

## **Opportunism and Over-optimism: Understanding North Korea's Unification Drive of 1980**

**Choongil (Peter) Han\***

This paper provides a historical analysis of North Korea's two diplomatic initiatives in 1980 which were aimed at fostering favorable conditions for Korean unification: a call for inter-Korean Prime Ministerial Talks and a meeting between the US Democratic Congressman Stephen Solarz and Kim Il Sung. Based on primary sources from archives in the ROK and the US, I argue that Pyongyang's conciliatory gesture towards Seoul in 1980 was mostly opportunistic in nature and was mainly prompted by political instability in the South. I also suggest that the DPRK leadership misread the intention of Solarz and became overly optimistic about the prospects of a breakthrough in DPRK-US relations; while Solarz visited Pyongyang on a personal capacity as a fact-finding mission, the North Korean leadership expected that Solarz could influence the US government to advance its relations with the DPRK, which was not what Solarz intended to achieve.

**Keywords:** Korean Unification, Inter-Korean Relations, DPRK-US Relations, Stephen Solarz, Kim Il Sung

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\* Choongil (Peter) Han is a Gates Cambridge Scholar at the University of Cambridge. He can be reached at [ch785@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ch785@cam.ac.uk).

## Introduction

The year 1979 witnessed a series of radical change both within and outside the Korean peninsula. The Cold War dynamics in East Asia started to change as the People's Republic of China (PRC) normalized its relations with the United States in January 1979. The socio-political situation in the Republic of Korea (ROK) became increasingly volatile due to the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in October 1979 and the military coup of Chun Doo Hwan in December 1979. On a much broader level, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 heralded an era which was often referred to as the Second Cold War. With all this in the backdrop, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime was preparing for succession from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il while trying to revitalize its decelerating economy. What many people do not know, however, is that the DPRK regime actively pursued the idea of achieving Korean unification at this time. In the year 1980 alone, the DPRK regime restarted the inter-Korean dialogue by proposing Prime-Ministerial Talks while inviting Stephen Solarz—a US Democratic Congressman—to Pyongyang with a view of improving DPRK-US relations. All these diplomatic efforts to foster favorable conditions for Korean unification, however, did not result in any meaningful progress in inter-Korean relations and DPRK-US relations.

Perhaps such a lack of any significant improvement in DPRK's relations with the ROK and the US in the 1980s might have caused the dearth of studies which investigate the DPRK's initiatives for unification at this time period. In English language scholarship, any empirically robust study of North Korea and its measures to facilitate unification in the 1980s is virtually non-existent. The same is true for South Korean scholarship where there is a tendency to look into inter-Korea relations and the foreign relations of North Korea during the second half of the 1980s, especially the years after Gorbachev's announcement of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* (opening-up and reformation of the Soviet Union's Communist Party) as well as South Korean government's introduction of *Nordpolitik* (also known as Northern Policy) as altogether contributing to South Korea's improved

relations with the Soviet Union and China. For those handful of studies that investigate the 1980s, the logjam in inter-Korean relations is often regarded as a result of the advent of a new Cold War, or as a prelude to the DPRK regime's eventual use of terrorism in Burma in October 1983.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is true that there was no fundamental change in inter-Korean relations and DPRK-US relations in the early 1980s and onwards, the question of 'why' remains under-explored. The absence of breakthrough does not mean that there were no attempts at all in breaking the impasse in inter-Korean relations or a diplomatic overture from Pyongyang toward Washington. In this respect, understanding why there was no breakthrough in DPRK's relations with the ROK and the US at the turn of the decade would enable us to have a much more nuanced understanding of the nature and motivations of Pyongyang's unification initiatives. We should also take extra care not to frame the entire early 1980s as a preparation period of North Korean terrorism just because we have the benefit of hindsight that North Korea orchestrated a terrorist attack in Burma in 1983. To that end, we need to suspend our historical awareness and situate ourselves in the early 1980s because only then can we have a more accurate understanding of why and how the North Korean regime made certain policy choices and to what extent they were effective in advancing the leadership's strategic objective of achieving Korean unification.

The aim of this paper is to examine the nature and motivations of Pyongyang's two overtures to create favorable conditions for Korean unification in the year 1980: North Korea's proposal for Prime Ministerial Talks and US Democratic Congressman Stephen Solarz's visit to Pyongyang. In terms of analytical framework, the paper adopts three levels of analysis—international, North Korean and South Korean—to

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1 Chae-Sung Chun, "Seventy Years of Division on the Korean Peninsula: International Environments, Domestic Structure, and Inter-Korean Relations," (in Korean) *Unification Policy Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 16; Sangsook Lee, "The Study on the Purpose and Effects of North Korean 'Rangoon bombing,'" (in Korean) *Discourse* 201 19, no. 3 (2016): 88.

provide historical context and examine how the changes in these three areas affected the DPRK regime's strategic thinking around unification. The paper mainly consults archival documents obtained from the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Archives, ROK Ministry of Unification's North Korea Information Center, Wilson Center Digital Archive and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)'s Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. While these sources are not new in terms of their release dates, they were never fully consulted by the previous studies, hence the need to engage with these sources critically.

I argue that Pyongyang's unification overtures toward South Korean authorities in 1980 were mostly opportunistic in nature. The available primary sources demonstrate that the key impetus for the DPRK regime to restart the dialogue with their Korean counterpart was to exploit the leadership vulnerability of the South. The fact that the DPRK authorities suspended the inter-Korean dialogue as Chun Doo Hwan consolidated his power is one of the strongest pieces of evidence showing the opportunistic nature of the DPRK regime's unification overtures toward the South. Furthermore, through a close reading of the memorandum of conversation between Stephen Solarz and Kim Il Sung, I suggest that the DPRK side misinterpreted Solarz's intention to visit North Korea and meet with Kim Il Sung. Solarz visited North Korea on a personal capacity as a fact-finding mission, whereas the North Korean leadership put much weight on Solarz's visit and believed that Solarz could convince the US government to withdraw its troops from South Korea, a highly controversial option which was no longer pursued by the Carter Administration. *Rodong Sinmun's* coverage of Solarz's meeting with Kim Il Sung, which reported Solarz's visit on the first page with a picture of Solarz and Kim, may represent the DPRK leadership's over-optimism for a breakthrough in DPRK-US relations.

The findings of this paper can benefit researchers and policymakers alike. For the scholars of inter-Korean relations, the paper offers some new insights into the DPRK's unification initiatives in 1980, which could be a groundwork for future studies on how the North Korean regime responded

to the Korean unification question during the last decade of the Cold War. Methodologically, this study's application of different levels of analysis, along with its consultation of archival sources, could contribute to the academic rigor and empirical robustness of historical research into North Korea. For policymakers, this paper's discussion of a perception gap between Kim Il Sung and Solarz might be useful to tackle the broader question of how the DPRK leadership receives and evaluates information about the outside world, a question which is still relevant to our understanding of the DPRK regime's strategic behavior.

The remainder of this paper is comprised of four sections. The first section reviews how previous studies investigated North Korea's unification initiatives of the 1970s and discusses what kind of theoretical framework can be useful in analyzing Pyongyang's overtures for unification. The second section then provides historical context by means of setting out three different levels of analysis: the changing Cold War dynamics in East Asia, North Korea's domestic challenges and South Korea's socio-political instability after the assassination of President Park Chung Hee and the military coup of Chun Doo Hwan. The third section investigates two major unification initiatives put forward by the DPRK regime—inter-Korean dialogue and DPRK-US dialogue—and explains why and how Pyongyang's leadership engaged in these initiatives. The final section summarizes the findings of this paper and discusses policy implications.

