhat of a breakthrough for North Korean diplomacy in dealing directly with the United States, something that South Korea consented to as long as it involved only the nuclear problem. But the US-DPRK negotiations in Geneva in July 1993 expanded the scope of issues and included ideas for a “package deal,” such as the shifting of North Korea’s nuclear program to less proliferation-prone light-water reactors. The shift from limited US-DPRK talks, focused on preventing North Korea from withdrawing from NPT, to wider range negotiations made the South Korean government increasingly nervous of being sidelined by its ally in shaping the policy toward North Korea (Oberdorfer 1997: 283, 291). President Kim Young Sam’s policy toward North Korea vacillated between a compromise and a hardline stance, reflecting the mood in the public and the media.

The breakdown of international inspections in North Korea prompted the IAEA’s board to turn the matter over to the UN Security Council in March 1994. The collapse of South-North working-level talks in Panmunjom – where the North Korean negotiator threatened his South Korean counterparts that if war broke out, then Seoul would turn into a “sea of fire” – as well as the Kim Young Sam administration’s decision to deploy Patriot missiles, dramatically escalated the tension on the Korean Peninsula in the spring of 1994. The UN Security Council’s deliberations to impose sanctions on the DPRK, following the IAEA’s alarm, triggered angry responses in Pyongyang, which likened the punitive action to a “declaration of war.” The defueling of the nuclear reactor in Yŏngbyŏn – the unloaded fuel rods were considered a tangible threat of building nuclear bombs – and IAEA’s declaration that it was unable to verify the reactor’s past further ignited the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. The crisis forced the US military to prepare a war contingency plan. The North-South stand-off became so unpredictable that the South Korean government organized large civil defense drills. The US officials were planning an evacuation of American civilians from Seoul, while citizens in the capital were stockpiling food in case war broke out.

Former US president Jimmy Carter’s visit to North Korea in mid-June and his meetings with Kim Il Sung made a breakthrough in both US-DPRK nuclear negotiations and in North-South relations. Kim agreed to a nuclear freeze (not to place new fuel rods in the reactor and not to reprocess the removed fuel rods) and in return North Korea would receive help for building light-water reactors. (Light-water reactors are less suitable for producing plutonium for nuclear weapons compared to gas-graphite moderated reactors.) The North Korean leader also accepted Kim Young Sam’s proposal for an inter-Korean summit, which was delivered through Carter. As a result, the US dropped their sanctions drive and plans for military deployments to Korea. The Korean peninsula moved away from the abyss of brinkmanship to a relaxation of tension and the possibility for rapprochement.

There were plans for a historical summit between the Korean leaders in Pyongyang on 25 July, but Kim Il Sung unexpectedly died of a heart attack on 7 July. The Great Leader’s sudden death not only cancelled summit preparations, but it also led to the rapid deterioration of inter-Korean relations. Kim Yong Sam’s initial reaction to the unexpected turn of events in the North was to put the ROK army on maximum alert. The authorities in the South banned any expression of condolences to the North and, on the day of Kim Il Sung’s funeral in Pyongyang, made
public Russian documents revealing his role in starting the Korean War. The North Korean response returned to bitter anti-South propaganda, while South Korean officials envisioned the imminent collapse of the DPRK. Nevertheless, the U.S.-DPRK nuclear negotiations continued in Geneva. The US-North Korean Agreed Framework, signed on 21 October, stipulated the provision of light-water reactors (total 2000 MW) to North Korea in exchange for freezing all activity on its existing reactors and permitting continued monitoring by IAEA, including “special inspections.” The two sides also agreed to open diplomatic liaison offices in the two capitals as a first step to full normalization of relations. North Korea was to implement the 1991 North-South joint declaration on denuclearization and re-engage in the inter-Korean dialogue. The ROK government officially endorsed the deal, even though South Korean objections persisted. In March 1995, the US, Japan and South Korea set up the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in order to supply two reactors to North Korea, as South Korea was primary financial contributor to the project (Oberdorfer 1997: 357, 366).

