

## Issues and Prospects for Cross-Recognition: A Korean Perspective

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On 8 July 1994 Kim Il Sung died to no one's anticipation, and the first inter-Korean summit scheduled for 25 July was put off. His sudden death came at an inopportune time for North and South Korea as well as for the neighboring four big powers. For North Korea the passing of Kim Il Sung marked the end of an era. It also opened the reign of Kim Jong Il, designated heir, which may be riddled with uncertainty and possible instability. For South Korea, Kim's death was welcome news but it also meant a significant challenge to ROK policy toward North Korea. For the big powers with their great concern for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, the death of elder Kim might pose a threat to their vested interests in Northeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

North Korea under Kim Jong Il faces no easy choice: preserve the so-called Korean-style socialism based upon isolationist "self-reliance" or depart from seclusion to economic opening and possibly economic reform. Even if his grip on power turns out to be solid, Kim Jong Il is confronted with enormous challenges. North Korea's economy shrank by more than 20 percent over the

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1 For a brief analysis on the possible implications of the death of Kim Il Sung for US policy, see Rinn S. Shinn and Robert G. Sutter, *North Korea After Kim Il Sung*, CRS Report for Congress, 20 July 1994.

past four years.<sup>2</sup> Severe food shortages have forced people down to two meals a day in much of the country, and it could lead directly to a regime crisis. Economic opening, on the other hand, potentially will erode the North Korean system by allowing an inflow of "the wind of liberalization." It could bring about the sudden collapse of North Korea. Neither is a prescription for the stability that every country in the region is seeking.

Indeed, the neighboring four big powers, not to mention South Korea, seem determined to avoid chaos in North Korea, which is manufacturing weapons-grade plutonium. A possible answer to this task is to help stabilize the new regime in Pyongyang while discouraging it from acquiring a nuclear-armed status. The fulfillment of cross-recognition of the two Koreas by the four big powers could be an important means to achieve such a goal. Although the North Korean nuclear issue remains a main obstacle to improved relations between North Korea and the US and Japan as well as South Korea, it will be resolved in one way or another. North Korea and the United States have just agreed on the exchange of diplomatic representation, as a move toward full normalization of their relations, in their third round talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear dispute.

This paper examines the issue of cross-recognition. The discussion begins with an overview of the basic positions taken by both Koreas on the issue.

### **Positions of the Two Koreas on Cross-recognition: A Historical Overview**

While South Korea upholds a policy supporting cross-recognition, North Korea sustains stubborn adherence to an implausible one-Korea policy. Since the 1980s neither of the two Koreas any longer conducted policies for achieving wider recog-

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2 Bank of Korea, *An Estimate of North Korea's GNP in 1993* (in Korean) (June 1993), p. 2.

dition of their legitimacy, but they have never ceased their intense rivalry to gain greater international support for their respective positions on inter-Korean affairs and ways of unification.

Until the early 1970s the ideological confrontation between the North and South was so intense that it precluded initiatives by South Korea to seek relations with China or the Soviet Union or by North Korea to seek relations with the United States or Japan. South Korea had rigorous anticommunist laws prohibiting its citizens from any intercourse with Communist states. It viewed the USSR and China as enemies who backed North Korea in its plan to communize the South.<sup>3</sup> It saw itself and the United States as staunch bulwarks against Communist expansion in East Asia.

Pyongyang likewise saw the United States as the imperialist enemy blocking Northern-terms reunification or even as harboring designs to back a South Korean military attack on the North. The capture of the *Pueblo* and the shooting down of an American EC-121 demonstrated the intensity of the hostility felt by North Korea toward the United States. Japan was also viewed as none other than a sympathizer of "US imperialism."

Changes in strategic circumstances of Northeast Asia, however, as seen in the Sino-US rapprochement and US-Soviet detente in the 1970s, shot holes in the certainties upon which Seoul and Pyongyang had based their policies. A reappraisal was called for, if not of strategy, at least of tactics. They opened talks with each other and began to reconsider their policies toward each other's allies.

South Korea moved first, announcing in 1971 its willingness to open diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and China if they ceased "hostile activities," recognized the sovereignty of the ROK, and stopped aid to North Korea. On 23 June 1973 the South

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3 Some documents recently delivered to South Korea by Russia confirm once again that the Korean War was initiated by North Korea with support from the Soviet Union and China to communize the whole Korean peninsula.