## **Literature Review**

In the absence of robust archival research into the DPRK regime's unification initiatives in the 1980s, there are two notable archival research efforts done on North Korea's unification policy in the 1970s. Above all, Bernd Schaefer's study of North Korea's unification policy from 1971 to 1975 serves as a good example of how archival research can be done to illuminate North Korea's strategic thinking and perceptions about unification. Examining North Korean situation of the early 1970s, Schaefer

points out that this period was “the last best chance [for North Korea] to unify the peninsula under its auspices in the wake of Sino-US rapprochement via the bridge of inter-Korean dialogue, shortly before the growing economic gap between the two Koreas.”<sup>2</sup> Based on notes from meetings between DPRK foreign ministry officials and Soviet and GDR diplomats, Schaefer points out that “the July 4 Declaration was merely tactical, especially its third provision of building one state regardless of societal differences; in the end, unified Korea would have to be a socialist state according to the Northern model.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing from a wealth of documents from East German Foreign Ministry archives, Schaefer suggests that the inter-Korean dialogue led the DPRK to have “inaccurate and unrealistic perceptions of Southern support for the Northern system and Kim Il Sung in person.”<sup>4</sup>

Another example is Jong-dae Shin’s analysis of DPRK’s changing perspectives on Korean unification after the release of the North-South joint communique on 4th July 1972. Based on 25 documents acquired from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, Shin argues that the DPRK seems to have believed initially that inter-Korean dialogue was effective in undermining the ROK government and supporting the democratic forces south of the DMZ to seize power. However, due to the successful approval of the *Yushin* constitution which legitimized President Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship, Park was able to force his North Korean counterparts to communicate only with Park’s officials through inter-Korean dialogue. Ultimately, this ruined the DPRK’s plan to “push for the participation of the opposition and other anti-Park government forces in the North-South dialogue and the creation of a 2:1 dialogue structure favorable to the North.”<sup>5</sup>

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2 Bernd Schaefer, “Overconfidence Shattered: North Korean Unification Policy, 1971-1975,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, December 2010, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/NKIDP\\_Working\\_Paper\\_2\\_North\\_Korean\\_Unification\\_Policy\\_web.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/NKIDP_Working_Paper_2_North_Korean_Unification_Policy_web.pdf).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

The works of Schaefer and Shin can be best characterized as studies on North Korea's unification policy which take a historical approach. While fully recognizing the merits of these contributions, I would argue that these studies are less explicit about the theoretical framework they are using. In this respect, setting out a clear theoretical framework in the historical research of North Korea would be helpful in achieving analytical clarity. It might be helpful to see how other disciplines utilize an analytical framework in their investigation of North Korea's strategic thinking around unification. One example would be North Korean foreign policy researchers who have treated North Korea's unification policy as a subset of North Korea's foreign policy and applied different levels of analysis to make sense of North Korea's strategic planning. Although not without shortcomings, studies on North Korea's foreign policy, especially the multiple levels of analysis these studies utilize, can be applied to study North Korea's unification policy.

Byung Chul Koh's *The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea* provides a robust theoretical framework for studying North and South Korea's foreign policy. Building from theoretical underpinnings of Michael Brecher and Graham Allison, Koh suggests a feedback loop in both South and North Korea's foreign policy systems.<sup>6</sup> This feedback loop is divided into three steps—inputs, conversion process and outputs. External and internal settings (inputs) of a country, after being converted through the decision-maker's perception and/or the bureaucratic process within the government, would result in short-term, mid-term and long-term outputs. These outputs may in turn affect the conversion process as well as the external and internal situation of a country.

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5 Jong-dae Shin, "DPRK Perspectives on Korean Reunification after the July 4th Joint Communiqué," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 2012, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/NKIDP\\_eDossier\\_10\\_DPRK\\_Perspectives\\_on\\_Korean\\_Reunification\\_after\\_the\\_July\\_4th\\_Joint\\_Communique.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/NKIDP_eDossier_10_DPRK_Perspectives_on_Korean_Reunification_after_the_July_4th_Joint_Communique.pdf).

6 Byung Chul Koh, *The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 4-5.

Regarding whether unification policy should be considered separately from foreign policy, Koh upholds the view that a unification policy needs to be treated as part of foreign policy; “North and South Korea are two separate states in every sense of the term. In fact, as measured by the yardstick of interstate relations, they are more apart from each other than they are from most of the strictly foreign states.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this, in Koh’s assessment of North Korea’s external environment, the South Korean situation was regarded as one of the structural factors and unification policy was relegated under the broader category of foreign policy. Yet Koh claims that “the strategic objective of reunification occupies such a pivotal position in the foreign policies of Seoul and Pyongyang alike that the latter cannot be understood apart from the former.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, based on Koh’s argument, analyzing North Korea’s foreign policy should enable us to understand North Korea’s unification policy as well.

Koh correctly notes that even though both the ROK and DPRK did not formally recognize each other, they were undeniably *de facto* two different Korean states in the 1980s. While Koh’s logic behind treating North-South relations like any other bilateral relations makes sense as an attempt to understand the overall foreign policy system of North and South Korea, the same framework may not be so helpful in analyzing North Korea in the context of Korean unification. More important, Koh’s analytical framework obscures the subtle nature of inter-Korean relations which cannot be entirely defined as a form of normal state-to-state relations. What makes inter-Korean relations different from all other bilateral diplomatic relations is that the two Korean *states* compete against each other to become the only legitimate *nation* in the Korean peninsula.<sup>9</sup> To

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7 Koh, 7.

8 Ibid.

9 Samuel S. Kim, “North Korea and the Non-Communist World: The Quest for National Identity,” in *North Korea in Transition*, eds. Chong-Sik Lee and Se-Hee Yoo (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1991), 17-42.



borrow the words of Samuel Kim, the two Koreas have fought a “competitive zero-sum game in which legitimation has come to be viewed as dependent on the delegitimation of the other side.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in order to understand North Korea’s strategic thinking around unification, Koh’s framework needs to be slightly modified; the assessment of the South Korean situation must be considered along with other sources of input—external and internal settings—rather than being considered as part of the external settings. Only then can the dynamics of inter-Korean relations be properly captured, offering us an explanation into why and how North Korea behaved in a certain way to achieve their objective of unification.

To conclude, studies on North Korea’s foreign policy provides a methodological foundation for studies on North Korea’s unification initiatives. Particularly, the use of different levels of analysis—external, internal and inter-Korean—provides methodological improvement in the historical research of Pyongyang’s unification approach. The way forward, then, is to consult available archival sources through three different levels of analysis, thus providing theoretically sound and empirically robust research on North Korea’s unification overtures.

## **Historical Context**

To make sense of North Korean initiatives for unification in 1980, it is necessary for us to situate ourselves in the late 1979 and closely examine what was happening in three different dimensions—international, North Korean and South Korean—as well as questioning how such developments might have prompted Pyongyang’s activities to facilitate unification.

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<sup>10</sup> Kim, 22.

## I. International Environment of 1979 And Its Impact on the DPRK's Foreign Relations

In the late 1970s, the Cold War dynamics in East Asia were in flux as China improved its relations with the United States and Japan while the relationship between Beijing and Moscow deteriorated. In 1978, China signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Japan and decided to terminate the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance which had prevented China from attacking Soviet allies. Arguably, the regional Cold War order shifted when China normalized its relations with the United States in January 1979 and attacked Vietnam—a Soviet ally—in February as a punitive measure for its invasion of Cambodia. While China had yet to establish formal diplomatic relations with South Korea, one memo from the South Korean Foreign Ministry noted that Chinese diplomats, who previously remained distant and reserved toward South Korean diplomats, started to engage in casual conversations with them in formal receptions.<sup>11</sup> The amount of indirect trade between South Korea and China was steadily on the rise as well, altogether suggesting a growing Chinese interest in engaging with South Korea.<sup>12</sup>

In response to the Sino-Vietnamese war, the North Korean media directed its criticism toward Vietnam's "dominationism" rather than the Chinese invasion of Vietnam; the DPRK-PRC relations, at least on the surface, remained cordial throughout 1979.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the North Korean regime would have been deeply troubled by the growing possibility that China would no longer actively support the North Korean position on the Korean unification issue. Simply put, North Korea's position on unification was that the two Koreas must solve a hard question—that is, to have political negotiations—first and then engage in various inter-Korean

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11 "An Investigation on Chinese Attitude toward South Korea, 1980," (in Korean) pp. 7-8, DVD, 2010-10 (14148), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

12 "An Investigation on Chinese Attitude toward South Korea, 1980," (in Korean) p. 3.

