

# Possibilities of Cooperative Conflict Resolution: A Study on Conflict between North and South Korea<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper examines the inter-Korean conflict from the perspective of a problem-solving approach, limiting it to the confrontation over the ideal state of ethnic unity, and the reign of Korea. In order to make negotiations for resolution successful, it is necessary for the parties to have the intention to form an agreement, to execute it, and to have continuous execution ability. Both sides of the North and South are required to be responsible governments that can continuously implement agreements. It is only when that trust is built that it is possible to modify each objective and to build cooperative relationships. The possibility of building such a trust relationship is also considered.

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## 1. The Nature of the North–South Korean Conflict: Framework for Understanding

### (1) Defining “Conflict”

In conflict resolution research, conflict is understood as arising when multiple individuals or groups see each other as pursuing aims that cannot simultaneously be met. Each individual/group believes that if one of them tries to realize their aims, then the other will have to give up on realizing or change its own aims.<sup>2</sup>

How can we describe the conflict between North and South Korea in light of this definition? In order to understand a conflict, one must identify those who are in conflict, other involved parties, and their relationships, make clear what the conflict is about, as well as understand the process by which the conflict arose and its structure.

As is well known, it will soon be seventy-four years since the Korean Peninsula was split in two. With Japan’s defeat in World War II the Korean people should have been liberated and acquired self-determination, but as a result of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the peninsula was divided into two, and two governments were established that were strongly influenced by these two countries’ different founding principles. Here I attempt to understand the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), which declared their founding in 1948 to be the direct parties of the North–South Korean conflict.

Incidentally, although the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, the Korean War (which began in 1950) is still technically

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<sup>2</sup> Uesugi pp.113-115, Ramsbotham pp.34-36

ongoing, so perhaps we should see the Korean War as the “conflict” on the Korean Peninsula. However, the primary signers of the 1953 armistice were the United Nations Command (the US) and the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (the Chinese). While Kim Il-sung, Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army, also signed it, it was not signed by a South Korean representative.

The Korean War should not be understood as a conflict between North and South but as an international conflict, and while South Korea was a direct victim of the Korean War, it was not a primary party in peace negotiations.

Then, what is the conflict between North and South Korea? Here, I would like to consider this issue while limiting myself to the polity of a unified Korean Peninsula and people, as well as conflict over the right to rule a unified Korea.

## (2) Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution research both makes clear via analysis the structures of conflicts and tries to present methods for solving them by changing parties’ “perceptions” that they are in a trade-off relationship in which it is impossible for them to realize both of their demands (aims).

In military conflicts (such as wars between states) in which force is exercised and violent acts are carried out, conflict management efforts, such as conflict regulation and containment, are made. However, these are in many ways stopgap measures, and approaches have also been developed that eliminate the causes of the conflict and aim for a permanent resolution.

One example is trying to shift the opposing relationship between those in conflict into a cooperative one in which they each share

the aim of eliminating points of conflict. A well-known example of this method is the “problem-solving approach.” This is premised on an environment in which those in conflict can engage in direct negotiation. Research on negotiation techniques for conflict resolution has also progressed, and therein one finds the method called “collaborative negotiation.”

In order to make negotiations successful, parties need mutual understanding and efforts to be understood. For this purpose, there are the techniques of “informing” the other party of one’s worldview, negotiating climate, position, and needs, as well as of having an “open mind” and “uniting,” which build a foundation for sharing aims and creating solutions.<sup>3</sup>

The secret negotiations that made possible the 1993 Oslo Accords, which surprised the world due to Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) relationship changing greatly from an intense oppositional one (to the extent that they rejected each other’s existence) to mutual recognition, are a good example of a problem-solving approach that made full use of collaborative negotiation.<sup>4</sup> Norway, who propelled the secret negotiations, subsequently played an important role in promoting conflict resolution in Aceh and Sri Lanka.

However, subsequently the peace in Palestine untangled, and today the Oslo process is seen as having failed. We could say that this once again showed the difficulty of transforming zero-sum-game conflicts. It appears that conflict and division within the parties in conflict was a major factor that prevented the implementation of the “agreement.” Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the Oslo Accords,

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3 Raider pp.31-88

4 See Corbin for the negotiation process leading to the Oslo agreement.

was assassinated two years later by a young right-wing Jewish extremist. In this and other ways, on the one hand, anti-peace forces have expanded, while on the other hand, in Palestine, Islamic fundamentalist groups like the Hamas emerged as major forces opposing the PLO and intensified attacks against Israel.