Korean government proclaimed that it would open its doors to all countries on the basis of the principles of coexistence, and urged "countries whose ideologies and social institutions are different from ours to open their doors likewise to us."<sup>4</sup> In 1974 the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly sent a letter to the US Congress proposing the negotiation of a peace treaty between Pyongyang and Washington to replace the Armistice Agreement. The United States did not respond to the initiative, but declared its support for the admission of both Koreas to the United Nations and expressed a willingness to improve relations with North Korea if its allies would take similar action toward Seoul.

Japan's relations with the two Koreas have differed somewhat from those of the other big powers. History, Japanese domestic politics, and the presence of a large Korean minority in Japan caused the government to permit more unofficial intercourse with North Korea than the USSR and PRC had with South Korea, or the US had with North Korea. Japanese policy toward official relations, though, closely followed that of the US, supporting the dual entry of the Koreas into the UN and rejecting diplomatic relations with North Korea until the Soviet Union and China would take similar action toward South Korea.

Since the early 1980s the United States has carried out a seemingly passive policy toward Pyongyang of deregulation. Central to the new American initiative was the notion of cross-contact. Increased American contacts with North Korea would also increase Japanese, and they in turn would stimulate the Soviets and the Chinese to establish contacts with Seoul. Such cross-contacts are expected in the end to lead to cross-recognition.<sup>5</sup> Japan lost no time in following the US lead toward

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4 "President Park Chung Hee's Special Foreign Policy Statement Regarding Peace and Unification" in *A White Paper on South-North Dialogue in Korea* (Seoul: National Unification Board, 1986), pp. 450-54.

5 Hakjoon Kim, "South-North Korean Relations in the 1980s—An Overview" Research Center for Peace and Unification of Korea, *Korean Unification: Source Materials with an Introduction*, Vol. B (1986), p. 54.

Pyongyang. By the early 1980s Seoul had also begun to make unexpected contacts with the Soviet Union and China.<sup>6</sup> At last it seemed that the international environment had become riper for cross-contacts between the two Koreas and the four big powers.

Against this backdrop, it was no surprise that South Korea began its efforts upon *nordpolitik* or northern policy, a policy to widen contacts with its estranged northern neighbors, the Soviet Union and China.<sup>7</sup> The South Korean government made several significant overtures for better relations with the North, notably the Special Declaration of 7 July 1988, promising to refrain from engaging in a wasteful diplomatic competition with North Korea and urging greater American and Japanese contacts with Pyongyang. Accordingly, Seoul has sought cross-recognition of North and South Korea by the four big powers: Pyongyang's recognition by the United States and Japan, and Seoul by the Soviet Union and China. Seoul had also sought simultaneous entry into the UN by the two Koreas.

However, Pyongyang objected the idea of simultaneous entry, arguing that its aim was "to justify 'two Koreas' in the name of the UN and thus perpetuate national division."<sup>8</sup> Even after the separate entry of the two Koreas in September 1991, North Korea has continued to accuse Seoul of harboring a "conspiracy to perpetuate two Koreas." Since at least the beginning of the 1990s,

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6 The Soviet Union had three high officials, of Tass and the Ministry of Culture, abruptly visit Seoul in October 1982, which could be interpreted as playing a "South Korean card" against North Korea in the Sino-Soviet competition over Pyongyang. But this gave a good opportunity for Seoul to start its contacts, albeit informal and unofficial, with Moscow. The forced landing in Seoul of a hijacked Chinese passenger aircraft in early May 1983 provided South Korea with an excellent opportunity to have direct talks with Chinese authorities.

7 South Korean Foreign Minister Yi Pum-suk gave a public lecture on 29 June 1983 indicating the international atmosphere favoring coexistence between two Koreas. He stressed that "we have to admit the reality of the existence of two states on the Korean peninsula." Most countries in the world were inclined to agree.

8 Statement by North Korean Foreign Ministry on Korean Entry into UN as a "Single State," October 3, 1985, *Pyongyang Times*, 12 October 1985, p. 6.

the North's position has been that a "confederation system" with the existing political systems and ideologies in both Koreas intact would be the only alternative to national division. Pyongyang has also repeatedly condemned cross-recognition as a plot to perpetuate the division of Korea.