13 Young C. Kim, "North Korea 1979: National Unification and Economic Development," *Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (1980): 58.

exchanges. North Korea's previous proposals for establishing a federation were only presented as interim measures, only if South Korean authorities were not ready to proceed with political negotiations first. The South Korean position, however, was the other way around: engage in trust-building measures first and then have political negotiations at the very last stage of unification. From North Korea's point of view, any measures aimed at perpetuating the division of the Korean peninsula as well as the very existence of the two *de facto* Korean states must be thwarted.

In this regard, Sino-US normalization amplified the DPRK leadership's fear that China may now align its views on the situation in the Korean peninsula with that of the United States. Indeed, according to the US State Department's analysis, Chinese authorities, as early as 1975, seemed to prefer long-term stability on the Korean peninsula over radical changes which might be prompted by the North Korean attempt to unify the North and South in a short period of time.<sup>14</sup> Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua's address given to Chinese Foreign Ministry officials in January 1980 also confirms that China did not expect South and North Korea to be reunified in the near future and China was willing to use the "South Korea Card"—that is, to improve the PRC's relations with the ROK—as a counter-measure to North Korea's tilt toward the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between North Korea and Soviet Union, when compared to Sino-DPRK relations, remained relatively robust. For Moscow's part, it was strategically important to strengthen its relations with Pyongyang when the traditional Cold War balance of power in East Asia between US-ROK-Japan and Soviet Union-DPRK-PRC started to shift due to Sino-US normalization. While the North Korean leadership would

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14 Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976: Revised Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 220.

15 Hua Huang, "Diplomatic Situation and Foreign Policy in the 1980s and the tasks afterwards," (Chinese original translated in Korean) quoted in Jin-Yong Oh, *China, Soviet Union and Two Koreas during the Kim Il Sung era* (Paju: Nanam Publications, 2004), 78.

have hoped that the impact of Sino-US normalization could be neutralized through the withdrawal of US troops from the Korean peninsula, the Carter Administration's withdrawal plan, which reflected President Carter's personal ambition and lacked thorough consultation, faced a huge backlash from the US military, congress and public alike.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the Carter Administration had to suspend its original troop withdrawal plan in July 1979, and such a decision to keep the US troops in the Korean peninsula would have undoubtedly caused the DPRK regime to gravitate toward the Soviet Union. Accordingly, Moscow started to show "a greater degree of sensitivity to North Korean interests than had been the case before," and the Soviet media provided "correct" analyses from the vantage point of Pyongyang by voicing official support of the North Korean position on unification while condemning China for its "alleged perfidy and complicity with the U.S. and South Korea."<sup>17</sup>

Same as its previous silence on the Chinese invasion on Vietnam, the DPRK regime did not explicitly condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This, however, does not mean that Pyongyang covertly recognized the Soviet-backed Karmal regime in Afghanistan; in February 1980, Pyongyang did not participate in the Pro-Soviet statement issued by communist parties gathered at Sofia. North Korea's official position toward the Karmal regime only became clear in April 1980 when North Korea sent a cable to express its solidarity with Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the DPRK regime would have been "in a state of indecision, if not confusion," in dealing with the conflicts within the socialist bloc.<sup>19</sup> Determining the official position to these conflicts would have been challenging for the DPRK regime because both Chinese and

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16 Eric B. Setzekorn, "Policy Revolt: Army Opposition to the Korea Withdrawal Plan," *Parameters* 48(3) Autumn 2018: 6.

17 Kim, 58.

18 Young C. Kim, "North Korea in 1980: The Son Also Rises," *Asian Survey* 21, no. 1 (1981): 124.

19 Barry K. Gills, *Korea Versus Korea: A Case of Contested Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 1996), 202.

Soviet actions were at odds with North Korea's fervent protest against "the presence of foreign troops in all countries."<sup>20</sup> Yet the fact that Pyongyang eventually endorsed the Karmal regime in Afghanistan reflects the significance of the Soviet Union's economic and diplomatic support.<sup>21</sup>

## II. North Korea's Internal Challenges: Succession and Economic Development

Amidst the changing structural environment in East Asia, North Korea in the late 1970s had to deal with its internal issues, namely the question of succession and declining economic growth. As Kim Il Sung got older and allegedly weaker due to his health issues, the DPRK regime had to deal with the question of who would be next in line to lead the nation. In this regard, hereditary succession was an "understandable" decision from Kim Il Sung's point of view.<sup>22</sup> Upon observing the situation in Soviet Union where Stalin was "bitterly criticized by the people who were once seen as his most trusted lieutenants" as well as in China where Lin Biao—Mao's then designated successor—staged a coup even before the death of Mao, Kim would have felt the need to handle the succession question in a way that preserved his legacy while bestowing his legitimacy to his successor.<sup>23</sup>

Kim Il Sung's first official remarks on succession came in an address delivered on 24 June 1971.<sup>24</sup> While not using the term "succession" explicitly, Kim emphasized that the new generation should carry on the

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<sup>20</sup> Kim, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>23</sup> Lankov, 71.

<sup>24</sup> While the official remarks on succession came out in June 1971, it is assumed that the DPRK regime covertly prepared for succession as early as the 1960s. Kim Il Sung had shown his interest in succession in 1968 by praising "the revolutionary lineage," and visitors who visited Pyongyang in 1966 heard the rumours that Kim Jong Il was widely expected as a prospective successor. See Seung-ji Kwak, "The Theory of Political Succession and Kim Jong Il's Rise to Power," (in Korean) *Security Studies* 23 (1993) for more details.

revolutionary tasks.<sup>25</sup> As such, in the latter half of 1972, the DPRK regime precipitated the emergence of this “new generation” by purging some of the old members of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) while expanding the WPK party membership to some 400,000 North Korean youth.<sup>26</sup> In February 1973, when Kim Jong Il—the son of Kim Il Sung—was assigned to lead “Three Revolution Team Movement,” which was a movement designed to mobilize North Korean youth, it became apparent that Kim Jong Il would continue the revolution and lead the next generation.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, Kim Jong Il consolidated his power within WPK and was appointed as a propaganda secretary in WPK Central Committee in September 1973 and elected as a member of the politburo in February 1974.

Despite Kim Jong Il’s growing prominence especially among North Korean youth, Kim Il Sung’s authority remained uncompromised. It was still Kim Il Sung, not Kim Jong Il, who oversaw the ongoing North Korean revolutionary struggle. Moreover, all these internal developments regarding North Korea’s preparation for succession were not publicized at this stage. The fact that Kim Jong Il assumed key positions within the WPK was only known to the outside world in the early 1980s.<sup>28</sup> The only clue from the DPRK media was the expression *Tangjungang* (party center) which first appeared in 1975. While the expression *Tangjungang* completely disappeared from the DPRK media in 1977 and 1978, it reappeared in early 1979.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the succession process in the DPRK in the 1970s, which unfolded gradually and covertly, did not pose a serious threat to the

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25 Kim Il Sung, “Youth should carry on the revolution,” (in Korean) Address delivered at the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of League of Socialist Working Youth of Korea, June 24, 1971, *Kim Il Sung Works* 26: 203.

26 Seung-ji Kwak, “The Theory of Political Succession and Kim Jong Il’s Rise to Power,” (in Korean) *Security Studies* 23 (1993): 37.

27 “Three Revolution Team Movement,” (in Korean) North Korea Information Portal, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/term/view/NkKnwldgDicary.do?pageIndex=1&dicaryId=120>.

28 Kwak, 37.

29 Kim, “North Korea 1979: National Unification and Economic Development,” 62.

stability of the regime.