The implementation of the KEDO project was fraught with difficulties and obstacles, stemming from domestic politics of the participants and the volatile situation on the Korean Peninsula. In September 1996, a North Korean submarine incursion incident led to South Korea’s suspension of all KEDO-related activities, as well as inter-Korean economic cooperation. North Korea in turn threatened to abandon the agreed framework and restart its nuclear program in Yongbyon. Meanwhile, the ROK army designated twelve targets in North Korea for retaliation if new provocations arose. The crisis subsided after North Korea issued a statement of “deep regret” for the submarine incursion in December 1996. The DPRK also agreed to participate in a joint ROK-US briefing in New York on four-power peace negotiations – the two Koreas, US and China – a format that had been proposed by Presidents Clinton and Kim Young Sam.

Economic sanctions against DPRK remained and no steps were taken toward establishing diplomatic relations with the US, as there was a growing suspicion of an underground uranium-enrichment facility (a second possible route to nuclear weapons) in North Korea. In 1998, the North Korean government warned that it would resume its nuclear research. The KEDO began the construction of the first light-water reactor in August 2002 (the two reactors were to be ready by 2003), but indefinitely halted work several months later. In October, during a meeting with Assistant Secretary of State Kelly in Pyongyang, North Korean officials stated that DPRK was an independent country and that they had the right to possess nuclear weapons for defense purposes. When the CIA reported that North Korea was building a centrifuge facility for uranium enrichment, the US administration discontinued their shipments of oil (part of the agreed framework) to North Korea in December 2002.

The two Koreas re-engaged in the humanitarian field in the 1990s. In 1995, the North Korean economy was on the brink of collapse after several years of continued decline. The state distribution system disintegrated and the food supply situation became desperate, forcing the government to appeal for outside help. South Korea sent 150,000 tons of rice to the North, but refrained from providing further food relief amidst the submarine incursion crisis. However, as evidence of starvation in the North mounted, the South Korean Red Cross started to ship rice in 1997 (as much as 40,000 tons). The ROK was also one of the major financial contributors to the UN World Food Program which provided 200,000 tons of food to North Korea.

Sunshine era, 1998–2007

The inauguration of President Kim Dae Jung in January 1998 marked the beginning of a more positive policy of South Korea toward North Korea. The crux of the “Sunshine Policy” was
the acceptance of peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas, although it fell short of legally recognizing the DPRK. The new approach moved away from containment and isolation of the North towards a more active engagement and of cooperation in various areas and on different levels. The rationale of the new policy was that reconciliation and exchanges could stimulate change in North Korea and eventually the two Koreas could unify. North Korea’s initial response to this change of attitude was criticism of the new Seoul policy as a “political assault” on its system, but as the time passed, the North became more receptive to the separation of economic cooperation from political issues, and it recognized benefits from the new environment in inter-Korean relations.

The first significant result of Seoul’s positive approach of engagement was the summit between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang on 13–15 June 2000. The June 15 Joint Declaration called for: 1) resolving the reunification issue independently; 2) exchange of visits by separated family members; and 3) promotion of economic cooperation and exchanges in cultural, sports, health, and other fields. The two sides decided to use multiple channels for negotiations – such as the Red Cross, ministerial meetings and military working-level talks – to facilitate the cooperation. The summit dramatically improved the atmosphere in the bilateral relations, and President Kim Dae Jung was greeted by thousands of enthusiastic Seoul citizens upon his return from Pyongyang.

The most tangible outcome in the inter-Korean economic cooperation was the creation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which opened in December 2005. The complex developed with the ups and downs that reflected the pulse in the inter-Korean dialogue. Even though the KIC did not expand as originally planned, its scale and implications as a joint undertaking were unprecedented. Using North Korean labor and South Korean capital, as well as know-how for manufacturing consumer goods for export, the project became a mini-version of what a future Korean economic community might look like. (As of 2013, the KIC employed 53,000 North Korean workers and involved 123 South Korean companies.) Mount Kŭmgang Tourist Region was another product of the 2000 Korean summit. This resort was established in 2002 to facilitate visits from the South. By 2008, approximately two million South Koreans had visited the scenic mountain getaway. Bus tours from South Korea to Kaesong were also arranged to expand civic exchanges. Following the agreements, the two Koreas restored railway links between Kaesong and the DMZ in 2003, and freight service started in 2007.

