

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Inter-Korean Relations

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## **Background**

Korea claims a history that goes back thousands of years, despite invasions, at one time or another, by all of its neighbors. Although there have been several periods of competing kingdoms co-existing on the Peninsula over the course of Korea's long history, Korea's last dynasty ruled over a unified and highly ethnically homogeneous state for over 500 years, until Japan annexed Korea in 1910. The modern division of the country at the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel by the United States and Soviet Union was based on geopolitical considerations and not on any pre-existing geographic or cultural divisions within Korea.

The 1943 Cairo Declaration, a statement of wartime objectives toward Japan issued by the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of China, stated that "in due course Korea shall become free and independent."<sup>1</sup> At the close of World War II, the Soviet Union and the U.S. agreed to a temporary division of the Korean Peninsula at the 38th parallel until a provisional government could be established. However, the emergent Cold War ended plans for placing a unified Korea under international trusteeship, and the division of the Peninsula hardened: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south was declared on August 15, 1948, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north followed a month later. Both states claimed to represent the whole Peninsula and declared unification as an urgent objective.

War broke out on June 25, 1950, with the North Korean People's Army (KPA) invading and quickly occupying much of the southern half of the Peninsula. The U.S. soon intervened in the conflict under the aegis of the United Nations Command (UNC), which was followed by the intervention of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army. Peace negotiations began in 1951, as a stalemate developed roughly along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, and on July 27, 1953, the UNC (represented by the U.S.), the KPA, and the People's Volunteer Army signed an Armistice Agreement establishing a demilitarized zone (DMZ) across the Peninsula."<sup>2</sup> While the Republic of Korea was represented in the Armistice as a member of the UNC, its military was not a direct signatory. The Armistice left some issues unaddressed, such as a maritime boundary, and the 1954 Geneva Conference, convened as a provision of the armistice, failed to achieve the envisioned peaceful settlement.

## **Inter-Korean Relations During and After the Cold War**

The brutality of the Korean War – over a million lives lost and much of the Peninsula reduced to rubble – intensified the enmity between the North and South. In the years after the war, the two Koreas competed for legitimacy and international recognition abroad, with a developmental dictatorship emerging in the South and a highly-centralized personalist regime in the North. For the next several decades, government-to-government contact between the two Koreas was almost nonexistent. In the late 1960s,

a sharp rise in clashes along the DMZ, along with the attempted assassination of ROK President Park Chung-hee, increased inter-Korean tensions to their highest point since the war.<sup>3</sup>

However, with U.S.-China rapprochement fundamentally changing the security architecture of East Asia in the early 1970s, the governments of both Koreas found it in their interests to begin a dialogue with one another. Inter-Korean talks, initially held under the auspices of the Red Cross, led to the first Joint Statement on reunification, issued on July 4, 1972. Yet this *détente* on the Peninsula was short-lived. In 1974, the ROK's First Lady, Yuk Young-soo, was killed during another unsuccessful assassination attempt on Park Chung-hee, carried out by a Japanese-born North Korea sympathizer. North Korean agents also attempted to assassinate Park's successor, President Chun Doo-hwan, during a presidential trip to Burma in 1983, and bombed a passenger flight, Korean Air Flight 858, in 1987. Although there were some additional periods of cautious inter-Korean engagement in the latter years of the Cold War – for example, a small number of separated South and North Korean family members were allowed to briefly reunite in Seoul and Pyongyang in 1985 – these periods of dialogue did not last long.<sup>4</sup>

Significant inter-Korean dialogue resumed under South Korea's first democratically elected president, Roh Tae-Woo (in office 1988-1993). Roh's policy of *Nordpolitik* led to South Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea's traditional major allies, the Soviet Union and China. As part of this policy, the Roh administration also reached out diplomatically to North Korea, permitting direct inter-Korean trade in 1989 for the first time and initiating inter-Korean sports exchanges.<sup>5</sup> In December 1991, the two Koreas signed a "Basic Agreement" on reconciliation, nonaggression and exchange and cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Shortly afterward, the two Koreas issued a Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, pledging not to possess, produce, or use nuclear weapons and prohibiting uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing.<sup>7</sup>

