

# **A Study on How the Lack of Bi-partisanship Has Affected South Korea's Policy on North Korea: Implications for Future Relations**

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**Abstract** The Republic of Korea (RoK) is praised for its rapid economic development, whilst simultaneously transforming its political system from an authoritarian one to a democratic one. However, compared to its economic rise, the RoK's political transformation has been more challenging, with suppression of opposition parties, weak coalitions, and governments that, once in power, look out only for their own party's interests. This has defined most aspects of South Korea's political system, but the lack of bi-partisanship with regards to the unification policy with North Korea has been even more pronounced. This paper will analyze how the political evolution has shaped its system and, as such, why historical trends still play a major role in domestic politics. It will then focus on the fluctuation in unification policies throughout the various governments, and show that this pattern of shifting policy is now weakening South Korea's own position with regards to the North, as well as the RoK's allies.

**Keywords** Partisanship.unification policy.domestic politics.inconsistency.progressives.conservatives

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the political system within the Republic of Korea (RoK) in order to understand why there has not been any consistent policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).<sup>1</sup> This lack of consistency has arguably damaged any deepening of relations between the two Koreas and has therefore prolonged the division of the Peninsula. The domestic divisions have been present throughout the RoK's development, but unfortunately, the divisions still remain present to this day. As such, the lack of bipartisanship towards the RoK's North Korea policy needs to be addressed if any significant progress is to be made in the future.

One further aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of Korean domestic politics for the wider, global audience. When researching this topic, it became clear that whilst there is a good deal of literature available, the majority of critical analyses of domestic politics in the RoK are written in Korean only. As such, many scholars will not have access to this material if they cannot speak Korean nor have funds to translate all papers into English. That also means, therefore, that I have had to limit my research to mainly the existing literature in English or current newspaper articles, which means that there may be some subjective views.

The first section will focus on the development of South Korea's domestic political system. This section will show that since the constitution was implemented in 1948 the political system has centered around top-down politics, self-interested politicians and presidents, and constant conflict between parties. This has created in South Korea a system that automatically rejects opposition policies and makes any bi-partisanship extremely difficult. As such, when it comes to inter-Korean relations and South Korean policies thereof, a lack of consistency has worsened any chance of trust-building with the DPRK. Moreover, the first post-war decades were defined by authoritarianism and a South Korean population looking to build not only a new political system, but also a new identity as a nation-state.

The second section looks at the unification/North Korea policies of the various governments since the Rhee administration. In doing so, a pattern will emerge of policies of absorption and aggression, followed by ones of dialogue, in turn followed by extremely generous engagement, preceded by a return to animosity, and finally swinging back to nationalistic engagement. The repercussions of the inconsistent policies of the various governments will then be analyzed in the final section, where it shall be seen that the North has begun to understand this pattern of behavior and is now taking full advantage of the current administrations time in office, where it can follow its own partisan approach, regardless of political opposition.

The paper will finish by noting that in order for the North to take the South seriously in the future, the RoK's domestic political parties must start to form bipartisan policies and overcome historical differences.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms RoK & South Korea, and North Korea & the DPRK will be used interchangeably throughout.

## **South Korea's Political Evolution**

On 17 July, 1948, the South Korean constitution came in to force, three years after its independence from Japanese imperial forces. The constitution represented the first time in its history that the people of (South) Korea would be governed by a democratically elected President, a point which should not go unmentioned. According to the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, "Korea had never experienced the concept of a constitutional government until then. Consequently, key concepts of the constitution, such as national sovereignty, basic human rights, separation of powers, presidential system and parliamentary system were rather unfamiliar to Korean society" ('The Constitution of the Republic of Korea', www.much.go.kr). This means that from the get-go Korea has had to develop its democratic system from scratch, creating new institutions, legislation and policies without a true understanding of what they are. Ahn (2000, 466) describes the process, "political mobilization led from above had a tendency to reinforce top-down politics, political authoritarianism both at the top and the bottom, a hierarchical pattern of authority relationship, and centralized direction of political activities".

This section shall look briefly at how Korean domestic politics has evolved since 1948, in order to understand the dynamics of the system and help determine why bi-partisanship still remains elusive. In particular, the section on 'pre-democratization' shows that the RoK was founded on a flawed system that embedded the preferences of the leadership in to national policies-what would be considered as classical realism. This foundation has caused the system to be built around non-democratic procedures, which still exist today. This, therefore, has a significant influence on how successful inter-Korean relations will be. As Yun (1999, iii) suggests, "domestic political forces have had a greater influence on inter-Korean relations and negotiations than the international environment".

### **Pre-democratization**

The 1948 constitution that the South Korean state was based on was essentially a democratic constitution. Article 1(1) of the Constitution reads, "the Republic of Korea shall be a democratic republic", whilst immediately following, Article 1(2) reads, "The sovereignty of the Republic of Korea shall reside in the people, and all state authority shall emanate from the people". However, the formative years of the RoK's domestic political system veered markedly away from these opening commitments. Authoritarian rule took almost immediate effect.

Following Rhee Syngman's inauguration in 1948, the RoK not only had to consider unification with the communist North, but it was also going through a phase of extreme anti-Japanese sentiment. These two areas of concern set the tone for Rhee's twelve years in office, twelve years that Jung (2002, 90) describes as "absolute supremacy of state power in all social sectors and dictatorship backed by police power".