While collaborative negotiation is effective in having parties agree upon new solutions, in order for agreed-upon solutions to be implemented, there is a need for those who reached the agreement to intend and have the ability to implement them in a sustained fashion.

With all of this in mind, I would like to examine how agreements between North and South Korea have been reached to solve the conflict and the efforts of the two countries to make these agreements a reality.

## 2. North and South Korea Unification and Policy Transformations<sup>5</sup>

I have stated my position that the Korean War should be understood as an international conflict. The intention of Kim Il-sung, who started the war, was to have North Korea unify the peninsula via military force. This has been pointed out by multiple researchers. However, due to a massive counterattack by the United States, he was unable to fulfill this aim, and as a result the North—South division became fixed.

Subsequently, North Korea would advocate North—South federalism and then come to offer proposals aiming for the unification of the two states. North Korea has called for a North Korea-led unification of the peninsula via the “democratization of

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding changes in the theory of north-south unification, referred to Asai, IPP, Kimiya 2006, Kurata, Kuroda.

South Korean politics” (a socialist revolution in South Korea and the kicking out of US forces from the country). This is shown by Kim Il-sung’s statement, “If American imperialism is driven away, and a people’s democratic revolution is victorious in South Korea, and then the people are able to hold political power in their own hands, then via the power of Northern socialist forces and South Korean democratic forces, the great deed of the unification of our ancestral land will be carried out.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Syngman Rhee, holding that the South Korean government, which was recognized by the UN, was the Korean Peninsula’s only legal government, did not recognize the North Korean government and advocated the recovery of the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. Even after Syngman Rhee was gone and the Chang Myon and Park Chung-hee administrations came into power, they saw South Korea as a legitimate UN recognized government and made clear that their approach was to eliminate communist forces. North and South Korea were in a classical zero-sum-game-like conflict in which they each advocated exclusively acquiring ruling rights in the peninsula.

However upon entering the 1970s, due to changes in international conditions, such as the intensification of the conflict between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, improvements in US-PRC relations, and the PRC becoming the UN representative of China, North Korea looked to improve its relations with the South, and in 1972 the “July 4 South—North Korea Joint Statement” was released. Here the so-called three principles of unification were proclaimed, which state that “peaceful unification” is a shared aim.

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the history of north-south negotiation, referred to Asai, NDL 2019.

However, the statement's call to "faithfully carry out these agreed items" was not put into practice. There are almost no cases in which post-military conflict peace treaties are completely implemented (this includes the aforementioned Oslo Accords). Often a process of agreement violations, renegotiations, and the conclusion of a modified agreement is repeated. This is because those in conflict proceed with negotiations while hiding desires that would lead to argument in order to reach an agreement for the time being.

While it is not insignificant that approximately twenty years after the Korean War the two governments released a joint statement, it was not an agreement for changing North—South relations but a way of shelving such changes and trying to avoid a confrontational situation.

From the latter half of the 1960s onwards, South Korea experienced rapid economic growth and democratization was advanced. Amidst this, there were efforts for North—South unification, referred to as "Nordpolitik" (Northern Policy).

In the July 7th Declaration (the Special Declaration for National Self-Esteem, Unification, and Prosperity) that President Roh Tae-woo announced in 1988, we find the following: "In order to create the conditions that establish peace on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea is ready to improve its relationships with our allies such as Japan and the United States, and we will pursue improved relations with socialist countries, including the Soviet Union and China." It tried to lead North Korea toward coexistence with the South, which was sought by the South's government, by enclosing it internationally. Also, because North Korea was unable to avail support from the Soviet Union or China, as both countries were stuck in economic doldrums at the end of the Cold War, it called for economic exchange between North and

South Korea trying to make North Korea's economy dependent upon that of the South.

The December 1991 "Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between South and North Korea" was born out of these circumstances. Also, at the end of 1991, the "Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" was released as well.

However, due to the 1993–1994 North Korean nuclear crisis, North Korea came to be seen as a political and military threat by the international community, particularly Japan and the United States. This also meant the strengthening of an external factor that restricted negotiations between the North and South, the parties in conflict, namely, US's influence.