Although the DPRK leadership handled the succession issue in a way that effectively preserved the stability and legitimacy of the regime, it was not as successful as it had hoped in managing the North Korean economy in the 1970s. Recognizing the limitations of the self-reliant economy of the 1960s, North Korea in the early 1970s expanded its trade relations with the West, mostly through receiving foreign loans.<sup>30</sup> As the global price for mineral resources—North Korea's major export item—skyrocketed in 1972 and 1973, the DPRK regime might have been confident that there would be no serious issues with loan repayments.<sup>31</sup> However, due to the oil shock in 1974, the DPRK's trade deficit and foreign debts significantly increased. Consequently, as the North Korean economy entered recession in the late 1970s, the DPRK regime abandoned its opening-up policy and returned to its original principle of self-reliance.<sup>32</sup>

Adding to North Korea's ailing economy was the DPRK regime's huge spending on the military. Compared to South Korea in the 1970s where defense spending took up approximately 7% of its GNP, North Korea allocated 25% of its GNP to its military, thereby resulting in "nearly two-and-one-half times as many tanks, one-third more armored personal carriers, more artillery, over twice as many jet combat aircraft, a three-fold advantage in naval craft" than South Korea.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, the military balance in the Korean peninsula was only stable with the continued presence of US troops. If the US forces withdrew from South Korea, it was North Korea which "would enjoy a military advantage over the South."<sup>34</sup>

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30 Moonsoo Yang, "70 Years of Economic Development Strategy in North Korea: Retrospect and Prospect," (in Korean) *Unification Policy Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015): 42.

31 Yang, 45.

32 Ibid.

33 John H. Cushman, "The Military Balance in Korea," *Asian Affairs* 6, no. 6 (1979): 359–69.

34 CIA, "The Military Balance," Document no. CIA-RDP81T00700R000100050009-0, CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.

Another important change in the North Korean economy in the late 1970s was the amount of aid it received from the Soviet Union and China. While Chinese aid given to North Korea gradually declined to “a politically perfunctory level,” the Soviet Union continued to remain the major donor to the North Korean economy as well as Pyongyang’s biggest trade partner.<sup>35</sup> The trade volume between Soviet Union and North Korea in 1978 and 1980 recorded \$551.4 million and \$881.5 million respectively, indicating a sharp increase.<sup>36</sup>

### III. The ROK’s Domestic Situation and the DPRK’s Response

Similar to the DPRK leadership’s effort to ensure the stability of the regime while facilitating economic growth, South Korea also underwent the process of consolidating political power and achieving economic development, especially under President Park Chung Hee’s rule. In the 1970s, the South Korean economy experienced rapid growth, mainly due to the successful implementation of a 5-year economic development plan which focused on nurturing heavy industry and facilitating export-oriented growth. At the same time, Park Chung Hee consolidated his power through *Yushin* constitutional reform which enabled his lifetime rule as the leader of South Korea. Such economic and political stability boosted South Korea’s confidence over North Korea and eventually led Park to announce “Special Declaration on Peaceful Unification and Foreign Policy” (also known as 6.23 Declaration) in 1973, which stated that the ROK would not oppose the DPRK’s participation in international organizations and that the ROK was open to establishing diplomatic relations with all countries, based on the principle of reciprocity and equality; the ROK government even urged those countries that do not share the same ideology and system with that of ROK to open their doors.<sup>37</sup>

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35 Jae Kyu Park, “North Korea’s political and economic relations with China and the Soviet Union: From 1954 to 1980,” *Comparative Strategy* 4, no. 3 (1984): 297.

36 Park, 298.



Yet the two sources of South Korean confidence vis-à-vis North Korea started to decline in 1979. Due to the second oil shock, the South Korean economy experienced a high level of inflation—18.3% and 28.7% in 1979 and 1980, respectively.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the growing public discontent over Park Chung Hee's *Yushin* dictatorial system resulted in student-led protests in the city of Busan and Masan, collectively known as Bu-Ma Democratic Protests. On October 26, 1979, only 6 days after the end of Bu-Ma protests, Park Chung Hee was assassinated by Kim Jae-gyu, the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. And on December 12, 1979, Major General Chun Doo Hwan—commander of Security Command—took control of the South Korean military by arresting the ROK Army Chief of Staff Jung Seung-hwa without the authorization from the acting president Choi Kyu Ha. This event, also known as the 12.12. Military Insurrection, heralded Chun Doo Hwan's emergence as South Korea's next authoritarian leader.

The assassination of Park Chung Hee in October 1979 and Chun Doo Hwan's coup in December 1979 were two key events that seriously undermined South Korea's socio-political stability. The available primary sources altogether suggest that Pyongyang exploited the leadership vulnerability in Seoul at this time. First, intelligence received by the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that North Korea was not expecting Park Chung Hee's death at all; an unnamed North Korean political intelligence officer, overjoyed by Park's assassination, commented that "the unification of the fatherland is quickly approaching."<sup>39</sup> Second, immediately after the death of Park Chung Hee, the DPRK leadership summoned its heads of overseas missions to participate in an extraordinary meeting.<sup>40</sup> Considering that the meeting of North Korean

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37 Park Chung Hee, "Special Declaration on Peaceful Unification and Foreign Policy," (in Korean) ROK Presidential Archives.

38 "Consumer Price Index," (in Korean) K-indicator (Statistics Korea), accessed June 13, 2023, <https://www.index.go.kr/unify/idx-info.do?idxCd=4226>.

39 "North Korean Activities after 1979. 10. 26 and 12. 12, 1979-80," (in Korean) p. 48, DVD, 2010-34 (18995/14411), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

diplomats normally takes place in Pyongyang at the beginning of the year, the rationale behind this early meeting would be to respond to the changes in the South Korean situation after the assassination of President Park. While we do not have any access to the minutes of this meeting, it is safe to assume that Pyongyang would have reviewed and updated its strategy, especially concerning unification.

## North Korea's Unification Drive in 1980

In response to developments in the late 1979, the DPRK regime, from early 1980, vigorously engaged in activities to foster favorable conditions for Korean unification. This section examines why and how the North Korean regime pursued inter-Korean dialogue while exploring the possibility of establishing direct contact with the US in 1980.

### I. North Korea's Proposal for Prime Ministerial Talks

The inter-Korean contact, which had been virtually disconnected since the mid 1970s, resumed on January 12, 1980 as North Korea sent 12 letters in total to various South Korean individuals.<sup>41</sup> In his letter to South Korean Prime Minister, North Korean Premier Lee Jong-ok expressed his hope to meet his South Korean counterpart face to face to have a candid

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40 "North Korea's External Activities, 1979-80," (in Korean) p. 46, DVD, Registration No. 11774, Classification No. 725.9, ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

41 Among those eleven recipients of the letter were South Korea's opposition politicians such as Kim Jong Pil, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung—collectively known as 'the Three Kims'—as well as Yun Posun, former President of South Korea, Lee Hee-sung, the ROK Army Chief of Staff, Ham Seok-heon, a key figure in South Korea's *minjung* (citizen) movement and Kim Sou-hwan, the first South Korean Cardinal who supported democratic movements against authoritarian regimes. See "North Korea's Proposal for North-South Prime Ministerial Talks, 1980, Vol. 1," (in Korean) p. 46, DVD, 2010-35 (14421), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

exchange of views. Lee suggested that the DPRK was open to hold talks between North and South Korean authorities along with the political negotiation that the DPRK had been proposing. Lee also mentioned that the DPRK was willing to “promote the meeting of senior official representatives of South and North Korea.”<sup>42</sup> On January 24, 1980, South Korean Prime Minister Shin Hyon-hwack replied to the DPRK Premier Lee Jong-ok's letter, stating that South Korea was willing to proceed with the Prime Ministerial talks. On January 30, 1980, North Korea accepted South Korea's suggestion for holding working-level talks, and on February 6, 1980, the first working-level talks between the three delegates from each side took place.<sup>43</sup>

However, the preparatory meetings made very little progress because each side undermined its sincere intent for dialogue. For example, South Korean authorities, upon discovering three infiltration attempts from North Korea in March 1980, warned their counterparts that “the dialogue cannot be carried on” if North Korea continues armed provocations.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, South Korean government's expansion of Martial Law to the entire Korean peninsula on May 17, which was justified on the grounds that North Korea could invade South Korea at the time of South Korea's civil unrest, ruffled the North Korean delegation's feathers. Hyeon Jun-geuk, the head of the North Korean delegation, criticized the South Korean government's utilization of a perceived North Korean threat as an excuse for expanding Martial Law as “an act of provocation against us, the other side in the dialogue.”<sup>45</sup>

Another element which delayed the progress of inter-Korean dialogue was the way each side set its agenda for the Prime Ministerial Talks as well

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42 “North Korea's Proposal for North-South Prime Ministerial Talks, 1980, Vol. 1,” p. 36.