Rhee was a devout nationalist, having been the first president of the Korea Provisional Government (KPG) after it was founded in Shanghai in 1919, during Japanese colonization. After his impeachment by the KPG in 1925 Rhee "led an anti-Japanese movement in the U.S." (Kim, 2010; 13). However, Rhee's hatred of communism was equally as strong and it became

“the ideological basis of the Syngman Rhee government” (Jung, 2002; 90). As such, Rhee was able to manipulate his new position as President of the RoK by using both of these narratives. Kim Hak Joon (2010) discusses several examples, including the implementation of the National Security Law in 1949, which led to the arrest and imprisonment of 118,621 suspected communist sympathizers (*ibid.*, 29), the Pusan massacre in which “about 10,000 unarmed civilians suspected as the “leftists”” were killed (*ibid.*, 43), and the establishment of the ‘March to the North’ policy.<sup>2</sup>

Rhee’s leadership came to an end with the April 19 uprising, a massive protest that developed after “the authorities extensively rigged the election to ensure Rhee and his heir apparent Lee Gi-bung (Yi Gi-bung) would be elected president and vice president” (Jung, 2002; 88). Rhee attempted to put down the protest by declaring martial law, but the ploy failed and Rhee exiled himself to Hawaii on 29 May, 1960.

The end of Rhee’s dictatorship left a political void, which was temporarily filled by Huh Chong, a former cabinet member under Rhee.<sup>3</sup> With only a four month mandate, Huh had little chance of effecting great change and in August 1960, Chang Myon took office, although he had “inherited the issues the caretaker administration had failed to resolve, principally six political scandals perpetrated under Rhee’s regime and the settlement of illicit fortune” (*ibid.*, 93). One change that had occurred was the constitutional amendment to reduce the power of the President and increase the role of the Prime Minister, in effect creating a Parliamentary system and the start of the Second Republic. Even so, the government, under Chang, was weak, and the Stevenson Amendment of April 1961 further highlighted the divide between conservatives and progressives. Kim (2010, 101) cites Han in describing the sectoral divisions of the time, “South Korea was under “the extreme bipolarization of ideological orientations between important sectors of the society—such as the police, military, and conservative politicians, on the one hand, and the activist students, intellectuals, and reformist politicians, on the other”.

Needless to say, the Second Republic, under PM Chang, did not last. On May 16, 1961, Park Chung Hee successfully led a coup d’état against the Second Republic, after he which ruled the RoK until 1979. Park took a firm grasp on power, enforcing sweeping changes, from political to labor law changes. Nam (2013, 874, 875) notes, “the military junta after the May 1961 coup d’état led by General Park Chung Hee disbanded all political organizations, including trade unions, revised existing labor laws in 1963, and organized, from the top down, a new national union federation”<sup>4</sup>.

Park took a strong position from the start, promoting the building of South Korea, rather than developing relations with the North, in what Kim (2010, 123) calls the “Thesis of “Economy-first, Unification-later””. Khaled (2007) also discusses the economic emphasis of Park by detailing the Five-year economic plans that Park began drafting as early as June, 1961, just weeks after taking power. However, despite the rapidly improving economy throughout the

<sup>2</sup> Both Jung (2002, 99-106) and Kim (2010, Chapters 1-3) discuss numerous massacres that occurred during the Rhee government, in particular between the years 1948-1952. Many of the massacres took place in the South East (South Gyeongsang province) and Jeju island.

<sup>3</sup> According to Jung (2002, 91) Huh Chong was also in charge of arranging “Rhee’s exile in Hawaii”, which indicates the closeness of the relationship between Rhee and Huh.

<sup>4</sup> Nam’s (2013) work focuses on the role that industrial workers played in the democratization process in Korea, in particular the role of shipbuilders

1960s, Park was criticized for his stance on normalizing relations with Japan.<sup>5</sup> Advocates pointed out that normalization would result in “economic aid from Japan to support a series of five-year economic development plans” (Kim, 2010; 125), although the government faced “united” opposition, and extreme resistance from the leftists who demanded reunification with the North before normalizing relations with the old enemy (*ibid.*). Even so, Japan and South Korea signed the normalization Treaty on June 22, 1965.

The declaration of emergency martial law in October, 1972, enabled Park to ratify the Revitalization constitution (more commonly known as the Yushin constitution) on November 21, 1972, after which he was officially elected by representatives of the National Conference for Unification as the President on December 23, 1972. Kim (2010, 191) notes that this made Park “the *de facto* life-term President reigning supreme over all three branches of government”. Park maintained a tight grip on power, until his assassination in 1979.

The subsequent Chun Doo Hwan regime, 1980-1987, was mired from the start in controversy, in particular with the Kwangju massacre in May, 1980. The use of military force on unarmed civilians stamped Chun's authority on to South Korean politics, yet what is often overlooked is the fact that Chun initially seized power with the help of Roh Tae Woo in December, 1979, and once in power Chun targeted and imprisoned political opposition leaders, most notably Kim Dae Jung, who was sentenced to death in September, 1980.<sup>6</sup> As with Park, Chun also revised the constitution and the Fifth Republic began on October 27, 1980. However, the 1980s saw increased demonstrations against the Chun government and a strong call for democratic elections. In Busan, for example, students, including future President Roh Moo Hyun, protested against the new Fifth Republic. By 1984, Chun had lifted a ban on opposition political parties and released imprisoned professors and students who had been activists against his government. The tide was definitely turning towards democracy.