Inter-Korean relations were tumultuous under Roh's successor Kim Young Sam (in office 1993-1998). Initially taking a hard line as the first North Korean nuclear crisis mounted, President Kim changed course and planned a summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, which would have been the first meeting of the two Koreas' leaders since the country's division. Kim Il Sung died a few weeks before the summit was to take place, leading the North to lash out at the South over its failure to send a condolence message and to a halt in inter-Korean dialogue.<sup>8</sup> North-South relations continued on an up-and-down track over the next several years over issues including food aid, North Korean submarine incursions, and regional diplomacy.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Sunshine Policy**

Kim Dae Jung (in office 1998-2003), a South Korean democracy activist, became President of South Korea in 1998 and instituted the "Sunshine Policy" to promote

reconciliation with the DPRK. As part of this policy, the ROK government began allowing South Korean NGOs, businesses, and private citizens to have contact across the DMZ and ramping up bilateral food and fertilizer aid to the North, which was recovering from a devastating famine. In 1998, an arm of South Korea's Hyundai Group began operating tours of Mt. Geumgang in North Korea.<sup>10</sup> In June 2000, Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il met in Pyongyang for the first presidential summit for the first time since the division of Korea, leading to a dramatic shift in South Korean attitudes toward the North as well as in policy.<sup>11</sup> The two sides agreed to begin family reunion meetings and decided to establish the inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) near the DMZ.<sup>12</sup> The Sunshine Policy was premised on separating humanitarian and economic cooperation from political issues; the administration continued engagement even as the two Koreas faced off in naval clashes near the Northern Limit Line – the disputed maritime boundary between the two Koreas – in 1999 and 2002, and as the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework on North Korea's nuclear program fell apart in late 2002.

Roh Moo Hyun (in office 2003-2008), who succeeded Kim Dae Jung as President of the ROK in 2003, continued and intensified reconciliation efforts with North Korea under the "Policy for Peace and Prosperity." This policy saw increased bilateral aid and humanitarian assistance from South to North as well as substantial government-sponsored investment in the KIC. However, the Roh administration's approach to North Korea was complicated by the deepening nuclear crisis on the Peninsula. In the fall of Roh's first year in office, the first round of Six Party Talks – a series of multilateral negotiations to dismantle North Korea's nuclear program – was convened. Following the DPRK's first nuclear test in October 2006, South Korea reduced its aid and temporarily suspended fertilizer and food shipments to the DPRK, although investment in the KIC continued. With the Six Party Talks process showing some progress the next year, Roh met with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang for a second inter-Korean Summit in October 2007, during the waning months of Roh's presidency. The Summit outlined multiple new inter-Korean economic development projects, such as creation of a West Sea Economic Center in the North Korean port city of Haeju. However, the next administration did not implement the ambitious projects outlined in the Summit agreement.

### **Cooling Relations under Lee Myung Bak**

The inauguration of President Lee Myung Bak (in office 2008-2012) on February 25, 2008 heralded a major change in inter-Korean relations. Before taking office, Lee indicated that he would take a "pragmatic" approach towards North Korea.<sup>13</sup> His "Initiative for Denuclearization and Opening up North Korea" promised North Korea a \$3,000 per capita income 10 years if the DPRK abandoned its nuclear program. This initiative linked inter-Korean aid and cooperation to denuclearization more strongly than had

been the case under the Sunshine Policy. Lee also promised to make addressing human rights issues in North Korea a more prominent part of ROK policy.