43 Ibid., p. 48.

44 “South-North Dialogue in Korea (No. 23, July 1980),” ed. by Special Office for Inter-Korean Dialogue Ministry of Unification, 43, <https://lib.uniedu.go.kr/libeka/elec/00082047.pdf>.

45 “South-North Dialogue in Korea (No. 23, July 1980),” 58.

as their political implications. South Korean participants suggested three agenda points—building mutual trust, establishing peace and achieving unification—whereas North Korea came up with a single agendum entitled “Concerning the Expedition of Independent and Peaceful Unification of the Fatherland through Collaboration and Unity in All Areas of the South and the North.”<sup>46</sup> The North Korean side claimed that the South Korean delegation’s ulterior motive behind “establishing peace” was to consolidate division in the Korean peninsula; this is consistent with the North Korean approach toward unification which prioritizes a top-down, immediate political resolution over incremental trust-building measures leading up to eventual political negotiation which was endorsed by Seoul.

On the other hand, the South Korean side questioned the usage of two words—collaboration (*hapjak*) and unity (*dangyeol*)—that appeared in the proposed North Korean agendum as these words have specific political connotations within the DPRK. Quoting North Korean publications, the South Korean delegation argued that collaboration in the North Korean context means “enabl[ing] the people of South Korea to realize the righteousness of the Great *Juche* Idea of the Respected and Beloved Leader as well as the real superiority of the socialist system he has prepared in the Northern half of the Republic.”<sup>47</sup> The meaning of unity is also along the same lines: “to facilitate ‘unity’ South Korea should do away with its anti-Communist policy such as anti-Communist laws, anti-Communist education and the anti-Communist nature of the press.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, South Korean authorities objected to the usage of “collaboration” and “unity” in the proposed North Korean agendum for the Prime Ministerial Talks. If South Korea were to agree with using these two terms, North Korea could potentially argue in the future that South Korea had accepted the political meaning of “collaboration” and “unity” as used in North Korea. North Korea could then demand South Korea to abandon its anti-communist stance and embrace Juche ideology as agreed-upon

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 56.

procedures.

Although the preparatory meeting for Prime Ministerial Talks continued for a while even at the time of the Gwangju uprising, it was evident that North Korea quickly lost its interest in pursuing Prime Ministerial Talks especially after South Korea's socio-political situation was stabilized in the second half of 1980.<sup>49</sup> As Choi Kyu Ha resigned from his presidency on August 16, 1980 and Chun Doo Hwan became the 11<sup>th</sup> President of ROK on August 27, 1980, North Korea announced on September 24, 1980 that it would no longer continue its dialogue with South Korea. The nominal cause for the North's decision to discontinue the preparatory meeting has to do with the questionable legitimacy of the Chun Doo Hwan government. Kim Il Sung claimed that the continuation of inter-Korean dialogue would mean that the DPRK would be recognizing the new government of ROK under Chun Doo Hwan—which the DPRK regime fervently opposed due to Chun's violent handling of the Gwangju protests—, hence the DPRK's decision to pull out from the preparatory meeting.<sup>50</sup>

The primary impetus for North Korea's push for inter-Korean dialogue in early 1980 was the vulnerability of President Choi Kyu Ha's leadership. Choi, as an interim leader, had little political power and

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49 Chun Doo Hwan and some far-right South Koreans alleged that the North Korean military was involved in agitating the citizens at Gwangju. However, Hee-song Kim points to the fact that the South Korean delegation, at the working-level meeting which took place during the Gwangju uprising, did not raise any official complaint on this matter to the North Korean delegation. Previous records of the working-level meeting suggest that both sides raised official complaints when the other side eroded mutual trust (e.g. at the time of North Korea's infiltration attempts and South Korea's expansion of Martial Law based on the alleged North Korean invasion). This is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that the DPRK military was not involved in the situation at Gwangju. See Hee-Song Kim, "1980 May Gwangju, and The North Korea - A critical review on the argument of 'North Korea Intervention,'" (in Korean) *Journal of Democracy and Human Rights* 16, no.4 (2016): 33-74.

50 "Kim Il Sung announces the suspension of Prime Ministerial talks," (in Korean), Dong-a ilbo, September 25, 1980, accessed via Naver Digital News Library.

intention to curb the growing influence of Chun Doo Hwan and his military faction. For many years as a career diplomat, Choi was well known for his lack of interest in becoming a powerful politician. Such characteristics of Choi would have been useful in fulfilling his diplomatic duties, but it clearly did not sit well with his newly given role as a President. South Korean Prime Minister Shin Hyon-hwack's testimony reveals that President Choi Kyu Ha completely took his hands off from his duties at the time when a strong and decisive leadership was needed. When the student-led protests intensified in April 1980, Kim Ok-gil, then Minister of Education, had to discuss the countermeasures with Prime Minister Shin instead because President Choi did not respond to Minister Kim's urgent request for a meeting for a week.<sup>51</sup>

In this context, the DPRK regime might have assessed that they can effectively exploit the weakened leadership in South Korea. Considering that the South Korean government's decision-making abilities were seriously constrained at this time, it was an opportunity for the North Koreans to set the terms for the dialogue, as shown in the suggested agenda from the DPRK delegation. As Chun Doo Hwan consolidated his power and became both *de facto* and *de jure* leader of South Korea, however, the DPRK regime might have realized that the South Korean leadership was not as vulnerable as before and therefore nothing much could be exploited from the South Korean situation. The fact that North Korean authorities only participated in preparatory meetings during the short-lived presidency of Choi Kyu Ha substantiates that North Korea wanted to take advantage of South Korea's leadership vacuum.

One may ask why the North Korean leadership chose a peace offensive over military options especially at the time when South Korea was in a state of chaos. While any documentary evidence which demonstrates such a North Korean strategic decision is not currently available, we can make

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51 Cheol-sik Shin, *Shin Hyon-Hwack's Testimony: Modern History's Decisive Moments Spoken by Father and Documented by Son*, (in Korean) Medici Media, 2017: 327.

educated guesses based on the accounts of Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia who spoke with Kim Il Sung on multiple occasions around this time. First, Kim Il Sung probably did not want another all-out war in the Korean peninsula which could be equally destructive to North Korea. According to Prince Sihanouk, Kim Il Sung “has done a lot for the development of his country” by building “schools, hospitals, cultural centers and other facilities for his people and youth” while maintaining an imperial and luxurious lifestyle for himself.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, waging another Korean War would have been too costly of an option which may not have been as attractive as it was in 1950. Second, it would have been difficult for Kim Il Sung to secure enough military and diplomatic support from his immediate neighbors at the time when the Soviet Union was at war with Afghanistan and when China was getting closer with the United States. In fact, Sihanouk commented that Kim Il Sung was “intelligent” because he knew that he could not fight against the United States, could not rely on the Soviet Union and did not want to rely on China.<sup>53</sup>

On a similar note, one of the South Korean foreign ministry's internal memos demonstrates that North Korea's senior Cold War partners—Soviet Union and China—might have nudged North Korea to choose a peaceful option over a military option at the time of turbulent change both inside and outside the Korean peninsula. Specifically, the memo notes that the Soviet Union might have needed another dramatic event in the region in order to divert the public attention from its invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the memo points out that Beijing also would have wanted to avoid the escalation of tension in the Korean peninsula, thereby strongly recommending the leadership at Pyongyang to engage in inter-Korean dialogue.<sup>55</sup> While the memo does not specify why Beijing would prefer

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52 *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XXII, Southeast Asia and the Pacific*, eds. David P. Nickles and Melissa Jane Taylor (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2017), Document 83, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v22/d83>.