## First Steps Towards Democracy

The period of change that is generally recognized as turning South Korea from a dictatorship to a democracy is 1987-1992. Ahn (2000, 457) sums up, “It was only in 1987 that South Korea entered an era of significant political transformation and made a decisive turn away from authoritarianism to democracy”. In 1987 the first general election took place, whilst in 1992 the first government of the Sixth Republic, under Roh Tae-Woo, lost the election and peacefully handed power over to the newly elected government under Kim Young-Sam in 1993.

Despite Ahn's mention of a “decisive turn away from authoritarianism”, the period did not see a complete U-turn in domestic politics that resulted in the absolute democratization of the southern peninsula. As Lee (1991, 65) stresses, “Elected by popular vote, Roh was able to depart from the Fifth Republic's strong anticommunist stand in foreign policy while allowing

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<sup>5</sup> There is wide debate on whether Park was pro-Japanese or anti-Japanese, although many point towards Park's education at Japanese institutes as proof that he was aligned with the Japanese during colonization, see Kim (2010, 117,118) and Jeong & Shin (2018, 62-65).

<sup>6</sup> Kim Dae Jung's sentence was only overturned and reduced to life imprisonment when the US asked Chun to show leniency. He was then subsequently released in 1982, as Chun was becoming increasingly unpopular and he needed a way to appease public negativity.

limited democratization in domestic politics”, further adding that the elites within the administration needed to “reconcile two conflicting needs; political democratization and preservation of their own vested interests”. What this shows is that on the outside there was a symbolic reforming of the system, but domestically the previous authoritarian tendencies and corruption remained very much intact. In particular, Lee (*ibid.*) points out that the elites within the Roh Tae Woo government were highly linked with the previous authoritarian government of Chun Doo Hwan. Lee states, “President Roh continues to draw his inner circle from the T.K. group (Taegu and Kyongsang), whose members constituted the core of the Fifth Republic. Although those who had been too closely identified with the previous regime were removed from influential position, the T.K. group continued to be overrepresented in various important institutions”.

The trend towards democracy was highlighted by Kim Young Sam’s reluctance to change the constitution in 1991 in order to gain an advantage in the 1992 Presidential election. Whilst such constitutional reforms were frequent in the past -Lee (1991, 67) states, “rewriting the basic rules has been common in Korean political practice”, whilst Ahn (2000, 466) notes, “The founding constitution adopted in 1948 was amended 9 times. The autocratic rule of Syngman Rhee during the First Republic set a bad example of manipulating the constitution through frequent amendments” - Kim was against constitutional reform, based on public opposition to such a reform, as well as strong local election results in mid-1991, which had strengthened the DLP’s standing and therefore Kim’s chance of being elected the next president. Either way, the perception of public opinion was beginning to determine domestic political policy, a sign of democratization.

Moreover, the opposition Party for Peace and Democracy (PPD) lead by Kim Dae Jung merged with the Democratic Party, which included former followers of Kim Young Sam who had opposed his policy of merging with the Democratic Justice Party under Chun Doo Hwan in the 1980s. Whereas in the past, under authoritarian rule, criticism of the government, even by opposition parties, was punishable by imprisonment, the new system seemed to be moving towards a multi-party system with openly critical opposition.

The concept of political parties merging to defeat the larger parties in power has also become common place in Korean domestic politics. Suh (2014, 228), when reviewing the work of Youngmi Kim states,

The presidential election of 2012 amply demonstrated that coalition building was a prevalent feature of South Korean domestic politics. Opposition parties formed a loose coalition to field a candidate who posed a formidable challenge to the dominant conservative candidate. ... Coalition building and pulling resources and political capital together to win an election or get a legislation passed, is not unique or limited to Korea- ... -but South Korea stands out in the extent to which coalition building pervades domestic politics.

Suh (*ibid*) then further discusses how the coalitions often prove fruitless in their pursuit of policy achievement. The examples of Kim Dae Jung’s failure to keep his promise to Kim Jong Pil of implementing a parliamentary system, Roh Moo Hyun’s failure to either abolish or amend the National Security Law, and Lee Myung Bak’s challenges with the Grand Canal

Project.<sup>7</sup> These examples are vital in understanding domestic politics in South Korea. Whilst coalitions form to get elected in to power, they are otherwise foundationless and achieve almost no cross-party policy consensus. Haggard, Pinkston and Seo (1999, 202) go further by suggesting some coalitions may be the root cause of in-fighting, in particular referring to the coalition between Kim Dae Jung's NCNP and Kim Jong Pil's ULD as both "an unlikely alliance" and "a marriage of convenience that raised the specter of inter-coalitional conflict".

Moreover, when one political party is tainted by the bad name of one politician, it merely merges with other parties or changes its name, meaning that in reality, very little changes. In 2000, for example, the NCNP reformed itself under the name Millennium Development Party (MDP) as a move away from the unpopular policies of Kim Dae Jung. More recently, in 2017, the conservative Saenuri Party (새누리당) changed its name to the Liberty Korea Party (자유한국당) following the impeachment of former President Park Geun Hye. According to Lee (1991, 73) these changes are due to selfish reasons, noting in his conclusion that Korean politicians are more concerned with self-interest, rather than ensuring long-term stability for the nation. He states,

South Korea's internal political process has been disappointing to many observers. Its politicians continue to operate with the "black and white" mentality, which means a winner takes all, tries to defeat an adversary rather than maximize one's own advantages, and endeavors to change the existing rules rather than negotiate political compromises. This attitude multiplies uncertainty, not about policy outcomes but about existing political institutions, and makes it impossible for anyone to make long-term plans. ... The North-South Agreement will add more complexity to internal politics.