The collapse of the North Korean economy in the 1990s led to the Great Famine, which the regime called the Arduous March (konanŭi haenggun). The humanitarian disaster caused between 600,000 and over one million deaths (Haggard and Noland 2007: 11). Meanwhile, Kim Jong Il formulated a military-first policy (son’gun chŏngch’i) after the mid-1990s, although the North Korean historiography traces it back to the 1960s. The “revolutionary idea of attaching great importance to the army” was a policy tool to consolidate Kim’s power, mobilize scarce resources and labor, and tighten controls in society. The North Korean government tried to address the economic difficulties by introducing limited liberalization measures in July 2002, which was conducive to the economic cooperation between the two Koreas. But the policy was reversed in 2005 and old patterns of central planning and controlled markets were reinstated. The inter-Korean cooperation helped North Korea to stabilize economically and expand its foreign relations. The ROK not only did not block efforts of other countries to forge ties with Pyongyang – a pattern from the global Cold War era – but actually encouraged them to do so. Between 2000 and 2001, the DPRK established diplomatic relations with the UK, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Luxemburg, Brazil, Canada, and New Zealand, among others.

The South Korean non-governmental sector also nourished linkages between the two halves of the peninsula in the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s. South Korea’s NGOs
responded to North Korea’s call for international help in 1995, amidst severe food shortages. Their activities received official sanction by the Kim Dae Jung administration and expanded after 1998. From 1995 to 2001, South Korean NGOs donated nearly USD 162 million in form of food, clothes, and medicine to North Korea (Flake and Snyder 2003: 87). South Korean business also became active in promoting ties with the North. One notable example is Chŏng Ch'ŏng-yŏng, the founder of Hyundai group who was born in Asan, North Korea. Chŏng became known for his “cattle diplomacy,” when he crossed the DMZ with a cattle herd loaded on trucks as a donation to North Korea just before the first inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang. The good spell in inter-Korean relations revealed how important political thaw was for reinvigorating the linkages between the two halves of the peninsula.

Inter-Korean relations also suffered setbacks during the “sunshine” era. After President George W. Bush identified North Korea as part of “Axis of Evil” in January 2002, the DPRK government temporarily terminated the talks with the South. In June 2002, a naval skirmish occurred between the two Koreas in a disputed maritime area in the Yellow Sea. Two North Korean vessels crossed the Northern Limit Line – which was considered the boundary by South Korea versus the Military Demarcation Line – and attacked South Korean patrol boats. In retaliation, South Korean reinforcements pushed back the North Korean vessels. The clash caused the death of thirteen North Korean and six South Korean sailors. Revelations surfaced that the South Korean government paid USD 500 million to Pyongyang in order to facilitate the June 2000 summit and this revelation created a political storm in Seoul, including the conviction of six businessmen in 2003. The chairman of Hyundai Asan, Chŏng Mong-hŏn, who was reportedly involved in the back-channel dealings with the DPRK, committed suicide during the scandal.

President Roh Moo Hyun (No Mu-hyun) followed in the footsteps of his predecessor Kim Dae Jung by formulating a “peace and prosperity policy” toward the DPRK in 2003. Roh crossed the DMZ on 2 October 2007 on his way to Pyongyang, where he met Kim Jong Il for the second inter-Korean summit. Although the second meeting between the Korean leaders was not as dramatic as the first summit, it generated positive momentum and capped-off ten years of the Sunshine Policy. They adopted a peace declaration that called for the implementation of the 15 June Joint Declaration from 2000; embracing efforts to overcome differences in ideologies and systems; the replacement of the armistice with peace treaty; talks for easing military tension and economic cooperation; the creation of special zone around Haeju in North Korea; humanitarian exchanges and family reunions; and cooperation in the fields of education, culture and sports.

