

KOREAN REUNIFICATION TALKS: HIGH STAKES FOR THE U.S.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) have been sitting down at the bargaining table to discuss ways to ease tensions on the Korean peninsula. Following an eleven-year lull in negotiations, the two sides met last November and again from May to July to discuss a wide range of economic, political, and social issues. As they are two of the world's most bitter military and political rivals, this was no small task. The obstacles to peaceful reunification of the peninsula are enormous. While some foreign observers accept the division as more or less permanent, unification is the highest national goal of both the North and the South. Koreans are a homogeneous people whose culture is 5,000 years old. To them, the partition of their nation is an aberration that eventually will be overcome. The two sides plan to continue their talks in September.

The recent flurry of negotiations concentrated on three major areas: establishing North-South trade relations, reuniting family members separated since the Korean War, and the eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula under one government. These same issues were the focus of the last substantive negotiations, which took place in 1971 to 1973. North-South dialogue is a complex process heavily influenced by political motivations and diplomatic one-upmanship. While the avowed goal of the negotiations is to ease tensions on the peninsula, North Korea consistently has placed a higher priority on its own political gains. The recent round of talks, for example, coincided with North Korean overtures designed to improve its public image among Western nations. These actions included easing the

barriers to foreign investment in the North and inviting Western journalists to visit Pyongyang, North Korea's capital. The U.S. should recognize these ulterior motives and thus view cautiously the prospects for the talks' success.

South Korea is an increasingly important ally of the U.S. Since the ROK has become America's seventh largest trading partner, stability on the peninsula offers tangible economic benefits for the U.S. North Korea, on the other hand, has close diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. With 40,000 U.S. troops stationed in the ROK, an outbreak of hostilities on the peninsula would likely involve superpower confrontation and threaten U.S. national security.

The U.S. has much at stake in the North-South talks. At this point, Washington should strongly support Seoul's positions and avoid pressures to establish any official or unofficial U.S. contact with Pyongyang. Negotiations should proceed on a strictly inter-Korean level until substantial progress is made. The U.S. should ask other interested nations to support this strategy.

ROOTS OF THE NORTH-SOUTH CONFLICT

The division of the Korean peninsula and the threat to world peace it represents are products of foreign intervention and manipulation. In 1910, expanding Japanese militarism led to the annexation of Korea. At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union agreed that, following the surrender of Japan, "Korea should be independent in due course."¹ The Soviet Union entered the Pacific war on August 9, 1945, just six days before Japan surrendered. Soviet troops, however, already had moved into the northern part of the Korean peninsula. Fearing that the Soviets would occupy the entire country before U.S. forces could move into the peninsula, Washington proposed that the Soviet Union accept the surrender of Japanese forces north of the 38th Parallel. Later dubbed General Order #1, this was a military arrangement and not intended as a political solution.

Moscow, however, immediately began to consolidate its political influence by purging moderate Koreans from the civilian administrative apparatus of its sector and favoring those who supported establishment of a communist system on the peninsula. Joint U.S.-Soviet negotiations aimed at resolving ideological differences and paving the way for an independent and unified Korea failed. The U.S. then turned

1. White Paper on South-North Dialogue, National Unification Board, Seoul, Korea, 1982, p. 11.

its attention to forming a democratic government in the southern sector. U.N.-supervised general elections were held, and the Republic of Korea was inaugurated on August 15, 1948. When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established one month later, Korea's political division was complete. Kim Il Sung, a Korean who had served as an officer in the Soviet Red Army, became the President of North Korea. He still rules today.

The North Korean People's Army (KPA) was formed in February 1948. Kim Il Sung proclaimed that "our people cannot sit idle, letting American imperialists and their running dogs engage in the wicked policy of splitting the nation."² He warned that "the men of our KPA will fight to the last drop of their blood to defeat the enemy."³ On June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded the South, launching the bloody three-year war that cost the lives of an estimated one million Koreans and 35,000 American troops. While an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, the agreement was limited to military issues and was not a political settlement. It suspended open hostilities and established a 4,000 meter wide demilitarized zone (DMZ) across the Korean peninsula. As such, the 1953 ceasefire has become the longest in modern military history. Today, the 60 million inhabitants of the peninsula technically--and often in fact--continue to live in a state of war.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA TODAY

North Korea today is one of the world's most regimented, totalitarian, and isolated communist systems. It prides itself on self-reliance and chides the South Koreans for being "stooges" of U.S. and Japanese "imperialists." By contrast, South Koreans take pride in the country's growing democracy and image as an "economic miracle" and a showcase for free market capitalism.

North Korea has a record of provocation and terrorism and regularly violates the terms of the 1953 truce. In 1983 alone, South Korean troops killed eleven armed North Korean agents discovered in ROK territory and two North Korean spy boats were sunk in ROK waters.⁴ Between 1974 and 1978, three North Korean infiltration tunnels were discovered under the DMZ. One tunnel was large enough to allow one division of troops per hour to invade ROK territory.