## Democratization

The narrow election victory of Kim Dae Jung's NCNP<sup>8</sup> in 1997 was also a benchmark in democratization. It represented the first transfer of power from one party to a major opposition party, i.e. from conservative right wing, to liberal left wing. Yet the Kim Dae Jung administration was also a perfect example of both cross-party and in-party division, as well as the continuation of leadership dominance. Ahn (2000, 473) notes that "the party system remains highly unstable, short-lived and mal-institutionalized. ... In non-election years, the parties are less active and usually subordinate to the personal commands of the top power holders".

Elections have become a key feature of democratization and participation. Ahn (2000, 469)

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<sup>7</sup> The Grand Canal Project, known also as the 'Pan-Korea Grand Waterway Project', was the brainchild of former President Lee Myung Bak and it formed the basis of his election campaign. Lee planned to build a canal that linked the two major rivers, Han and Nakdong in Seoul and Busan, respectively, but suffered from huge opposition politically, socially and academically, and as such the project was later changed to the Four Major Rivers Restoration Project, which did not include a canal linking the two major cities. For more details see, Sun-Jin Yun. (2014). Experts' Social Responsibility in the Process of Large-Scale Nature-Transforming National Projects: Focusing on the Case of the Four Major Rivers Restoration Project in Korea, pp.114-120.

<sup>8</sup> The National Congress for New Politics Party was later reformed in 2000 as the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), a move that was based on President Kim's waning popularity.

points out that “elections have become more regular and transparent and have come to be perceived as legitimate channels for participation”. In particular, 1995 saw the first full local elections since they were banned in 1961, a clear sign of democratic processes advancing. However, the question still remains, do regular and transparent elections mean that political parties will cooperate more and work together for the good of the people? Ahn (*ibid.*) concluded that they do not, emphasizing, “the underlying basis of party politics and candidate nomination has not markedly changed... South Koreans are still fed up with party infighting, scandals and corruption in election periods”.

By 2002, Shin (2005, 25) notes, South Korea was well on track to democratization, stating, “South Korean society has undergone democratization processes in economic, political and social structures over the past ten years under two civilian presidents. The economic and political reforms that the Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung administrations have instituted are remarkable”. Moreover, Shin (*ibid.*, 26) puts the accelerating democratization down to the rapid increase in civic organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that have increased exponentially the interest and participation of civilians in domestic politics.

Yet the 2002 Presidential elections proved to be a further step in the democratization process. The nomination procedure for Presidential candidates was reformed from in-party conventions to national primaries. “To become their party’s nominees, both Lee Hoi Chang (GNP) and Roh Moo Hyun (MDP) went through their respective party’s presidential primaries, the first time ever in the history of South Korean elections” (Shin, 2005; 27).<sup>9</sup> In doing so, this reduced the role that the “party boss” would have in choosing the nominee, whilst simultaneously reducing “deal making, vote buying and factional fighting {which} had frequently been observed in the nomination conventions of major parties” (*ibid.*).

The 2007 election victory for Lee Myung Bak saw a swing back to conservative government under the GNP, following the decade-long period of progressive rule. As Moon (2009, 120) notes, the Presidential victory and the following general election in April 2008 were clear mandates for change, “Lee Myung-bak, ... was inaugurated as the 17th president, defeating the incumbent party’s Chung Dong-young by the wide margin of 5.2 million votes in the December 2007 presidential election. The ensuing landslide victory by the GNP in the April 9, 2008, general election gave the Lee government the nation’s largest legislative majority since the democratic opening in 1987”. Ironically, however, the victory for Lee was arguably a step backwards in terms of democratization. Whilst the results proved that South Korea had established itself as a representative democracy and popular elections had now become the norm, the people of South Korea had not only expressed, by vote, their dissatisfaction with the Roh administration, but they had also elected a new President “despite a number of scandals that implicated him in tax fraud, illicit real estate deals, and connections with BBK, a bankrupt investment firm charged with fraud” (*Ibid.*, 121). For many citizens, President Lee’s promise of improving the economy was a bigger priority than eliminating corruption. Yet, in a further

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<sup>9</sup> The backgrounds and policies of the two major presidential candidates were completely opposite. Roh Moo Hyun was a self-taught lawyer and activist with more left-leaning liberal policies, as well as an advocate for continuing the Sunshine Policy. Lee Hoi Chang was from an upper-class family, well-educated and had had major roles in the judiciary and political system, most notably serving as Prime Minister under Kim Young Sam. A staunch conservative, he wanted to maintain the status quo with the North and preserve US authority. For more details, see Shin (2005, 28)

twist, once in power, President Lee suffered a massive drop in popularity based on his nominations for the Cabinet in which 13 out of the 15 nominees were similarly suspected of real estate speculation, tax evasion and plagiarism (*Ibid.*, 123). The appointments were criticized for being personal acquaintances of, or at least of having ties to, Lee, for which Moon (*ibid.*) clarifies, "Koreans were less outraged by their wealth than by their lack of noblesse oblige and by Lee's explicit nepotistic bias in personal appointments". This thus shows that nepotism and cronyism are still at high levels in Korean politics.