Between 2002 and 2009, there were sixteen rounds of family reunions at the Mt. Kumgang resort, involving 10,673 South Koreans and 5,539 North Koreans. South Korea increased its humanitarian aid to North Korea, which included the annual delivery of 450,000 tons of food and 300,000 tons of chemical fertilizers from 2003 to 2007. From 1998 to 2007, the total South Korean aid provided to North Korea was worth USD 7.18 billion. The inter-Korean trade expanded to USD 1.79 billion in 2007, which constituted almost one-third of the DPRK’s foreign trade, which matched the volume of Soviet-North Korean trade which peaked in 1988. The number of North Korean refugees to the South also increased: from 71 in 1998 to 2,551 in 2007. By 2010, the total number of refugees from the North reached 20,407. The most high-profile North Korean defector was Hwang Jang Yop (Hwang Chang-yŏp), a former chairman of Standing Committee of the Supreme People’s Assembly (position which he held until 1983) and a leading chuch’ē ideologue. Hwang fell out of favor with the new North Korean leader Kim Jong II and defected to South Korea via the South Korean embassy in Beijing and the Philippines in 1997.
The improvement of inter-Korean relations did not solve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. Nuclear proliferation problem entered a new dangerous phase, as the agreed framework was unraveling. The DPRK announced its withdrawal from NPT on 10 January 2003. The Bush Administration opted for a multilateral approach to tackle the nuclear problem in contrast to the previous bilateral one adopted by the Clinton Administration. The Six-Party Talks – including the two Koreas, US, China, Japan and Russia – commenced in August in Beijing. It was not until the fourth round of the talks in September 2005, however, that the parties agreed on a joint statement, which outlined steps needed for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The DPRK agreed to abandon its nuclear weapons and programs and return to the NPT. The other parties acknowledged North Korea’s right to develop nuclear energy and were ready to discuss the delivery of light-water reactors. In addition, the US and ROK committed not to deploy nuclear weapons in Korea.

Yet, a new cycle of confrontation quickly followed. The US sanctions against DPRK’s trading entities provoked a strong reaction from Pyongyang. Further, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test on 9 October 2006 and dynamics quickly deteriorated. The UN Security Council issued Resolution 1718, which called on DPRK to refrain from further nuclear and missile testing and to rejoin the talks. The Six-Party negotiations resumed in February 2007, which resulted in an agreement on the first steps of implementing the Joint Statement in the next sixty days. North Korea sealed its reactor and declared its nuclear activities in June, and the US removed DPRK from the Trade with the Enemy Act and from the list of states that sponsored terrorism, steps that were agreed to in February. But disagreements on the verification mechanisms for North Korea’s nuclear program stalled the progress of the Six-Party Talks in December 2007.

**Shadows over Korea, 2008–2013**

South Korean President Lee Myung Bak (Yi Myŏng-bak) reversed the “Sunshine Policy” after questioning its character of “appeasement.” Past policies of Lee’s predecessors toward the North also created friction with ROK’s allies: the United States and Japan. The conservative South Korean administration aimed at providing conditional economic assistance to the DPRK over the next ten years, with the goal of bridging the gap between the two Koreas. Inter-Korean cooperation was intended to help the North Korean economy reach a USD 3,000 per capita income during that period, hence the “Vision 3000” policy. The main condition for South Korean aid was the implementation of the 2005 Joint Statement, which had been issued at the Six-Party Talks for the denuclearization of North Korea. President Lee also prioritized human rights issues in his policy toward North Korea, which had an adverse effect on inter-Korean dialogue. The DPRK labeled the South Korean government a “reactionary clique.” Exchanges between the two Koreas were either canceled or limited. In 2008, after a South Korean tourist was shot and killed by a North Korean soldier in the Mt. Kumgang resort area, the Seoul government terminated tours to the North.