### **Issues of Cross-recognition: An Assessment**

The best conceivable way to defuse the situation on the Korean peninsula is to try to wean Pyongyang away from its existing policies and to involve it in the international community. The rigidity of the confrontation between the two Koreas, however, and the complexity of the big power involvement rule out any simple, short term solution to the Korean question. The DPRK nuclear issue is a case in point. While the United States has tried for the past one and a half years to find a solution by orchestrating a sort of international mechanism, progress has been disappointing.

If cross-recognition could be a means to dismantle the existing distrust and animosity between North and South Korea, it would also pave the way toward stabilizing their emerging policies of amity—that is, to make it possible for an initially fragile detente to survive the stresses and strains that are bound to occur. What then are we to expect from the fulfillment of cross-recognition?

### **Tension Reduction and Confidence Building**

The basic objectives of ROK policy are to diminish the saliency of the military confrontation and bring about tension reduction and confidence building on the peninsula. When North Korea accepted UN membership in September 1991 for whatever reasons and agreed to conclude the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North in December the same year South Korea thought it possible to crack the door somewhat, to a phase of exchanges and cooperation between the two Koreas, which its

three-stage unification formula envisages as the first one. But the North Korea response was not conducive to an improvement in relations. The nuclear controversy has been so overwhelming that any other issues have not been able to be discussed. And the firmly established national practice of viewing each other primarily as military threats remains intact.

Cross-recognition can indirectly help to counter the tendency to overemphasize military confrontation by establishing a kind of mutually constraining mechanism among the big powers toward the two Koreas. Since South Korea already has full diplomatic relations with Russia and China, North Korean relations with the US and Japan would help materialize such a framework to ease tensions on the peninsula through complex structures of checks and balances among the surrounding four powers. A multilateral security network could emerge. This would in turn provide both Koreas with an external environment favorable to develop mutual confidence.

### **Peaceful Coexistence that May Lead to Unification by Consensus**

The ultimate goal of South Korea's policy toward Pyongyang is to manifest its commitment to unification by peaceful means in conformity with the free will of the Korean people. Under all circumstances the road to unification must be democratic and should intersect with the road of national prosperity. North Korea has also continued to contend that unification is its goal, but that American interference in Korean affairs has prevented it.

South Korea holds that the easing of tension between the two Koreas and the attainment of a stable state of peaceful coexistence is an essential prerequisite to serious negotiations on unification, and the international trend toward cross-recognition favors this view.<sup>9</sup> Pyongyang's contention that the DPRK is the

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9 Ralph N. Clough, *Embattled Korea: The Rivalry for International Support* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), p. 382.

only legitimate government on the Korean peninsula, whereas the ROK is illegitimate and unworthy of international recognition, has already lost ground. Instead now, North Korea argues that it is preferable to achieve a unified Korea through neither "prevailing over communism" nor "communization."<sup>10</sup> This implies that in practice North Korea does want coexistence.

Cross-recognition would offer a realistic framework to facilitate the evolution of a state of peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas. Some have advocated that the United States, as the only big power with military forces in Korea, should accept the North Korean proposal for official dialogue. The nuclear issue gave an opportunity for Washington and Pyongyang to start official talks in June 1993, and some small progress was made: they agreed on 12 August 1994 to establish diplomatic representation in each other's capitals.

The opening of official talks between the US and the DPRK, together with Seoul's ever-expanding relations with Russia and China, would foster an environment contributing to the realization of peaceful coexistence between Seoul and Pyongyang. Moreover, cross-recognition by the big powers would lead to their recognition by almost all states. The near-universal acceptance of the legitimacy of the two Koreas would weaken the inclination of each to question the legitimacy of the other, creating a sounder basis for dialogue and interaction. Should Washington and Tokyo normalize their relations with Pyongyang, a peace system could be set up.

### **Emergence of a New Order in Northeast Asia**

The fulfillment of cross-recognition of the two Koreas can help to build a regional security structure that would be a locus of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The Korean peninsula

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10 Speech made by North Korea's former Premier Yon Hyong Muk at the 46th Session of the UN General Assembly on 2 October 1991. *Pyongyang Times*, 5 October 1991, p. 2.



would cease to be a cause for dread of more fighting, which has been the case since the end of the Korean War. Cross-recognition would also promote understanding between the big powers and the two Koreas, thus creating a more stable environment for the peninsula.<sup>11</sup> Diplomatic missions of all four big powers in Seoul and in Pyongyang would enable direct, frequent contacts and communications between them and the two Koreas, improving the understanding of attitudes and policies and reducing the scope of misperceptions.