In 2012, Park Geun Hye was elected into power, in what many saw as a full-circle. President Park's term in office was mired with scandal on both the national and personal level, stirring memories of her authoritarian father. Similarly to Lee Myung Bak, Park was also hit with accusations of nepotism, although on a much larger scale. Taking advantage of the scandals surrounding President Park Geun Hye, incumbent President Moon Jae In ran a successful Presidential campaign based on anti-corruption and clean politics. Since taking office in 2017, Moon's administration has targeted numerous politicians for crimes committed during office, including former President Lee Myung Bak, as well as President Park Geun Hye, and he has also expanded anti-corruption investigations in to businesses, including the influential Chaebol.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the campaign to rid Korean politics of corruption is fully justified, President Moon must be careful not to abuse his power.<sup>11</sup> Kirk reports that new legislature being pushed through by the government will increase the number of political opponents being removed, a return to the past as he sees it. He states, "The controversy in Seoul over establishing a special unit to investigate corruption deepens South Korea's left-right divide in a struggle sure to test the country's democratic system. In his zeal to carry out his campaign pledges and sweeping reforms, President Moon Jae-in wants broader powers to solidify his regime and sublimate conservative voices" (South China Morning Post, 3 May, 2019).

Clearly the political tendencies of the past for Presidents to promote self-interest remain alive and kicking. Moreover, these moves by President Moon further the divides between political parties and with a historic difference over North Korea policies between left and right, this can only be negative for developing a bipartisan North Korea policy.

## **Policies towards North Korea**

The above section has shown that Korean domestic politics has democratized immensely, with citizen participation now very high and accountability equally so. At the same time, leaders

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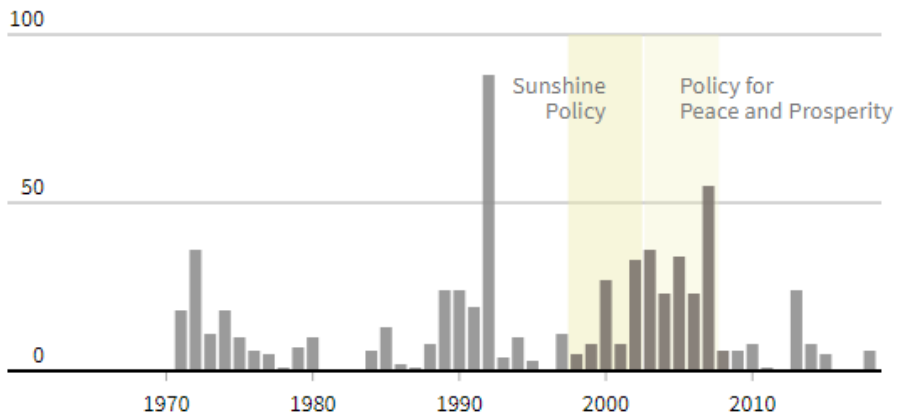
<sup>10</sup> In a report by Korea.net in January, 2019, the administration's efforts to eliminate corruption are bearing fruit. The report states that "Transparency International (TI), Berlin-based organization measuring global corruption levels" has given South Korea its "highest corruption perception index", meaning that South Korea is the cleanest it has ever been. For more details see, Park Gil-ja & Yoon Sojung, 'Gov't reform drive raises Korea's anti-corruption ranking to record high', [www.korea.net](http://www.korea.net)

<sup>11</sup> In the list of Presidential pardons, released in February 2019, President Moon appeared to show that politicians convicted of corruption, even if they are aligned with the progressives on the left, will not receive preferential treatment. A report in the JoongAng Daily notes that former lawmaker for the now-disbanded UPP, Lee Seok-Ki, did not receive a pardon. See, Ser Myo-ja, 'Moon passes over politicians, pardons activists', Korea JoongAng Daily.

like the current President, Moon Jae In, are also pushing to eliminate corruption from within the system. However, patterns of historical political movements are still very much alive, with frequent party name changes, weak coalitions that cannot work together and a lack of willingness to unite on policies of national interest, in particular when leadership preferences may be compromised.

This section will focus more sharply on the North Korea policies of the governments at various stages of South Korea's political development. However, to avoid repetition of historical description and to make this paper more concise only the policies since 1987 will be looked at—since the pre-1987 governments were all authoritarian there is no need to analyze lack of bipartisanship in that period. The post-1987 analysis aims to show that there has been both a lack of bipartisanship, as well as mis-trust amongst the parties as to true motivations towards the North. One simple graph, produced by Reuters, shows how communication with the North has been extremely inconsistent, with more progressive governments opening up and more conservative ones closing off communication (see below). By analyzing past inconsistencies in the North Korea policies, South Korean political parties should start working together to build a more consistent and stable policy, which will result in a more stable relationship with the DPRK.

### Official North-South meetings per year



Source: Reuters Graphics

### 1987-1997: Inconsistency begins

Roh Tae Woo pursued a policy of engaging with the North and called for both sides to see each other as non-enemies, thus bringing to an end the idea in South Korea of unification by absorption. At the start of his term in office, he called for the Korean National Commonwealth Unification Formula which would see inter-Korean trade and exchanges. “He gave substance to this proposal by developing much of the legal and administrative machinery for regulating North-South economic interactions, including the establishment of an Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Promotion Committee to oversee exchanges between the two Koreas” (Levin

& Han, 2002; 8). What is particularly unique about Roh's unification policy was that he had gained partisan support. Yang (2016, 13) describes the level of support, noting, "the formula won bi-partisan support, particularly from the heads of the three opposition parties, two of whom subsequently became South Korean presidents". Arguably, the transition towards democracy, enforced by public pressure, created a period of 'democratic euphoria' and this may have played a role in Roh's conservative party forming a bi-partisan policy with the leftists.