Inter-Korean relations continued to deteriorate after North Korea test-fired an Unha-2 three-stage rocket on 5 April 2009, in which the third stage failed to separate properly. The UN Security Council issued a presidential statement, declaring that the test was a violation of the October 2006 Resolution 1718, and new sanctions were adopted against the DPRK afterwards. North Korea declared that it would not participate in the Six-Party Talks and that it would also abrogate previous agreements. On 25 May 2009, The DPRK conducted a second nuclear test. As a result, on 12 June, the UN Security Council adopted new sanctions and arms embargoes against North Korea. The following day, the DPRK admitted for the first time that a uranium
enrichment program existed for the production of fuel for a light-water reactor. This was another blow to inter-Korean relations.

Military tensions on the Korean peninsula escalated to a dangerous level in 2010 in the wake of two significant incidents. On 26 March, a North Korean submarine allegedly fired a torpedo at a South Korean corvette Cheonan, which sank near Paengnyŏng Island. The island lies in a sensitive, disputed area of the Yellow Sea, 16 kilometers off the North Korean coast and 121 kilometers from an area where joint US-ROK naval exercises were being conducted at that time as part of Key Resolve war maneuvers. As a result of the Cheonan sinking, 46 South Korean seamen lost their lives. The incident can be viewed in the context of ongoing disputes between the DPRK and ROK over sea borders, which has led to frequent naval clashes. Only four months earlier, a naval battle between the two sides in the area left several North Korean sailors dead. In May, South Korea announced it would stop almost all trade with North Korea, and that it would conduct joint US-ROK naval exercise in response to the sinking. North Korea presented its own list of punitive measures, which included cutting off all ties with the South – except the operation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex – and it threatened to attack any South Korean vessel crossing the Military Demarcation Line, which was declared as a sea border by Pyongyang in 1999. Another grave incident occurred in November in the disputed Yellow Sea zone. Following live-fire exercise by South Korean forces, North Korean artillery opened fire on military and civilian targets on Yŏngp’yŏng Island (located 12 km off the North Korean coast), killing four South Koreans. The ROK army retaliated by firing on North Korean military positions. In response to the DPRK’s provocation, ROK and US conducted previously scheduled but expanded joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea while the South Korean army reinforced the defense of Yŏngp’yŏng Island.

Inter-Korean relations hit a new low point after North Korea successfully launched an Unha-3 rocket into space on 12 December 2012. It was a breakthrough in the DPRK’s ballistic missile program, as it demonstrated the capability of sending vehicles roughly 10,000 km, although it had not reached the capability to build miniature warheads for mounting on a missile. Consequently, the UN Security Council Resolution 2087 condemned the launch on 22 January 2013. The DPRK escalated the rhetoric and declared that it would continue the missile tests and the development of its nuclear program; it even threatened the US with launching long-range missiles. On 12 February, North Korea conducted a third nuclear test and declared that it would end the Armistice Agreement on 13 March. At that time, the United States and South Korea conducted the joint military exercise Foal Eagle, which involved B-52 bombers from an American air base in Guam and B-2A stealth bombers (which flew directly from Missouri to the Korean Peninsula) as an affirmation of the “nuclear umbrella” over South Korea. The war of words reached unprecedented levels, as North Korea declared a “state of war” against the South on 30 March. North Korea’s saber-rattling, albeit not unusual, can be partially explained by the recent power succession to Kim Jong Un (Kim Chŏng-ŭn) – the youngest son of Kim Jong Il. There was little time to prepare for the transition after Kim Jong Il died on 17 December 2011, and the young Kim had to quickly assert his leadership. According to such interpretation of North Korea’s militant attitude, Kim Jong Un needed to demonstrate that he could stand up to the DPRK’s enemies in order to enhance his credentials as the new Supreme Leader, particularly among the military – a key for power succession. North Korea announced that it would restart its nuclear reactor in Yŏngbyŏn and closed entry to the Kaesong Industrial Complex – the last functional project of the inter-Korean cooperation. In August, the two sides agreed to reopen the complex, which signaled the end of the crisis.