Upon taking office, the Lee administration dramatically curtailed aid to the North, but continued inter-Korean cooperation at the KIC and Mt. Geumgang. However, following the shooting of a South Korean tourist in a restricted zone of Mt. Geumgang in July 2008, Lee ordered a suspension of tourism at the resort until a joint investigation could be conducted;<sup>14</sup> the DPRK refused to allow such an investigation.<sup>15</sup> Inter-Korean relations continued to deteriorate in early 2009, with North Korea declaring all past inter-Korean agreements “nullified”<sup>16</sup> and the Lee administration condemning nuclear and missile tests by the North. However, Lee did not close the KIC despite the worsening atmosphere between the two Koreas, seeing the KIC as “one conduit for us to keep that window of dialogue open.”<sup>17</sup>

A new opening in inter-Korean relations arose in August 2009 when North Korea sent a high-level delegation to Kim Dae Jung’s funeral; the delegation subsequently met with President Lee. During this time, North Korea released a South Korean worker who had been detained at Kaesong and the two Koreas convened a reunion of separated families for the first time since 2007. However, this would prove to be another short-lived *détente*.

In November 2009, ships from the North and South Korean navies engaged in a skirmish along the Northern Limit Line, the first such clash in seven years. The following March, a South Korean corvette, the *Cheonan*, sank after an explosion, killing 46 South Korean sailors. An international investigation of the incident reported that “the evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the torpedo was fired by a North Korean submarine.”<sup>18</sup> North Korea rejected the report,<sup>19</sup> and some South Korean and U.S. scholars also questioned the investigation.<sup>20</sup> China did not assign culpability to the sinking, a stance echoed in the UN Security Council Presidential Statement issued in response.<sup>21</sup> Lee demanded a North Korean apology for the attack, and on May 24, 2010 he announced several new unilateral sanctions: the ROK prohibited North Korean ships from using shipping lanes that crossed ROK territory, and suspended all inter-Korean trade and exchanges outside of the KIC.<sup>22</sup> In November 2010, as the ROK conducted live-fire military exercises near the NLL, the DPRK military fired around 170 artillery shells at *Yeonpyeong* Island, resulting in the deaths of two South Korean Marines and two South Korean civilians.

Inter-Korean relations for the remainder of Lee’s Presidency remained tense. South Korea demanded an apology for the *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong* incidents as a precondition for resuming dialogue, which North Korea refused to give. The two sides held secret talks initiated by the South in April 2011 in Beijing, but this attempt at rapprochement was unsuccessful.<sup>23</sup> Following Kim Jong Il’s death in December 2011, the ROK issued a statement “convey[ing] sympathy to the North Korean people,” but did not send an official delegation to Pyongyang.<sup>24</sup> After Lee condemned North Korea’s April 2012

launch of a satellite using ballistic missile technology, North Korea began an intense personal campaign against him, signaling the end of any interest in dialogue for the remainder of Lee's term.<sup>25</sup>

### **Park Geun Hye and *Trustpolitik***

Park Geun Hye was elected President of South Korea on December 19, 2012, promising to strengthen the economy, modify the social safety net, and improve relations with North Korea.<sup>26</sup> Park campaigned on taking a more pragmatic approach to North Korea, premised on building trust through renewed dialogue while responding forcefully to any new provocations. She also pledged to build a multilateral institution for regional cooperation, which would include North Korea. In a *Foreign Affairs* essay, Park Geun Hye outlined her vision of *trustpolitik*, arguing:

North Korea must keep its agreements made with South Korea and the international community to establish a minimum level of trust, and second, there must be assured consequences for actions that breach the peace. To ensure stability, *trustpolitik* should be applied consistently from issue to issue based on verifiable actions, and steps should not be taken for mere political expediency.<sup>27</sup>

President Park's inauguration came at a period of high tension on the Peninsula. North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in February 2013 and responded strongly as the U.S. and ROK began conducting joint military exercises the following month. Over the course of a few weeks, North Korea declared the Armistice Agreement "completely nullified," severed the last inter-Korean military hotline, and declared a "state of war" with South Korea, as nuclear-capable U.S. bombers flew over South Korea in a show of force. North Korea also withdrew its 53,000 workers from the KIC, leading South Korea to withdraw its personnel from the KIC in turn.<sup>28</sup>

Over the next few months, however, the two Koreas gradually returned to dialogue, seeking to reopen the KIC and address other issues such as family reunions and the possible reopening of the Mt. Geumgang resort. The two sides reached a breakthrough in August 2013, agreeing to a number of measures aimed at preventing disruption of the KIC during future crises and to take steps to develop it further. These included a guarantee not to restrict employee access or withdraw workers unilaterally; the resumption of communications links and the creation of a joint North-South committee for overseeing the KIC; and a pledge to make a mutual effort to attract investment in the KIC from abroad.<sup>29</sup>

Follow-up on this agreement, and talks on other inter-Korean cooperation issues, took place sporadically thereafter. The two sides planned to hold a reunion for separated families at Mt. Geumgang in September 2013, but the event was cancelled by the North shortly before it was to take place; a reunion did eventually take place in February 2014.