For North Korea, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the US and Japan would open the way to increase its trade and to induce foreign investment, and to gain confidence to expand economic cooperation with its neighbors. A political relationship based on reciprocity and equality could evolve. It would in turn open up North Korea, giving its leadership and bureaucracy a more realistic understanding of the outside world.<sup>12</sup>

All this would provide an unparalleled opportunity to mold a new international order in the Northeast Asian region as we have witnessed in post-Cold War Europe. It is expected that current uncertainties in the region would gradually take concrete forms towards regional cooperation in the economy and in security.

### **Prospects and Policy Implications**

Although the international environment is favorable to peaceful unification in the sense that no country among the four powers wants to see a conflict recur on the peninsula, for the sake of the status quo and their own national interests the gradual but steady drift toward a balance of dynamics in Northeast Asia would act for the consolidation of the division of Korea. The four seem to believe that unification will come one day, but they hope

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11 Ralph N. Clough, pp. 375–76.

12 Ibid.

not too suddenly; a stable, divided Korea would serve their interests as well as if not better than would a unified nation. It is a primary concern of the South Korean government that cross-recognition might help intensify such a drift.

North Korea, on the other hand, has stubbornly opposed cross-recognition. Even when the UN approved its membership, the DPRK did not fail to emphasize that "no attempts should be allowed to misuse UN membership for the purpose of perpetuating the country's division into 'two Koreas'."<sup>13</sup> The North Koreans have been insisting that cross-recognition would freeze the division of Korea, preventing unification, and from their viewpoint the argument does have validity. They do not abandon the hope that the present ROK government will be replaced by one more receptive to a withdrawal of US forces and unification on North Korean terms.

Pyongyang, however, has lost any power to prevent cross-recognition. Before Kim Il Sung's death, North Korea showed signs of a willingness to shift its policy stance on the issue. For example, when he met former U.S. President Carter on 15 June 1994, North Korean Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Kim Yong Nam expressed Pyongyang's wish to establish normal relations with the US, emphasizing that "the United States [should] respect the sovereignty of the DPRK and treat it as an equal partner."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in the prolonged negotiations with the United States since March 1993, an overriding concern has been to have the US guarantee the North Korean system in return for concessions on the nuclear issue.

Furthermore, there are at least three reasons compelling Pyongyang to give up its claim to a one-Korea policy. First, Seoul normalized relations with Moscow and Beijing. For Russia and

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13 A Statement published on 18 September 1991 by the Foreign Ministry of North Korea on the occasion of its entry into the United Nations, *Pyongyang Times*, 21 September 1991. p. 2.

14 *Pyongyang Times*, 25 June 1994, p. 1.

China, South Korea is a very important partner in economic cooperation; Seoul's share in their trade is much higher than Pyongyang's.<sup>15</sup> Second, there is no doubt that since the mid-1980s Seoul has overwhelmed Pyongyang in prestige and influence in the world, and with the collapse of socialist regimes in East Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, North Korea's position became worse than ever. Third, North Korea could not but seek to improve relations with the United States and Japan. This means that North Korea has in practice changed its stance on cross-recognition.

It seems that North Korea has realized that it has as much to gain from cross-recognition as does Seoul, perhaps more. In fact, one of the primary goals pursued by Pyongyang in the US–North Korea talks over the North's suspected nuclear weapons program has been to establish diplomatic relations with Washington, and it has finally achieved successful results. On 13 August 1994, the DPRK and the US issued a four-point joint statement on agreed steps aimed at settling their standoff over Pyongyang's disputed nuclear program. One element deals with diplomatic representation: they agreed that they were prepared to establish diplomatic representation in each other's capitals and to reduce barriers to trade and investment "as a move toward full normalization of political and economic relations."<sup>16</sup>

Whenever North Korea revises its policy, it can usually be interpreted as tactics to avoid impending hardships temporarily or to disguise its real intentions. DPRK outward behavior in the 1990s, however, has shown that Pyongyang believes it is in its interests to coexist with South Korea—the entry into the UN is a good example. In the face of changing international environ-

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15 In 1992, South Korea's trade with China and Russia was US\$6,379 million and US\$957 million, respectively, whereas North Korea's trade was US\$696 million and US\$292 million, respectively. *North Korea's Trade* (KOTRA, 1993); *South Korea's Trade* (KOTRA, 1993)

16 *Korea Herald*, 14 August 1994, p. 1.

ment, North Korea, albeit not voluntarily, has slowly modified its archaic policy toward the South.