2. Kim Il Sung: Biography, Miraisha: 7-2, 3-chome, Koishikawa, Bunkyo-Ku, Tokyo, Japan, 1970, p. 22.

3. Ibid., p. 234.

4. White Paper on South-North Dialogue, op. cit., p. 416.

North Korea has twice attempted to assassinate ROK presidents. In 1968, 31 commandos unsuccessfully assaulted the Blue House, the presidential compound near downtown Seoul. Equally dramatic was the North's attempt to murder ROK President Chun Doo Hwan during his state visit to Rangoon, Burma, in October 1983. A bomb exploded during a wreath laying ceremony at a memorial shrine for Burmese war dead, killing four Burmese officials and 17 South Koreans, including four ROK cabinet members. Chun was not injured. After two North Korean army officers were found guilty of the bombing by a Rangoon court, Burma severed diplomatic relations with North Korea.

The passage of time has done little to reduce tensions between North and South. Perhaps only the Israeli-Syrian and Soviet-Chinese borders are as heavily armed as the Korean peninsula today. North Korea began intensifying its military buildup in 1970 and now spends well over 20 percent of its total GNP on the military; the South spends around 6 percent. The North fields 784,000 troops compared to 600,000 for the South and has a 2 to 1 advantage in tanks, artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers, and combat aircraft. North Korea also holds a 3 to 1 edge in surface warships and deploys 21 submarines; the South has no submarines. Even the presence of 40,000 U.S. troops in South Korea does not offset completely the North's military edge.

North Korea maintains a well-trained commando force of about 100,000 troops, possibly the largest in the world. They appear poised for rapid infiltration and trained to bypass the ROK's frontline defenses and strike at its command and supply infrastructure. It was recently discovered that the North is constructing more than 100 new forward bases and has redeployed large numbers of combat troops nearer to the DMZ. South Korean Defense Minister Yoon Sung Min told The Heritage Foundation that these developments have "significantly strengthened North Korea's capacity to launch a surprise attack."⁵ In short, maintenance of a strong first-strike offensive advantage seems to be Pyongyang's highest priority.

HISTORY OF NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

For nearly two decades following their war, the North and South each followed a policy of "no contact." While unilateral declarations of unification policy were routine, neither side sought negotiation. This changed in 1970 when ROK President Park Chung Hee proposed direct North-South negotiations. As a result, talks began in August 1971 under Red Cross auspices. Their purpose was to identify and reunite

5. Interview, April 18, 1985.

the estimated ten million Koreans who were separated from relatives during the war. These talks continued for two years. At the same time, secret negotiations were proceeding, which produced in July 1972, the historic South-North Communique and established the basic negotiating principles that apply today: unification through bilateral negotiations free of external interference, renunciation of unification through force, and a commitment to transcending ideological differences.

Ironically, the high-level, public Red Cross talks collapsed when President Park announced in June 1973 that "we shall not oppose North Korea's participation with us in international organizations."⁶ Rather than viewing this as the concession that it was, the North branded it a ploy to perpetuate the peninsula's division, calling it an "open manifestation of a two-Korea policy."⁷ Park's attempt in 1979 to revive the talks failed. But in early 1980, three months after Park's assassination by the chief of his Central Intelligence Agency, the North suddenly called for meetings between the two sides' prime ministers. Preliminary planning began but broke down seven months later.

RESUMPTION OF DIALOGUE

After the brief flurry of high-level contact in the early 1970s, negotiations remained essentially stalemated. Then the South made a surprising overture in September 1984. President Chun accepted the North's offer to provide relief assistance to those parts of the South devastated by flood. In the past, both sides routinely had made such offers (perhaps to highlight the other side's adversity), and just as routinely, the offers had been rejected. Chun's acceptance at first threw the North off balance, but it did result in the unprecedented voyage of North Korean supply ships to a South Korean port and truck deliveries to a point along the DMZ. This breakthrough led to resumption of Red Cross family reunification talks after an eleven-year lull and, for the first time, the inauguration of economic talks aimed at opening trade between the two sides.

The first round of economic talks convened on November 15, 1984, at Panmunjom, the joint security area manned by both North and South Korean troops and located in the center of the DMZ. Each side presented lists of goods to be traded and discussed such possible joint ventures as cooperative fishing and mining operations. The

6. Byung Chul Koh, The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1984), p. 208.

7. White Paper on South-North Dialogue, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

South stressed that tangible trade relations should precede consideration of joint ventures. The North countered that both avenues should be considered concurrently. Deadlocked, the delegates agreed to meet again in December.

On November 23, however, the talks were jolted by an incident at the DMZ. A Soviet student studying in North Korea was touring the DMZ's joint security area when he suddenly dashed for freedom across the military demarcation line dividing the compound. In violation of the 1953 truce terms, North Korean troops pursued him into ROK territory and opened fire. After a fierce 20-minute battle between the North Koreans and a joint U.S.-ROK force, a ceasefire was called. One South Korean soldier and three North Korean soldiers were dead; an American serviceman was wounded. The Soviet student was unharmed and subsequently was granted the political asylum that he was seeking in the U.S. Charging that the student defector had been kidnapped by the South, North Korea postponed the economic talks that had been scheduled for December. The North also cited the annual U.S.-ROK military exercises slated for early 1985 as another reason for delaying the negotiations.