Roh's commitment to peaceful coexistence was fruitful and in December, 1991, the *Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North* was signed, signaling the start of a new relationship between Seoul and Pyongyang. However, by September of 1992 cracks were starting to appear, both in inter-Korean relations, due to the North's nuclear weapons program, as well as in the RoK, where once again left-wing right-wing differences emerged. Yang (*ibid.*, 15) states, "in a period of a conservative backlash in the South and increasing international pressure on the North over the nuclear issue, the two sides failed to agree" on various issues.

When it comes to Kim Young Sam, matters are more complicated. It is well known that Roh only became President because the opposition parties split the left and failed to mount a cohesive coalition. Kim Young Sam, as Denney (2015, 'Kim Young Sam's Legacy') points out, broke away from the left and formed a coalition with Roh's conservative Democratic Justice Party, in order to secure enough votes to win the presidential election,

Kim Young-sam merged his Reunification Democracy party with Roh's Democratic Justice Party and Kim Jong-pil's opposition party, the New Democratic Party. The result was the conservative majority sought by Roh and the necessary political support Kim required to take the presidency, which he did in the subsequent election. The "three party merger," as it is called, underscores Kim's pragmatic disposition and his understanding of how politics work, but also casts doubt upon his legacy as a champion of democracy

With regards to the North, President Kim's policy throughout his five years in office are best described by Yoon (1996, 514) as being "inconsistent", going from engagement, to aggression, whilst also confusing its own regional allies with contradictory statements on how they should approach the DPRK.<sup>12</sup> Yoon (*ibid.*) suggests, "Perhaps, the inconsistent policy toward the North was a consequence of the lack of coordination of the South Korean leadership". Does Yoon mean that the coalition between conservatives and progressives was an innate flaw in north Korean policy? If that is so, then any future coalitions and bi-partisanship are doomed from the beginning. Whatever the reason, the see-sawing soft-tough approach leads to instability in inter-Korean relations.

### **1997-2007: 'Unconditional engagement'**

The period of 1997-2007 is described by Lee and Chung (2013, 320) as one of "unconditional

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the leadership transition in the DPRK and the subsequent foreign policy of Kim Jong Il will have played a role in the South's shifting policy towards the DPRK. However, this paper is focused on the South Korean policy and thus will not delve into Kim Jong Il's leadership and its policies.

engagement". The above graph showing numbers of meetings per year shows clearly the policy shift towards engagement, going from zero official meetings in 1996, Kim Young Sam's last year in office, then entering a ten-year period of ever-more frequent meetings from 1997. The Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae Jung<sup>13</sup>, and the continuation of that policy under the name of the Peace and Prosperity Policy under the Roh Moo Hyun government, are regarded as sea changes in North Korean policy, but also ones that failed, in the eyes of the conservatives.

Levin and Hand (2002, 135) continue the thread of weak coalitions, noting that Kim Dae Jung "was elected only by forming a strange coalition-in political and policy terms-with Kim Jong-pil's ULD. His own party, moreover, was a distinct minority within the National Assembly". Based on his weak position domestically, the authors suggest that Kim Dae Jung exploited his Sunshine policy for his own political gain, but in doing so "it helped rile the political opposition, politicize what had generally been considered a nonpartisan issue" (*ibid.*). Indeed, even within the MDP-ULD coalition, each party "used the other to maximize its own political position without reaching a viable compromise on their very different views about policy toward North Korea" (*ibid.*, 137).

Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy was a functional approach, built on the ideas of liberalism and constructivism (Moon, 2012; 17). In defining the policy, Moon sees it as a "strategic and holistic approach that aimed at genuine, long-term improvements in inter-Korean relations" (*ibid.*), and the framework was based on three principles of the absolute rejection of war, South Korea's abandonment of unification through absorption, and increased exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas.<sup>14</sup> But where Kim's policy went too far for many was the "give first, take later" aspect, for which public support, as well as political opposition, criticized him strongly. Kim (2003, 284) mentions that "economic aid from South Korea without concessions from the North ... would ... release funds for military upgrade. The Kim government interpreted North Korea's militarism more charitably", a point which Kim (2008, 3) also makes when detailing Kim Dae Jung's refusal to halt economic aid even after the discovery of the DPRK's "clandestine uranium enrichment (HUE) program". This example highlights the polar opposite views of how to deal with the North.

In a further example of President Kim's willingness to "give" to the North, he permitted the Hyundai group to negotiate with the North on the Mount Kumgang project. To exemplify the shift in policy, Kim (2004, 586) remarks that "Earlier both the Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam governments had thrown cold water on Chung's resort project, forbidding him from offering hard currency to Pyongyang". Furthermore, Kim (*ibid.*, 584) also discusses the point that Kim Dae Jung put so much emphasis on the Sunshine Policy and engagement that "as a result, {he} not only weakened the fragile national consensus for the policy but also made the government inflexible to changing circumstances".