The crisis was a test for the new South Korean President Park Gun Hye (Pak Kŭn-hye). The daughter of late President Park Chung Hee, the new president formulated her own approach
to North Korea – “trustpolitik,” which aimed to resume dialogue with North Korea. South Korea made a commitment to restore aid and cultural exchanges with the North in return for a better rapport with Pyongyang – a compromise between the “sunshine” approach and a hardline policy. The fact that Park visited Pyongyang and met Kim Jong Il in May 2002 as chairwoman of the Korea-Europe Foundation helped to facilitate her communication with the North Korean leadership. For his part, Kim Jong Un – a third-generation leader from the Kim family – sent a positive signal to the South during his 2014 New Year address in which he called for establishing a “favorable climate” for improving relations between the North and the South and for unity the of all Koreans, who “should open a new phase for independent reunification, peace and prosperity this year.”

It seemed that the DPRK was ready to start a more positive phase in inter-Korean relations. Only time will tell how far the two Korean leaders might go in promoting linkages and cooperation across the DMZ.

After almost seven decades of separation and extremely divergent historical trajectories, the two Koreas continue to polarize and distance themselves from each other, making the possibility of reunification increasingly daunting. Notwithstanding, there are some key factors that make for achieving reconciliation possible. The first condition is to end the Korean War, which means the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace treaty. The peninsular Cold War architecture is the root cause for a continued division, so until it is dismantled, the inter-Korean antagonism will continue to persist. The peace process entails steps toward denuclearization of North Korea and military de-escalation, as well as the recognition of the DPRK by the United States and Japan. Some argue that a “grand bargain” – including denuclearization, recognition and economic aid to North Korea – was perhaps the most effective formula for achieving permanent peace, but at the current moment the prospects of such an equation are still dim.

DPRK’s determination not to give up its nuclear arsenal – which is perceived by the regime as its last stand against the hostile world surrounding the country – is an obstacle for reaching such an agreement and, more importantly, for implementing it. In recent years, North Korea has more vigorously expanded its nuclear program and has conducted a space launch, which has enhanced its bargaining position and has also increased the security risks on the peninsula. One possible way to deal with the nuclear problem has been offered by Siegfried Hecker, a Stanford University professor and the former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Hecker put forth a formula of “three No’s”: no more bombs (meaning no plutonium and highly enriched uranium); no better bombs (including testing and missile launches); and no exports.

Even if North Korea agreed to this, it would still be a difficult proposition for domestic political reasons, as Washington and Seoul would hardly accept a solution which would fall short of complete denuclearization. Clearly, no solution can be found without some flexibility and compromise from all sides.

Major players in the East Asian region are interested in peace, but they are even more concerned with preserving stability, which is associated with the status quo or a divided Korean Peninsula. Reunification of Korea is not exactly against the interests of China, Japan, and the United States, but it is not their priority either. Without a Helsinki-type process of collective regional security and cooperation, permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula will continue to remain out of reach. The participants in the Six-Party Talks, for example, could constitute such a regional security mechanism. On several occasions, the two Koreas have reached different degrees of rapprochement and a common understanding that they should pursue reunification independently, but the historical context of division is also inseparable from external factors. Similarly, peace and reconciliation are closely connected to foreign powers, starting from the conclusion of peace treaty.
The two Koreas have premised reunification on the concept that it should be achieved on each state’s terms. This means that one of the two should prevail and the other would have to disappear, hence the irreconcilable inter-Korean antagonism. The race for superiority has defined inter-Korean relations since the inception of the two Korean polities. Despite the huge economic gap (North Korea is three percent of the South Korean economy), South Korea has not been able to “win” the peninsular Cold War. For all practical purposes, the two Koreas have developed mutual deterrents as insurance policies and the zero-sum game cannot achieve significant progress toward reunification in the foreseeable future. Thus, mutual recognition of the two Koreas is another important condition for reconciliation and the reunification process. DPRK’s Marxist vision of revolution in the South further deepened the conflict between the two Koreas in the global Cold War era. Expectations of North Korea’s collapse by ROK and its allies have also led to missed chances for reaching a comprehensive peace regime and a durable reconciliation between the North and the South. Isolation and impoverishment have pushed North Korea further toward militarization and bellicose rhetoric and provocative behavior. Recognizing the fact of the division is important step toward overcoming it.