53 Ibid.

54 “North Korea in 1980,” (in Korean) pp. 23-24, DVD, 2010-35 (36869), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

stability in the Korean peninsula, this might have to do with China's economic modernization under Deng Xiaoping's rule; a stable external condition would have been important for China to focus on its economic development. In terms of North Korea's internal situation and its impact on suggesting inter-Korean dialogue, the South Korean foreign ministry assessed that North Korea would prefer stability over conflict when the important process of succession was underway, but it assessed the succession factor was more of a backburner than a major trigger or hindrance.<sup>56</sup>

Yet there was a possibility that North Korea could have framed this inter-Korean dialogue as an achievement by Kim Jong Il if the meeting of the two Prime Ministers would have taken place. According to South Korean Foreign Ministry's analysis, Yim Chun-gil, who led the North Korean delegation on behalf of Hyeon Jun-geuk in August 1980, was known as Kim Jong Il's direct subordinate.<sup>57</sup> If preparatory meetings between the two Koreas were successful and the inter-Korean Prime Ministerial Talks eventually took place, Kim Jong Il would have been given credit for achieving another breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. In fact, there is a precedent which suggests that a successful management of inter-Korean relations can be attributed to the "next generation" of the DPRK leadership. For example, there is the case of the 1972 Joint Communiqué between North and South when Kim Yong-ju—the younger brother of Kim Il Sung who competed with Kim Jong Il to become the heir apparent—signed the document as the head of the North Korean delegation, although Kim Yong-ju eventually lost his ground in the competition for succession.

To sum up, while the primary motivation behind North Korea's

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55 "North Korea in 1980," (in Korean) p. 23.

56 "North Korea in 1980," (in Korean) p. 27.

57 "North Korea's Proposal for North-South Prime Ministerial Talks, 1980, Vol. 3," (in Korean) p. 190, DVD, 2010-35 (18996), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.



proposal for Prime Ministerial Talks was to exploit the leadership vulnerability in the South, the changing Cold War dynamics in East Asia as well as the ongoing preparation for succession within the DPRK can explain why Pyongyang engaged in a peace offensive rather than a full-scale war in the Korean peninsula. Had Chun Doo Hwan failed to consolidate his power after the Gwangju Uprising, the North Korean leadership would have continued to use the inter-Korean dialogue channel as a means of creating favorable conditions to achieve unification under the Northern terms, as shown by the DPRK delegation's inclusion of two politically charged terms—"collaboration" and "unity"—in the dialogue agenda during the preparatory meetings.

## **II. The DPRK-US Dialogue in July 1980**

While exploring the inter-Korean dialogue channel, North Korea in 1980 was eager to improve its relations with the United States. Before delving into why the DPRK regime wanted to advance DPRK-US relations at this historical juncture, perhaps it would be useful for us to know why the DPRK regime wanted to engage with the US in the first place. Indeed, one of the major diplomatic objectives of North Korea, especially from the 1970s and onwards, was talking to the United States directly. In 1974, North Korea proposed bilateral talks between the US with a view of changing the armistice agreement into a peace treaty. The DPRK's logic behind talking to the United States directly is based on the legal interpretation that Pyongyang and Washington were the signatories of the armistice agreement, whereas Seoul was not. Eventually, this direct negotiation with the US would allow the DPRK leadership to push for its long-standing demand of US troop withdrawal from South Korea.

On the other hand, the official position of ROK and the US was to solve the Korean question through inter-Korean dialogue. Under the Carter Administration, however, the idea of holding three-way talks between South Korea, North Korea and the United States emerged as a possibility to tackle the Korean question. It should be noted that the idea of holding

three party talks was the invention of President Carter, who also had a strong conviction to withdraw troops from the Korean peninsula; once the tension in the Korean Peninsula was relaxed through dialogue, it would be easier for Carter to push ahead for planned US troop withdrawal.<sup>58</sup> While President Park Chung Hee opposed this idea at first, he later accepted it because he believed that the US would neither ignore nor exclude the South Korean government's position, especially regarding US troop withdrawal.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, on July 1, 1979, South Korea and the United States officially proposed tripartite talks to North Korea, of which North Korea rejected on the grounds that "signing a peace treaty and removing the US troops from the Korean peninsula are problems between the North and the United States" and claimed that "South Korea can participate as an observer, but only after the talk between the DPRK and US takes place."<sup>60</sup>

From the DPRK regime's perspective, the tripartite option contradicted the DPRK's basic principle of non-recognition of the ROK regime. If the two Koreas, along with the United States, were represented as equals at the negotiation table, this would be the very example of a "two Korea policy" which the DPRK regime fervently opposed. Moreover, a tripartite dialogue between Seoul, Pyongyang and Washington could facilitate the Soviet Union's recognition of South Korea, which was a looming possibility from Kim Il Sung's point of view.<sup>61</sup> These are the reasons why North Korea preferred direct negotiation with the US and did not accept the tripartite talks offer in the late 1970s.

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58 Seuk-ryule Hong, "The U.S. Policy toward Korea and Tripartite Talks during the Carter Administration," (in Korean) *Korea and International Politics* 32, no. 2 (2016): 33-71.

59 Hong, 56.

60 Hong, 57.

61 "Minutes of Conversation at the Official Meeting between the Romanian Delegation and the Korean Delegation," May 20, 1978, Wilson Center Digital Archive, National Central Historical Archives, Romanian Communist Party, Central Committee, Foreign Relations Section, Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114456>.

If we consider Pyongyang's persistence in improving its relations with Washington as an underlying factor, the immediate cause for Pyongyang to proactively advance DPRK-US relations at this time would be China's shift in its position toward Korean unification. According to the CIA's analysis, changes in the regional Cold War structure in East Asia, prompted by the improvement of Sino-Japan relations in 1978 as well as the Sino-US normalization in 1979, led China to "redefine [its] interests" in the Korean peninsula by "moderat[ing] its previous strident propaganda backing for North Korea and . . . portray[ing] a propitious atmosphere for promoting peace and stability on the peninsula through talks between Pyongyang and Seoul."<sup>62</sup> Eventually, in the eyes of the CIA analysts, China "has moved toward accepting the status quo in Korea and even tacitly approving 'two Koreas' . . . [and therefore] the Chinese have emphasized that China perceives reunification as a long-term development."<sup>63</sup> So when North Korean diplomats visited China in March 1980, they "conveyed their government's belief that, although the Chinese officially support Korean reunification, they actually oppose it."<sup>64</sup> Consequently, North Korea would have concluded that the only way they can mitigate the impact caused by China's adjustment of its stance on the Korean unification issue would be to radically improve its relations with the US.

*Stephen Solarz's Visit to the DPRK*

The US Congressman Stephen Solarz's visit to North Korea in July 1980 marked the first American public official's visit to North Korea in history. A then four-term Democratic Congressman from New York's 13<sup>th</sup> district, Solarz was one of, if not the most, active members of the House in the field of foreign affairs. Solarz's active engagement in foreign affairs took place at the time when the US Congress, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War,

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62 CIA, "China's Policy Toward Korea: A Delicate Balance," Document no. CIA-RDP08S02113R000100170001-0, CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

started to assume a greater role in shaping American foreign policy by checking the President's power in committing the US to an overseas armed conflict. It should be noted, however, that an individual congressman's power was still fairly limited in creating a decisive change in diplomatic relations. Even with the increased influence of the US Congress in shaping foreign policy, the primary organ for designing American foreign policy was within the Executive Branch, namely the National Security Council and the State Department.

There are several reasons why the DPRK leadership might have considered Solarz as an appropriate interlocutor. Above all, to the eyes of the DPRK regime, Solarz was recognized as a pro-unification activist. For example, in a conversation between Solarz and Kim Young Nam—a Politburo member as well as the Director of the International Affairs Department in Workers' Party of Korea—, Kim commended Solarz as follows:

For a long time we have known of your interest in Korean unification. Otherwise, you would not have traveled [*sic*] such a long distance. The time difference is 13 hours. It's not easy to come here. I hope your visit will be an opportunity to remove misunderstanding between the United States and the DPRK and to start toward bringing about the peaceful unification of Korea. I'm well informed of your righteous activities and have sympathy toward you.<sup>65</sup>

From the vantage point of Pyongyang, Solarz's "righteous activities" would refer to his active support of the Carter Administration's decision to withdraw US troops from South Korea. For instance, in a congressional hearing held in 1976, Solarz justified his support of the US troop withdrawal

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65 "Records of Conversation between Congressman Stephen J. Solarz and Kim Il Sung and Kim Yong-nam," August 4, 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Jimmy Carter Library, Carter White House Central Files, White House Central Files Subject File, CO-41, CO-82 Executive 12077-12081, Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115254>.

as follows: “the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea and the elimination of the specter of a U.S. involvement in land war on the Asian Continent would strengthen the long-term American commitment to support Korea in the event war broke out through logistical assistance rather than direct combat involvement.”<sup>66</sup> Solarz subsequently introduced “A bill to provide for the phased withdrawal of U.S. Armed Forces from Korea” in the US House of Representatives on March 1977.<sup>67</sup> By the time Solarz visited Pyongyang, however, he changed his view and supported the US government’s decision to suspend the withdrawal program.<sup>68</sup> Yet the fact that Solarz was willing and able to support the cause of US troop withdrawal from the Korean peninsula was surely in the DPRK’s favor.