The two sides finally met again at Panmunjom this May 17. The South offered to purchase 300,000 tons of anthracite coal from the North. This was in accord with the lists of goods and terms of trade approved in the 1984 round of talks. The South hoped that Pyongyang would counter with a proposal to purchase ROK steel or textiles. But the North rejected the idea of immediate action and proposed the establishment of a vice ministerial level "North-South Joint Economic Cooperation Committee" to study and coordinate trade. In the June 20 meeting, Seoul accepted the North's proposal and agreed to form a committee co-chaired by deputy prime ministers from both sides. Working-level delegates will meet to work out details on this September 18.

The most emotional North-South issue is family reunification. For over three decades, millions of Korean relatives trapped on opposite sides of the DMZ have been unable to communicate in any way. Even telephone contact and exchange of letters have been prohibited. The issue of family reunification has in the past been politically explosive. The talks in the early 1970s broke down in part because Pyongyang demanded that "improved legal and social conditions in South Korea" precede any family exchanges.⁸ Specifically, the North called for the abrogation of all anti-communist laws and the disbanding of all anti-communist organizations.

During the talks in Seoul this May, however, the North did not raise these ideological issues, although the chief North Korean

8. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

delegate did not rule out the possibility that political questions might be considered at future meetings. Each side presented comprehensive proposals aimed at identifying separated relatives, establishing channels of family communication, and arranging for exchange visits. The negotiations were upbeat and cordial. And at the last minute, in an apparent and unanticipated breakthrough, the two sides tentatively agreed to exchange "hometown visiting groups" on August 15. These groups would be allowed to travel to their places of birth regardless of whether or not a separated relative resided there. The two sides also agreed to exchange folk dance companies. According to a South Korean delegate, successful hometown visits and dance troupe exchanges would usher in "a new epoch in inter-Korean relations."⁹

Such optimism might have been premature. On July 19, the North changed its earlier position and insisted that the exchange groups be allowed to visit only Seoul and Pyongyang. ROK officials feel that the North has had second thoughts about opening its isolated society to South Korean visitors. The two sides have not yet set a date for the next meeting on the family reunification talks.

A new negotiation front was opened on June 1, 1985, when the ROK National Assembly voted unanimously to accept the North Korean Supreme People's Assembly proposal for parliamentary talks. Such a meeting would be the first time in over a decade that the two sides directly would address political and strategic concerns. Pyongyang's April 9 proposal for parliamentary conference called for discussion of a nonaggression agreement. The South rejected this as an agenda. It suspects that the North's nonaggression pact proposal is a tactic in its long campaign to edge U.S. forces out of the ROK. The South's legislators have suggested that the formulation of a "unified constitution" for eventual reunification be the focus of the North-South parliamentary talks. The conflicting proposals were discussed at the preliminary meeting on July 23; a second session is scheduled for September 24.

ROADBLOCKS TO PROGRESS

This recent diplomatic activity has raised hopes that real progress may be achieved this year. A successful trade agreement and exchange of separated family members undoubtedly would ease tensions on the peninsula, although major stumbling blocks to eventual national reunification would remain unresolved.

9. Korea Herald, Seoul, Korea, June 1, 1985, p. 3.

One serious impasse has been conflicting theoretical frameworks for reunification. The North calls for the creation of a unified nation called the "Democratic Confederated Republic of Korea" encompassing two autonomous states as a first step. A "Supreme Committee" made up of representatives from both sides later would settle the complex political, economic, military, and cultural disagreements. By contrast, the South wants these essential matters resolved prior to the formation of a single nation in order to "promote trust between the North and South" and "eliminate all impediments to unification." The mutual hatred and suspicions of the last 40 years, explains Seoul, cannot be dispelled overnight. The South's gradual approach is more realistic than the North's all-or-nothing stance.

Another obstacle to productive unification negotiations has been the North's political demands. While the South always calls for negotiation without preconditions, the North has insisted that prerequisites for a settlement are the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the ROK, abolition of Seoul's anti-communist policies, and the immediate "democratization" of the South. Seoul considers these demands as attempts to influence the ROK's internal affairs. Indeed, the North's acknowledged long-range strategy for unification includes encouraging "revolutionary forces" in the South.

The timing of North Korea's major negotiation initiatives also suggests political motivations. Its first major statement concerning unification was made just weeks after a student revolution toppled President Syngman Rhee in April 1960. The North's acceptance of President Park's call for talks in 1970 came in the wake of the Nixon Administration's rapprochement with the People's Republic of China. Unsure of the implications of a U.S.-PRC thaw, the North may have been compelled to promote an image of moderation.

The next major proposal by North Korea came just three months after the assassination of President Park in October 1979 and was intended to gain the high ground while the South wrestled with a chaotic domestic political and economic scene.

In other respects, the North's timing seems particularly insidious--and transparent. The round of intense negotiations in the early 1970s, for example, coincided with the North's construction of infiltration tunnels under the DMZ. On October 8, 1983, Pyongyang proposed tripartite talks with the U.S. and the ROK; the next day, the South Korean president narrowly escaped death in the Rangoon bombing by the North. South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Lee Sang Ock told The