Therefore, should the nuclear issue find its way toward successful resolution it will not take very long for North Korea to have full diplomatic relationships with the United States and Japan. Now the ball is in South Korea's court.

Up until the mid-1980s the ROK government in reality tenaciously maintained a policy against any contacts between the United States and North Korea. The South Koreans feared that if the Northerners could establish a beachhead in the United States through unofficial contacts, they would be in a position to increase pressure on the US government for official dialogue. They accepted in principle the view that a balanced increase in contacts by all the big powers with the two Koreas was desirable, but were quick to point out any aspect in which the US seemed to be getting ahead of the Chinese and the Soviets. In fact, until the late 1980s, the ROK government continued to constrain the US not to move too fast in permitting any expansion of contacts. The same was true of Japan. At the same time, however, it ignored those aspects, such as PRC trade with South Korea, in which the United States lagged far behind.

The agreement between the United States and North Korea to establish diplomatic representation signals root changes in the international situation surrounding Northeast Asia as well as the Korean peninsula. An eventual normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington will help shape a new order in the region as it would pave the way for Japan and other Western countries to follow suit in recognizing North Korea.

It will, however, pose a serious challenge to Seoul's policy towards the North. The establishment of formal DPRK-US and Pyongyang-Tokyo relations would signify the cross-recognition of both Koreas by all the big powers in the region. In January 1991 North Korea and Japan initiated normalization talks and held eight sessions until negotiations were suspended in Novem-

ber 1992, mainly due to the nuclear issue. It is expected that Japan will soon resume the dialogue.

As discussed above, the recognition of North Korea by the United States and Japan will help reduce tensions on the peninsula by encouraging it to join positively with the international community. This will, in the longer term, lead it towards a pluralistic society. It would also help Kim Jong Il to consolidate his power base.

South Korea welcomed the US-DPRK agreement, but emphasized that it is still only an initial step toward a final resolution of the nuclear problem. The ROK government reaffirms that it is willing to assist the Pyongyang's efforts to gain a formal recognition by Washington if it gives up its nuclear weapons ambition. In this regard, both Washington and Tokyo have pledged that they would respect the position of Seoul before making any important decision on their relations with North Korea.

## Conclusion

Both Seoul and Pyongyang have been extremely sensitive to the slightest move by one of their allies that could be interpreted as a step toward diplomatic recognition. They would prefer that no contact whatsoever take place between a big-power ally and the rival Korean state. Recognizing the impossibility of preventing such contact totally, however, they have done their best to keep it to a minimum. Each has also striven to develop contacts with its rival's allies.

Changes in the international environment since the late 1980s may favor the possibility of cross-recognition. Greater self-confidence engendered by its expanding economy and rising international stature, together with changing international environment, has prompted South Korea to conduct a more flexible and bolder foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> By promulgating the Special Decla-

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17 Young-Ho Park, "The Future of South Korea's Policy Toward North Korea,"

ration of 7 July 1988, Seoul urged greater American and Japanese contacts with Pyongyang. For its part, the ROK established full diplomatic relationships with the Soviet Union and all the East European countries, as well as with China.

Seoul's policy has kindled Pyongyang to change its policy toward the outside world as well as towards the South; it was obliged to adapt itself to external circumstances. North Korea, losing its very close Soviet and Chinese support, has tried to establish diplomatic relations with Japan and the United States, along with trying to improve inter-Korean relations. Now that Pyongyang and Washington agreed to exchange diplomatic representation as a move toward full normalization it will not be long before the DPRK and Japan come up with some concrete results in their normalization talks.

In recent days we have often heard that a new world order is emerging. This is intended to imply unprecedented changes in the post-1945 world order. It is by now a truism to note that in many ways the world is no longer what it was during the nearly fifty years after the end of World War II. Because North and South Korea are still captives of Cold-War politics, however, such a new order is yet to emerge in Northeast Asia. The events of 1994 concerning the Korean peninsula, particularly the improvement of the US-DPRK relations and the expected North Korean-Japanese rapprochement, may signify that a new order could be emerging in this area. Facing such a trend toward fundamental structural changes in the region, South Korea should be prepared to lead in the process of building a new East Asian order. In so doing, the first task is to seize the lead in inter-Korean relations. It is Seoul's hope and goal that North Korea will strive for reconciliation and coexistence.