Despite waning support for the Sunshine Policy, Roh Moo Hyun was victorious in the 2001 election, and from 2002 continued the engagement policy, although changing the name to the Peace and Prosperity Policy. Whilst domestically the issues remained fairly unchanged, the continued engagement policy and willingness of President Roh to forgive the North of all

<sup>13</sup> This was Kim Dae Jung's fourth presidential election, having been defeated in three elections since the 1970s.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, see Moon, Chang In (2012) pp.21-25

transgressions regarding military activities caused wider problems and highlighted further divisions with regards to national security. Kim (2004, 7) states that while conservatives demanded a stronger US-RoK alliance, "Under the Roh government, South Korea had disagreed openly with the U.S. in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue". Moreover, immediately prior to the 2007 presidential election, Roh held a summit with Kim Jong Il in which he "made additional concessions and commitments to the North", despite the first nuclear test by the DPRK in 2006 (*ibid.*, 5).

### **2008-2016: Return to reciprocity**

Unsurprisingly, the progressives lost the 2007 election and the conservative representative Lee Myung Bak became president, bringing with him a new North Korea policy that the North found rather unfavorable. Immediately after Lee's inauguration, Kim (2008, 2) states, the DPRK "refused to resume talks with Seoul unless the Lee government dropped its "anti-national" and "anti-reunification" policy". Continuing on, Kim notes that the North's leadership demanded that summits agreed by the two previous Presidents be honored, although the Lee government refused, citing "provisions which are unacceptable to the conservative leaders" (*ibid.*). Simply put, with the transition from progressive to conservative party in the RoK, the North Korea policy swung almost instantaneously to an offensive one, displeasing the North.

Lee's policy, known as 'Vision 3000: Denuclearization and Openness', was not entirely unreasonable. The basic framework provided for the facilitation of the denuclearization of the DPRK, was open to discussion/negotiation if the DPRK requested, and it would link economic and humanitarian aid on a reciprocal basis, i.e. if the North improved human rights and took steps towards denuclearization it would receive more aid. If the North continued its weapons programs, it would get nothing. In addition, the Lee administration wanted to repair its security ties with the U.S. to act as a deterrent against the North. According to Kim (*ibid.*, 7) the rebuilding of U.S.-RoK security ties, as well as his strengthening of Japan-RoK relations, "angered North Korea" who referred to Lee as a traitor.

Naturally, the opposition in Seoul had a similar view to Pyongyang, that Lee's 'Vision 3000' was too tough, and ignored previous agreements, such as the June 15 South-North Joint Declaration. Kim (*ibid.*, 14) remarks that "former President Kim Dae-Jung urged President Lee to 'soften his hawkish policy on North Korea'. ... A similar view was expressed by Son Hak-Kyu, chairman of the main opposition United Democratic Party (UDP)". In an even more critical attack on Lee's policy, some left-wing politicians went as far as to blame Lee's lack of engagement for the attacks on the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong island in 2010, whilst on the far right, Lee was criticized for not being aggressive enough after the sinking of the Cheonan (Lee & Chung, 2013; 319,320). In all, Lee's policy was criticized from all corners of South Korean politics.

The 'Trustpolitik' that President Park Geun Hye embarked on can be considered as taking the middle ground, or as Yun (n.d.) describes it, "neither a coercive policy nor an appeasement policy". According to Jo (2015, 103), "her government plans to attempt to strengthen deterrence and security while trying to normalize inter-Korean relations and to achieve durable peace on the Korean Peninsula in the medium-long run". Jo (*ibid.*) also stresses that Park's long-term goal was to achieve unification, but through a gradual, step-by-step approach.

Park's trust-building policy was, however, short-lived, with the DPRK carrying out two further nuclear weapons tests between 2013 and 2016.<sup>15</sup> As such, in line with the international community Park's administration applied sanctions against the DPRK, and with relations strained the industrial complex at Kaesong was closed. Later that year, Park's presidency became embroiled in a corruption scandal that saw her impeached in April, 2017.

## Current RoK Policy towards the North

### Moonshine and Lingering anti-communist Mentality

The Moon Jae In presidency has once again enacted a shift in policy towards the generous engagement approach. Colloquially known as 'Moonshine', due to its strong resemblance to the Sunshine policy of Kim Dae Jung, Moon's goals include "restarting of the six-party talks, increasing economic cooperation between the two Koreas, and a plan to set inter-Korean policy in stone through legislation that can be ratified by both the South's National Assembly and the North's Supreme People's Assembly" (Ahn, 2017: 'Sunshine 2.0'). The strikingly open policy towards the DPRK, a clear U-turn in policy from the Park regime, also has conservatives worried about the potential damage that it will do for RoK-U.S. relations, with Ahn (*ibid.*) noting, "it's certain to cause friction between Seoul and the Trump Administration, particularly in its proposals for a South Korean defense policy which distances itself from the U.S."<sup>16</sup>

Moon showed his commitment to implementing the engagement policy in a speech in August, 2017, in which he controversially stated that the RoK had been founded in 1919, a statement that had conservative leader Hong Jun Pyo riled up. Hong retorted that Moon was only changing the date so that he could appease the North "in order to avoid a legitimacy fight" (cited in O, 2018; 5). In addition, in 2018, as O (*ibid.*) continues, "National Assembly members (32 from his party, 1 from People's Party) sponsored a resolution to change the Armed Forces Day from October 1 to September 17". This was again due to historical events on these dates which shifted focus from *South Korean* history to *Korean* history.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, there have been protests over the appointment of the Justice minister, Cho Kuk, that revealed a stark divide in Korean attitudes towards political ideas. The *Financial Times*, reporting on protests that occurred after Minister Jo resigned in October, 2019, stated "hundreds of thousands of protesters clapped and sang in support of President Moon Jae-in and his government's campaign to combat corruption through justice system reforms. Fewer than

<sup>15</sup> The DPRK tested one nuclear weapon in February, 2013, and then declared in January, 2016, that it had successfully tested its first hydrogen nuclear bomb.