The Kim Dae-jung administration, which began in 1998, promoted a "Sunshine Policy" in order to unify North and South Korea via a three-stage process. In June 2000, meetings were held between the two countries' heads of state, and they released a joint statement. Based on the idea that stable unification of the North and the South would become possible as the economic gap between the two countries lessened, South Korean business provided their economic and technological power as well as support for economic rebuilding to North Korea.

However, US President George Bush criticized Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union Address, and in 2003 attacked Iraq due to suspicions that it was producing weapons of mass destruction, toppling the Saddam Hussein administration. It was in this context that the second North Korean nuclear crisis happened.

However, Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy was carried on by Roh



Moo-hyun. In 2004 operations began at the Kaesong Industrial Zone. While North Korea had carried out three nuclear tests, the zone was never closed during this time. In 2007 a heads of states meeting was held in Pyongyang between President Roh Moo-hyun and Defense Chairman Kim Jong-il, and the “Declaration on the Advancement of South—North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity” was released.

This declaration called for both the North and South to cooperate to end the Korean War as well as work to implement the six-party talks’ agreement in order to solve the peninsula’s nuclear problem. However, while the December 6, 2008 six-party talks aimed to put into writing a framework for verifying North Korea’s denuclearization, an agreement was not reached, and no six-party talks have been held since then.

The Lee Myung-bak administration, which began in February 2008, adopted a different approach than the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations. It sought denuclearization and the opening up of North Korea as conditions for economic assistance to the country. However, on July 11th, a South Korean female tourist was shot and killed by a North Korean soldier on Mount Kumgang, and the Mount Kumgang Tourist Region project came to a halt. Also, in May 2009, North Korea carried out two nuclear tests. Then due to the ROKS Cheonan sinking in March 2010, South Korea halted all exchange and trade with North Korea (excluding that in the Kaesong Industrial Zone). Due to this, the bombardment of Yeonpyeong by North Korea in November, and other reasons, North—South relations hit a brick wall.

In February 2013, the Park Geun-hye administration began. It advocated as its policy toward North Korea a “trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula” that aimed for the development of North

—South relations based on mutual trust. However, North Korea continued to arm itself with nuclear weapons, carried out three nuclear tests in February 2013 and four in January 2016, and launched a ballistic missile in February 2016. Aiming to cut off funding sources for weapons of mass destruction development, South Korea halted operations at the Kaesong Industrial Zone and North—South relations worsened.

In May 2017, Moon Jae-in became president, and for the first time in nine years, political forces seen as conciliatory toward North Korea held the reins of government. However, North Korea pushed forward with its nuclearization, continuing to launch ballistic missiles and so on. With the rapid worsening of the relations between US and North Korea, the advancement of North—South relations was seen as difficult.

However, North—South dialogue rapidly advanced from the beginning of 2018 with the Pyeongchang Olympic Winter Games soon approaching. On April 27, President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim Jong-un met in Panmunjon and released the “Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula,” which confirmed the following objectives: (1) improving North—South relations, (2) alleviating military tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and (3) constructing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

In June of the same year, a heads of states meeting was held between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un. Their joint statement read, “President Trump is committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK, and Chairman Kim Jong-un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Then, in September of the same year, President Moon Jae-in visited Pyongyang, and, along with Kim Jong-un, signed the

“Pyongyang Joint Declaration” that called for (1) an end to a militarily hostile relationship, (2) the advancement of economic cooperation, (3) the solving of the issue of separated families, (4) the promotion of cultural exchange, and (5) the advancement of denuclearization.

### 3. Are Shared North–South Objectives Possible?

In the decades since the 1972 joint declaration between the two countries, their governments have repeatedly agreed to improve relations while not really implementing such agreements. But what about the 2018 agreements?

On November 12th, 2018 an article appeared in the newspaper *Hankyoreh* entitled “Examining Inter-Korean Relations 200 Days after the Panmunjom Declaration.”

Examining progress on the 25 agreements in the Panmunjom Declaration and the Pyongyang Joint Declaration, we find that nine (36%) of them have been completely implemented, while 13 (52%) of them continue to be deliberated, either at a preliminary or subcommittee level. There were also two agreements (8%) that failed (holding an inter-Korean event on June 15 and a performance by a Pyongyang art troupe in Seoul in October), while there is one agreement whose implementation is contingent on other factors (deliberating the questions of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, resuming tourism to Mt. Kumgang and creating a joint economic zone on the West Sea and a joint tourism zone on the East Sea).