Second, Solarz had developed a particular interest in South Korea’s democratization. He was especially keen to save the life of Kim Dae Jung, who had been kidnapped under the Park Chung Hee regime and was sentenced to death under Chun Doo Hwan’s rule. Solarz “spent much of [his] time during visits in the late 1970s and early 1980s trying to help Kim Dae-jung.”<sup>69</sup> In June 1980, Solarz sent a letter signed by 31 US congressmen to President Choi Kyu Ha, expressing their concern over the arrest of Kim Dae Jung and other prominent South Korean political figures.<sup>70</sup> When

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66 “Shifting Balance of Power in Asia, Implications for Future U.S. Policy: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Future Foreign Policy Research and Development of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Ninety-fourth Congress,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976, <https://books.google.co.kr/books?id=gQefIycgiU0C>.

67 Congress.gov, “Actions - H.R.5832 - 95th Congress (1977-1978): A bill to provide for the phased withdrawal of U.S. Armed Forces from Korea,” March 30, 1977, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/95th-congress/house-bill/5832/all-actions>.

68 Regarding how the US Congress started to oppose the idea of US troop withdrawal from South Korea, see Kwan-haeng Cho, “The Study on the change of U. S. Congress ‘perspective for the Carter Administration’s U. S. Troops withdrawal policy from the ROK,” (in Korean) *Military History*, no. 100 (2016): 303-332.

69 Stephen J. Solarz, *Journeys to War & Peace: A Congressional Memoir* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 130.

Solarz met President Choi in July 1980, he once again expressed US concern over the trial of Kim Dae Jung and urged the South Korean government to adhere to the appropriate legal process.<sup>71</sup> The fact that Solarz wanted to save the life of Kim Dae Jung would have been welcomed by the DPRK leadership which also hoped to see the emergence of a more democratic government in South Korea.

One of the key findings of Solarz's visit to North Korea was that the unification issue was the top priority of the DPRK regime. In a congressional report on his study mission to the DPRK, Solarz described the DPRK regime's commitment to unification as follows:

What emerged most clearly from my discussions with Kim Il Sung and Kim Young Nam is the extent to which the reunification of Korea is not only the major objective of North Korea, but the primary touchstone against which different policies and proposals for resolving the Korean problem are evaluated. The commitment on the part of both Kims to reunification was not just verbal but visceral.<sup>72</sup>

While Solarz's quick observation may not unveil every single detail of North Korea's internal decision-making process, it confirms the strategic importance of unification within the North Korean policymaking process. Furthermore, Solarz's observation reveals that the North Korean leadership had multiple options in advancing Korean unification. It is not too difficult to assume, then, that pursuing inter-Korean dialogue was one option and seeking to improve its relations with the US was another.

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70 "Stephen Solarz's Visit to South Korea, 1980. 7.12-14, Vol. 1," (in Korean) p. 145, DVD, 2010-30 (14318), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

71 Jaebong Lee, "Korean Politics Before and After the 5.18 Democratic Movement and the US Intervention 5," (in Korean) *Hankyoreh On*, November 28, 2020, <http://www.hanion.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=20439>.

72 Stephen J. Solarz, "The Korean Conundrum: A Conversation with Kim Il Sung: Report of a Study Mission to South Korea, Japan, the People's Republic of China, and North Korea, July 12-21, 1980 to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981: 6.

In the meeting between Solarz and Kim Il Sung, Kim Il Sung demonstrated some degree of flexibility by expressing his willingness to start the reunion of separated families and exchange of letters without any conditions. On previous occasions, the DPRK regime always demanded that certain preconditions such as the abolishment of the anti-Communist law must be met in order to give the green light to family reunions. Of course, there were limits of the DPRK's flexibility, as it did not give up its fundamental position on Korean unification, which was to achieve unification first and engage in various inter-Korean exchanges later under the provision of a unified Korean government.

How can confidence-building measures, which are designed to overcome differences and foster mutual understanding and trust, make the unification of the two Koreas difficult? Perhaps the DPRK regime's rather puzzling stance can be interpreted as follows: the DPRK leadership believes that South Korean authorities prefer the continuation of the status quo—the divided Korean peninsula—over unification because South Korean officials only show limited interest in apolitical and anodyne inter-Korean exchanges while avoiding the real deal—political negotiation—which the DPRK regime has repeatedly requested since the bifurcation of the Korean peninsula. Not surprisingly, it was true that the South Korean government, for strategic reasons, did not proactively pursue unification. An intelligence memorandum from the CIA summarizes Seoul's lack of enthusiasm for unification as follows: "Seoul still pays lip service to the concept of eventual reunification, but the issue has long been supplanted in the minds of most South Koreans by the desire for economic progress and security. . . . Essentially, Seoul is seeking to buy time to gain sufficient economic and military strength to deal with the North from a position of superiority, with or without US backing."<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, the unique characteristics of inter-Korean relations may explain why the DPRK regime insisted on achieving unification first

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73 CIA, "Prospects for the Inter-Korean Dialogue," Document no. CIA-RDP85T002 87R000102580001-7, CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.

and having mutual exchanges later. Step-by-step confidence-building measures can be effective in improving the relationship between two different sovereign states. This may explain why the North Korean regime had an appetite in engaging in academic and cultural exchanges with the United States, even before establishing official diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, from the perspective of the DPRK leadership, the same logic cannot be applied to the case of the divided Korean peninsula. Since the two Koreas do not recognize each other as a *de jure* state, increasing the unofficial contact and improving inter-Korean relations would only result in gradual recognition of the other *de facto* Korean state. And by prioritizing such confidence-building measures, “Seoul is fully aware that in accepting such limited measures[,] North Korea would be according the ROK a form of legitimacy, while weakening its own broader schemes for unification and presenting to the outside world the image of two Korean states accepting the status quo.”<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the ROK authorities’ prioritization of uninterrupted national growth over immediate unification, along with North Korean sensitivities around the ROK regime being legitimized through inter-Korean exchanges, led the two Koreas unable to narrow the gap in their views on how to proceed with the inter-Korean relations and eventual unification.

Consequently, Solarz’s visit to the DPRK did not lead to a breakthrough in DPRK-US relations. The main reason behind such failure would be the DPRK regime’s misunderstanding of the purpose of Solarz’s Pyongyang visit as well as his influence in the US foreign policy circle. First, there is a possibility that the two sides had different expectations of each other about this initial contact. Solarz made it clear from the beginning that his visit to Pyongyang was a study mission: “My purpose in going was to gain a better understanding of the views of the North Korean authorities and to explore the possibilities for a reduction of tensions on the Korean peninsula.”<sup>75</sup> In contrast, Kim Il Sung repeatedly mentioned the old

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74 CIA, “Reflections on Reunification,” Document no. CIA-RDP83B00551R000200 020022-2, CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.

75 Solarz, “Letter of Transmittal,” in “The Korean Conundrum: A Conversation



Korean proverb “beginning is half done” when he met Solarz, indicating that Kim Il Sung had high hopes in using this initial meeting as a vehicle to drastically improve DPRK-US relations.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, in a congressional report on his trip to North Korea, Solarz alluded to his visit to Pyongyang by quoting a Chinese proverb—“a journey of 10,000 miles begins with a single step.”<sup>77</sup> Another Chinese idiom may aptly describe the different perceptions of Kim Il Sung and Solarz: dreaming different dreams while in the same bed.