Another key factor for the reunification process is its prioritization by the two Korean states. Their pledged commitment to unity has been backed by statements, unmatched by consistent and comprehensive policies. On the contrary, there are interests and forces in both the DPRK and the ROK, which are either afraid or directly opposed to unification. One example is the North Korean political and military elite, who are doomed if unification is achieved through absorption by the South. Further, concerns of prohibitively high unification costs (some estimates reach one trillion USD) and insecurity on the Korean peninsula discourage South Korean policy makers and the public to support reunification, at least in the short-run.

The two Koreas have followed diverging paths, so the historical trend is to make the division permanent. Shifting the centrifugal dynamics on the Korean peninsula will require profound changes, both internally and externally. Bridging economic and social gaps between the two sides is an extremely difficult task, although the economy seems the most promising sphere for promoting inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation. An even bigger challenge to reunification is the emergence of separate Korean nations with distinct identities and values. Korea has been moving from “two states – one minjok (nation)” towards a “two states – two nations” reality.

The history of Korean division and prospects of unification would be further illuminated by studying the issue of nation formation in the long-term partition of Korea. Inter-Korean relations could be examined from anthropological, cultural, social and psychological perspectives, outlining the connecting and disconnecting points between the two Koreas. Study of North Korean migration to the South, for example, can provide revealing intersecting points between the two Koreas on the humanitarian level. The scholarship of inter-Korean relations needs more research in various fields, such as economics, politics, security, diplomacy and culture, which includes also the link between domestic policies and the approach of the two Korean states toward each other.

Notes

1 Interestingly, this was not the first time Korea had been divided by foreign powers in modern history. A secret clause of the Yamagata-Lobanov agreement in 1896 stipulated the division of Russian and Japanese spheres of influence in Korea along the 39th parallel, even though the agreement was related only to the movement of limited number of troops from both sides and did not lead to the actual partition of the country.

2 Interview with former North Korean resident Sofia, May 2013.

4 Romanian Central Historical Archive (ANIC), File no. 43/1971, Report from the Romanian embassy in the DPRK, Minutes of Conversation on the Occasion of Party and Government Delegation on behalf of the Romanian Socialist Republic to the DPRK, Pyongyang, 10 June 1971. North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP), Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars.

5 Kim Il Sung articulated his five-point peace treaty proposal at the 2nd session of the Fifth SPA in April 1972: 1) suspension of the increase of armed forces and arms race; 2) withdrawal of all foreign troops, including those of the US; 3) reduction of the armed forces of the North and the South to under 100,000 troops and under, and sharp arms reduction; 4) termination of import of all kinds of weapon, tactical equipment and materials; 5) signing a peace treaty which will solve the aforementioned issues and guarantee that the North and the South will not use force against each other. Archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMVRB), opis 31, delo 116, 1882, Report from the Bulgarian embassy in the DPRK, Second Session of the Fifth Supreme People’s Assembly of the DPRK and the issues addressed by Kim Il Sung, ambassador Yanko Georgiev, Pyongyang, 10 July 1973, 50.

6 Political Archive of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PA AA MfAA), C 951/76, Report from the embassy of the GDR in the DPRK, Information provided by DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Yong-taek to ambassadors of East European countries on 3 July 1972, Pyongyang, 4 July 1972, NKIDP.

7 AMVRB, opis 29, Delo 69, 1609, Minutes of Conversation between Kim Il Sung and Todor Zhivkov, held on 25 October 1973: 133–135.


9 Recent reports dispute the North Korean involvement in the assassination plot, as the Japanese investigations failed to confirm Mun’s alleged links to the DPRK or the Ch’ongryŏnhaphoe in Japan.


11 The IAEA introduced special inspections to assess suspicious undeclared facilities, after it was established in 1991 that Iraq had a clandestine nuclear program in secret sites close to those inspected by the international agency of undeclared nuclear waste sites.


13 Nodong sinmun, New Year’s Address, January 1, 2014.


References