[http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_northkorea/870329.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/870329.html)

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As for agreements related to using military tension on the Korean Peninsula, the newspaper states that partially due to the Panmunjom Declaration's supplementary military agreement, their implementation rate was the highest. However, it notes that the implementation of agreed-upon items related to the construction of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is not progressing.

The problem is that this area requires the cooperation not only of South and North Korea but also of Korea's neighbors and parties to the armistice agreement, including the US and China. The crux of this issue is North Korea's denuclearization, a matter wholly dependent upon the results of the North Korea—US dialogue.

Examining the ideals of Korean unification and a peninsular peace regime, which have been professed by the two governments' joint statements and the like as well as considering their actual actions, we can see that while they assert the same position in writing, their reasons for doing so (what they are actually seeking) are opposed.

The Panmunjom Declaration also calls for bringing “a swift end to the Cold War relic of longstanding division and confrontation” and improving and cultivating “inter-Korean relations in a more active manner.” Many times it has been agreed that the unification of the Korean people should be sought after establishing the peaceful coexistence of North and South Korea.

In this sense, perhaps, we could say that the issue of who gets to lead the unification of the Korean Peninsula has decreased in importance. However, the problem is that the two governments' understanding of the necessary conditions for each polity to sustain

and survive peacefully does not match.

North Korea is extremely concerned that its current regime will be overthrown due to a military attack or collapse due to the spread of anti-establishment sentiments. It appears unlikely that it will quickly change its policies of firmly maintaining military defensive power (symbolized by its nuclear armament), controlling the speech and the political participation of its citizens, and so on.

While South Korea seeks an end to the Korean War in order to construct a peace regime as discussed in joint declarations, for this to happen, reconciliation between the US and North Korea is indispensable. However, the greatest obstacle to improving US—North Korean relations is North Korea's nuclear armament.

In other words, North Korea's nuclear armament is a point of dispute, and both countries' aims regarding it cannot both be met. North Korea sees its nuclear armament as the most suitable policy for maintaining the country's independence, but from South Korea's perspective it is a major obstacle to the construction of a peaceful regime on the peninsula, in other words, South Korea's peace. Here we should keep in mind that North Korea's nuclear weapons are not aimed at South Korea.

While North Korea's nuclear armament can be seen as problematic in that it challenges the NPT regime, due to sanctions being led by Japan and the United States (which see its armament as a military threat), North Korea has heightened its vigilance to protect its regime, and has actually become more attached to its nuclear armament.

For South Korea, in this situation, the worsening of US—North Korea relations and the peninsula being divided while a Korean War peace treaty remains at a standstill is a major loss.

According to the problem-solving approach, the aim should be for

North and South Korea to become partners that pursue the creation of an understanding in which their two desires are fulfilled at the same time. North Korea's desire to maintain its regime and South Korea's desire to end the Korean War and establish a peace regime.

In the aforementioned US—North Korea joint statement, the US again sought the complete denuclearization of the peninsula.

One way to get the US to agree to effective regime maintenance and an end to the Korean War could be North and South Korea working together to present a roadmap to denuclearization of the peninsula.

Turning to recent developments, partially due to President Moon Jae-in's diplomatic skills, work has been done to improve US—North Korea relations at the 2018 Panmunjom meeting, the US—North Korea heads of states meeting in Singapore, and the Pyongyang meeting. However, it appears that progress is halting due to the lack of agreement at the 2019 US—North Korea heads of states meeting in Hanoi.

According to media reports and the like, while North Korea prepared a phased denuclearization plan, the US pointed out that there were suspicions that facilities were being preserved, and they ended in disagreement. One also finds the view that Presidents Trumps' own scandals, unrelated to the content of negotiations, had an influence. In order to make conflict resolution negotiations successful, as previously stated, those in conflict must come to an agreement, intend to implement it, and have the ability to do so in a sustained fashion. It is also probably important to determine whether the US administration has retained such an ability.

There is also a need for both North and South Korean governments to be responsible and able to continually implement any agreement.

It is with this confidence-building that the respective aims of these two countries that lead to disputes can be modified and a cooperative relationship constructed.

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