In this respect, a close reading of *Rodong Sinmun*’s coverage of Solarz’s visit reveals how much weight the DPRK regime had given to a US congressman’s visit to Pyongyang. Solarz’s visit was reported on the front page of *Rodong Sinmun* where a picture of him and Kim Il Sung took up almost one fourth of the entire page. It is notable that the size of the picture used in reporting Kim Il Sung’s meeting with Solarz has striking resemblance with that of another picture featuring Kim Il Sung and the Zimbabwean delegation who visited Pyongyang on an official capacity.

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with Kim Il Sung: Report of a Study Mission to South Korea, Japan, the People’s Republic of China, and North Korea, July 12-21, 1980 to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives.”

76 “Records of Conversation between Congressman Stephen J. Solarz and Kim Il Sung and Kim Yong-nam,” <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115254>.

77 Solarz, “The Korean Conundrum: A Conversation with Kim Il Sung: Report of a Study Mission to South Korea, Japan, the People’s Republic of China, and North Korea, July 12-21, 1980 to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives,” 12.



Fig.1 Rodong Sinmun's July 19 1980 coverage of Stephen Solarz's visit to Pyongyang (on the left) and June 9 1980 coverage of the Zimbabwe government delegation's visit to Pyongyang (on the right). Note that the two articles are similar in terms of proportion of the photo and its overall presence on the front page.

Therefore, based on *Rodong Sinmun*'s coverage of Solarz's visit, it can be argued that although Solarz himself might have thought that he was visiting North Korea as a fact-finding mission, the North Korean leadership might have perceived Solarz's visit as no less important than official visits of those countries that had friendly relations with the DPRK.

Second, despite the DPRK leadership's hope that Solarz could potentially nudge the US government to start direct negotiations with North Korea, Solarz, as a member of the US House of Representatives, had little leverage in influencing US foreign policy. In his conversation with Solarz, Kim Young Nam revealed his expectation from Solarz: "I hope that you will do something to cause the U.S. government and Congress to agree to a dialogue [between the DPRK and the US]."<sup>78</sup> Kim Young Nam even

78 "Records of Conversation between Congressman Stephen J. Solarz and Kim

touted that Solarz could be the first “American minister to our country.”<sup>79</sup> Whether Solarz was best suited to move both the Congress and the Executive Branch, however, is questionable. In fact, the role of the US Congress in foreign policymaking was often considered as “trivial or merely symbolic.”<sup>80</sup> As a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Solarz was unable to drive a major shift in the US foreign policy to engage with North Korea. Although Solarz was well known for taking concrete measures in the congress by “urging additional US action such as aid or the denial of aid,” this was far from what the DPRK regime might have expected from Solarz. Therefore, it can be concluded that the DPRK leadership did not have an accurate understanding of the US foreign policy circle.

Then how can we evaluate this meeting's role in shaping Solarz and Kim Il Sung's perception of each other? In terms of Kim Il Sung's perception of Solarz, the fact that Kim wanted to invite Solarz once again in 1984 demonstrates that Kim continued to regard Solarz as a viable candidate to advance DPRK-US relations.<sup>81</sup> One of the reasons why Kim Il Sung's perception of Solarz might have remained the same would be due to the nature of the conversation that Solarz had with Kim Il Sung. According to Solarz, it was “very difficult” to have a conversation with Kim Il Sung because Kim “wasn't used to being interrupted or being asked questions” and went on speaking what he wanted to say for four hours.<sup>82</sup> In this kind of situation where Kim mostly spoke and Solarz listened, there would have been little to no room for Solarz to explore and shape Kim's thoughts by asking him many questions, thereby leaving Kim's perception of Solarz largely unchanged.

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Il Sung and Kim Yong-nam,” <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115254>.

79 Ibid.

80 “Foreword,” *Journeys to War & Peace: A Congressional Memoir*.

81 “US Congressmen's Visit to North Korea, 1984-1985,” (in Korean) pp. 2-27, DVD, 2010 (35974), ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Archives.

82 Stephen Solarz, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 2001, <https://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Solarz,%20Stephen.toc.pdf>.

In contrast, the meeting between Solarz and Kim Il Sung had a lasting impact on Solarz's perception of Kim and North Korea. Knowing that nothing much can be gleaned from his meeting with the DPRK leadership, Solarz declined Kim's 1984 invitation to visit Pyongyang. But Solarz never stopped being curious about North Korea and later came to realize the severity of human rights abuses committed by the North Korean regime.<sup>83</sup> This made Solarz an influential figure in advocating human rights in North Korea, which resembled his previous engagement in saving Kim Dae Jung's life from South Korea's authoritarian regimes. Eventually, in 1993, Solarz played a pivotal role in encouraging National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to "become active in North Korean issues," which was a starting point for many US-based NGOs to engage in the human rights issue in North Korea.<sup>84</sup>

To conclude, the motivation behind the North Korean attempt to improve its relations with the US can be best understood as part of the DPRK regime's reaction to China's potential strategic alignment with the US regarding the Korean unification question. The DPRK regime, based on Solarz's previous commitment to US troop withdrawal from South Korea as well as protecting Kim Dae Jung, would have thought that Solarz would be an ideal partner for initiating dialogue with the US. Yet the DPRK regime expected too much from this initial visit from a US congressman who had little power to create a seismic shift in DPRK-US relations. And little did Pyongyang know that this meeting somehow influenced Solarz to develop a keen interest in North Korea's human rights abuses.

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83 "[Running for North Korean Human Rights - 54] Late Stephen Solarz - 'Life in Action' who even met Kim Il Sung for the North Korean people," (in Korean) December 7, 2010, Radio Free Asia, [https://www.rfa.org/korean/weekly\\_program/run\\_nk\\_human\\_right/nk\\_humanrights-12072010110400.html](https://www.rfa.org/korean/weekly_program/run_nk_human_right/nk_humanrights-12072010110400.html).

84 Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined two North Korean initiatives—the preparation for inter-Korean Prime Ministerial Talks and dialogue between Stephen Solarz and Kim Il Sung—aimed at creating favorable conditions for Korean unification in 1980. In so doing, the paper utilized three levels of analysis—international, North Korean and South Korean—to provide historical context and evaluate the extent to which each factor prompted North Korea's unification initiatives. The main discovery of this paper is that North Korean efforts at achieving peaceful unification in 1980 were opportunistic in nature and marred by the misperception of the leadership. Such findings may fill the gap in the literature which did not fully answer why there was no breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and DPRK-US relations at this time. Hopefully, this research can be a cornerstone in which subsequent archival research on North Korea's unification overtures in the 1980s can be based.

By utilizing three levels of analysis, the paper demonstrated the interplay of international, domestic and South Korean factors in determining the DPRK regime's drive for unification. The main trigger for inter-Korean dialogue in 1980 was the socio-political instability in South Korea after the assassination of President Park Chung Hee, yet the shifting Cold War dynamics in East Asia as well as North Korea's internal preparation for succession also account for the DPRK regime's pursuit of peaceful overtures. The dominant factor behind the DPRK leadership's attempt to improve DPRK-US relations was due to Beijing and Washington's potential strategic alignment on the Korean unification issue. Yet given that the DPRK regime picked Solarz—who once advocated for US troop withdrawal from the Korean peninsula as well as strived to save the life of Kim Dae Jung—as a dialogue partner, the situation in South Korea also mattered in the DPRK regime's strategic calculations of improving its relations with the United States.

The historical analysis provided in this study is closely related to the policy question of whether we have enough knowledge about the DPRK

regime's ability to access and evaluate information from, and about, the outside world. What we can learn from the case of Stephen Solarz and Kim Il Sung's meeting is that North Korea was not so sharp in reading the nature of US politics and foreign policymaking in the 1980s. More importantly, the DPRK regime did not have an accurate understanding of how their meeting would have been perceived by Solarz himself. It is not surprising, then, to see why it is so difficult to see a breakthrough in the DPRK-US relations, as the most recent summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un may demonstrate. Among many other reasons behind the failure of the Hanoi Summit in 2019, one of the most prominent issues was the DPRK's misreading of the US intentions as well as lack of preparedness for a no deal scenario. Surely the DPRK regime that we see today may not be the same as the one that we saw during the Cold War period. However, we should not overlook that there is a certain degree of continuity in the DPRK regime's understanding of the outside world while historical analyses of past events may provide useful insights to make informed decisions when engaging with Pyongyang.

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