Inter-Korean talks on re-starting tourism at Mt. Geumgang were unsuccessful.<sup>30</sup> Initial working-level inter-Korean talks on some of the issues addressed by the Kaesong agreement failed to make progress.<sup>31</sup> However, South Korea also initiated other elements of its *Trustpolitik* policy at this time by increasing funding for UN agencies and NGOs conducting humanitarian work in the North, and by sending experts north of the DMZ to engage in joint projects in fields such as environmental protection and archaeology.<sup>32</sup> In November 2014, three high-ranking DPRK officials briefly visited the ROK to attend the closing ceremony of the Asian Games in Incheon, where North Korean athletes were participating.<sup>33</sup> However, this visit did not build any momentum for subsequent high-level talks.

Beginning in 2014, Park began to take her *Trustpolitik* policy in a different direction, putting an increased emphasis on unification as a central part of her inter-Korean policy. In response to a press question at her New Year's speech that year, Park said that "unification is a jackpot."<sup>34</sup> Her subsequent speech in Dresden largely focused on calling for enhanced inter-Korean exchanges and repeated the theme of unification.<sup>35</sup> DPRK state media criticized this emphasis on unification, interpreting it as premised on North Korean collapse and South Korean-led unification through absorption.<sup>36</sup>

In August 2015, two ROK soldiers on patrol in the DMZ were seriously injured by land mines placed outside of their guard posts. A UN investigation concluded that the mines had been deliberately planted there by North Korean soldiers, a charge that North Korea denied.<sup>37</sup> The ROK government responded by resuming its loudspeaker propaganda along the border, which both sides had agreed to halt in 2004. The North fired four shells into the South in response to this, and the ROK responded with a barrage of artillery fire. Subsequent high-level talks resulted in a compromise: the DPRK expressed "regret" over the injuries, while South Korea agreed to end the loudspeaker broadcasts "unless an unusual incident occurs."<sup>38</sup> The two sides also agreed to arrange a new round of family reunions, which was held in October.

In February 2016, Park announced an immediate closure of the KIC, largely in response to DPRK's fourth nuclear test. In a speech to the National Assembly, Park argued that funds from the KIC had gone to the leadership of North Korea's Workers' Party and that the security of South Korean workers at the KIC was under constant risk. She added that it had "become indisputably clear that the existing approach and good intentions will by no means work in countering the North Korean regime's determination to develop nuclear weapons."<sup>39</sup> In addition to the KIC shutdown, the South Korean government announced plans to tighten sanctions on the North. In response, the DPRK Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea announced that the KIC would be put under military control, South Korean assets there would be frozen, and military-to-military communication with the South would be terminated.<sup>40</sup>

South Korea's policy change also led to shift in its security policies, diplomacy, and approach to North Korean human rights. Following the adoption of a new UN sanctions resolution adopted in response to North Korea's fourth nuclear test, President Park traveled to countries with which North Korea has had military ties – including Iran, Uganda, and Ethiopia – to persuade these countries to cooperate with the sanctions regime.<sup>41</sup> In July 2016, the U.S. and ROK announced plans to deploy a THAAD missile defense battery to South Korea (a move which China expressed strong opposition to) and several months later the ROK signed a military intelligence sharing agreement with Japan. In March 2016, the ROK National Assembly passed the North Korea Human Rights Act, which had been pending for 11 years due to disagreements over its content and fears that its passage would damage inter-Korean relations.<sup>42</sup>

In late 2016, a corruption scandal involving President Park and her close confidant, Choi Soon-sil, led to mass protests in Seoul and Park's impeachment on December 9, 2016. As the scandal grew, some opposition figures alleged that Choi had influenced many of Park's major decisions on North Korea policy, despite Choi's lack of an official position or formal policy experience.<sup>43</sup> North Korean media covered the growing scandal extensively, routinely criticizing Park and highlighted the growing protests in its newspapers.<sup>44</sup>

### **North Korean Defectors in South Korea**

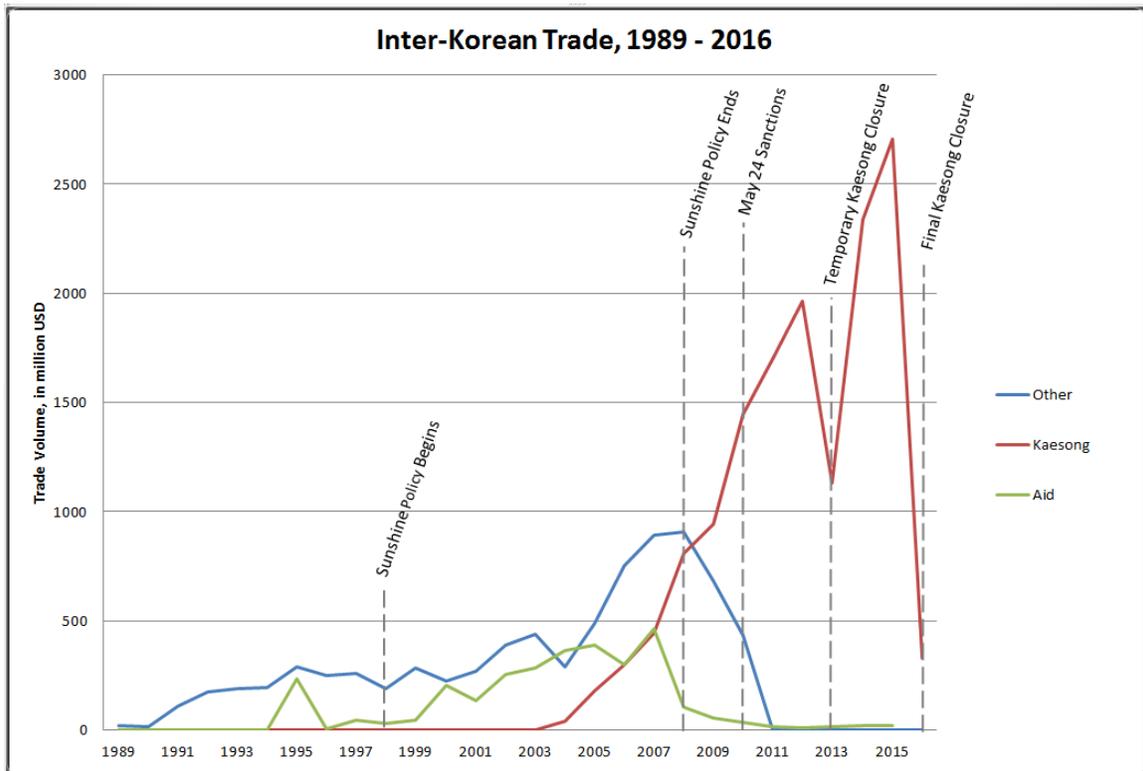
While the heavily-guarded DMZ has severely limited the movement of people between the two Koreas, the arrivals of defectors or refugees via third countries has become an increasingly important factor shaping relations between North and South.<sup>45</sup> In the period following the Korean War and until the end of the Cold War, there were a modest number of politically-motivated defections from North to South Korea, and vice versa.<sup>46</sup> As economic crisis and famine hit North Korea in the 1990s, thousands fled across the border to China, with many eventually making it to South Korea. The number of North Korean refugees arriving in the South reached a peak in the mid-to-late 2000s, before tightened security along the China-North Korea border began to impede this flow. North Koreans who fled during the 1990s or 2000s have mostly cited economic desperation for their decision to leave the country; however, a growing number of more recent defectors have come from relatively well-off backgrounds or already had family members present in the South.<sup>47</sup>

Currently, about 30,000 North Korean defectors reside in South Korea. Most come from modest backgrounds in the North, and many have struggled to adjust to life in the South. About 70% of North Korean defectors to the South are women, and over 60% come from North Hamgyong province, which borders China.<sup>48</sup> Members of the defector community in South Korea have also been active in promoting awareness of the human rights situation in the North, and in working to send news and media across the DMZ.<sup>49</sup>

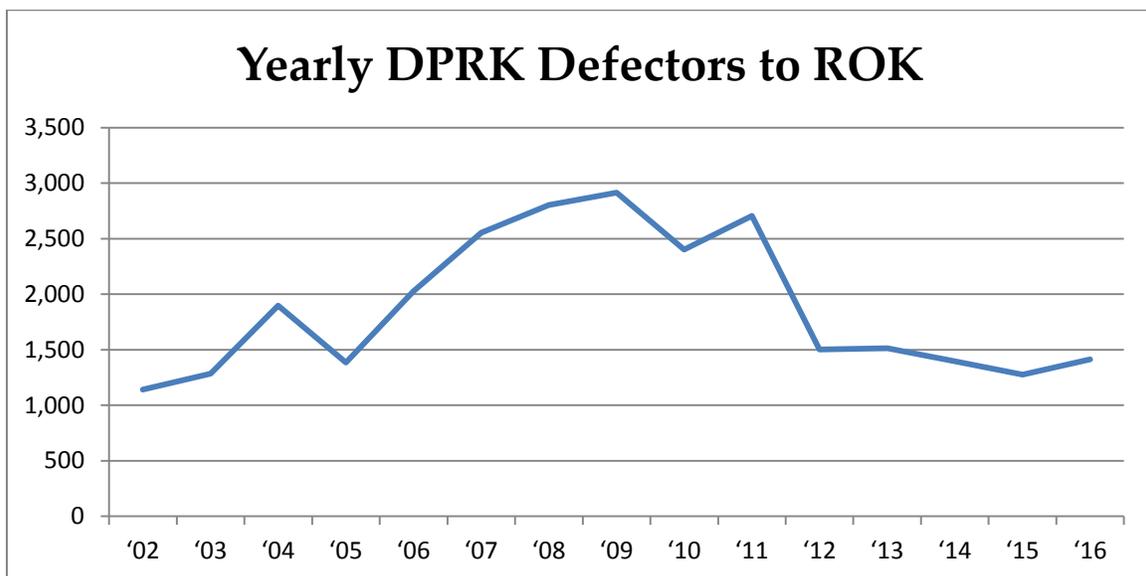
North Korea's media has frequently attacked defectors in the South, questioning the credibility of prominent defectors and labeling them as "human scum" and criminals who have fled the country to avoid punishment. North Korea has also publicized several cases of "re-defectors" who have returned to the North, organizing press conferences in which they claim that they were deceived into defecting into the South, or kidnapped by South Korean or American agents.<sup>50</sup>

In 2016, there were several high-profile North Korean defections, including the group defection of thirteen workers at a North Korean restaurant in the Chinese city of Ningbo, and that of the DPRK's Deputy Ambassador to the UK, Thae Yong-ho. In an October 2016 speech, ROK President Park Geun-hye issued an unusually direct appeal to North Koreans to defect, calling on them to "please come to the bosom of freedom in the South whenever you want."<sup>51</sup>

## Major Trends in Inter-Korean Relations



Source: ROK Ministry of Unification



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- <sup>45</sup> North Koreans who arrive in the South have been variously called "defectors," "refugees," or "migrants" depending on their background and the perspective of the individual discussing them. The Korean-language terminology to describe North Koreans who come to the South is similarly contested.
- <sup>46</sup> Choe Deok-sin, a former ROK Foreign Minister and leader of the Chondogyo religious movement who defected to North Korea in 1986, was the most prominent South Korean to defect to the North; Hwang Jang Yop, a former Chairman of the Standing Committee of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly who had been credited with developing North Korea's *Juche* ideology, has been the highest-ranking North Korean to go to the South, defecting in 1997.

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