<sup>16</sup> Since 2017, the U.S., under the leadership of Donald Trump, has managed to build historically strong relations with the DPRK, to the point where in mid-2019 Trump declared that he and Kim Jong Un were 'in love'. Had a different President been in office in the U.S. then relations between the three states could be very different.

<sup>17</sup> October 1, in South Korea, represents the first time that RoK forces crossed the 38th parallel during the Korean war, the 1949 establishment of the RoK air force, and the signing in 1953 of the U.S.-RoK Alliance. September 17, 1940, on the other hand, is the date when the Korean government in exile in China established the Korea Liberation Army.

50 metres away — separated by police — a smaller group of opposition protesters, numbering in the tens of thousands, lambasted the president as a “commie” and a “traitor”, and called for his removal from office” (2019, ‘South Korean protests Weaken Moon Jae-in ahead of 2020 polls’). A clear polarization of politics is emerging in Korea, again with clear notions of pro- or anti-communist stances.

The opposition have been very vocal in their criticism of Moon and his government. In 2018, the Liberty Party Korea “called for Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon to be fired because he violated South Korea’s constitution by circumventing parliament to promote joint projects with North Korea” whilst also criticizing the inter-Korea summit for being “approved in a Cabinet meeting without ratification by parliament” (Hayward, 2018. ‘South Korea Opposition Seeks Ouster of Unification Minister’). These are valid objections, since Moon himself has pushed vehemently for corruption in politics to be stamped out, yet his own party seems to be pushing its own manifesto without due democratic process.

In a more recent article, it appears that support for Moon’s generosity is wearing thin. DePetris (2019, ‘Moon Jae-in’s dream’), writes, “Moon Jae-in’s judgment is increasingly being questioned from all directions. *Chosun Ilbo* ran an editorial in early August suggesting Moon may have lost his mind. The *Korea JoongAng Daily* wasn’t much kinder”.

What remains clear, however, is that in the South, there is still a strong sense that left-wing, progressives are pro-communist—a lingering legacy of the Rhee and Park dictatorships. To highlight the extent to which “leftist suspicion” still remains in South Korea, let’s look at the example of US beef. U.S. beef imports to Korea had been banned since 2003, but the Lee Myung Bak government decided, quite unilaterally, in mid-April, 2008, that it would reinstate the importing of all American beef without checks. This led to mass protests by citizens on the one hand, although supporters of Lee suggested that negative news around American beef “was exaggerated out of proportion and that “impure elements” such as political radicals and pro-North Korean leftists were orchestrating the movement from behind” (Moon, 2009; 124). Whilst for this study the import restrictions on beef are irrelevant, it does highlight the fact that in South Korea politicians on the left of the spectrum are automatically considered to be pro-North Korean, and thus communist. Jeong and Shin (2018, 58) hold a similar view, stating, “Many South Koreans today tend to be intolerant toward progressive ideas, regarding them as impure, leftist ideologies held by those with favorable attitudes toward North Korea”.

## **DPRK Responses**

This section attempts to show that actions in the South have reactions in the North, although it is difficult to provide concrete data/evidence to support these ideas. As such, this section has required the use of newspaper reports to offer some evidence to support its arguments. So, what has been the reaction from the DPRK towards all of these changes? Lee and Chung (2013, 322) comment that “Pyongyang itself states its violent actions and words were responses to the behaviors of South Korea”, which gives a clear indication that the DPRK is becoming somewhat irritated with the constant shifts in policy, even though they may also use that as an excuse to act belligerently.

From a different angle, these shifts in policy, and particularly, the very soft and friendly approach of the current administration, could well play into the hands of the DPRK. By using

salami tactics, the DPRK is starting to play on the weakening relations between the U.S-RoK.<sup>18</sup> In his April, 2019, address, Kim Jong Un stated clearly that he wanted Moon Jae In to be more assertive against the U.S. demands in order to exchange more with the DPRK. The Korea JoongAng Daily ('Kim Scorns Moon as Mediator') of South Korea reported, "The South's authorities "should not act an officious 'mediator' and 'booster' that adopt a vacillating stand depending on the trend and engage themselves in an array of visits," Kim added, "but be a party advocating the interests of the nation with its own spirit and voice, being part of the nation." "

Kim is cleverly pushing the nationalist agenda, knowing full well that Moon is in favor of a quick reunification and is willing to provide economic aid to the DPRK. Moreover, Kim also understands that this period of engagement and generosity could very well come to an end with the next Presidency in just over two years. Furthermore, Kim understands that with Moon Jae In's anti-Japanese policies causing a rapidly deepening crisis, he can also take advantage of the weakening alliance there, in particular given Seoul's announcement to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). A report by the Dong-A Ilbo remarks, "Now that Seoul's decision to leave the agreement has cut off a channel in trilateral security cooperation, Pyongyang might have considered the current situation as a golden opportunity to enhance its own nuclear and missile capabilities as well as bargaining power for future nuclear talks" ('N. Korea takes advantage of chaos in Northeast Asia').

It seems that Kim's plan is working, with the same Dong-A Ilbo report noting that following the DPRK's testing of two short-range ballistic missiles "South Korea, the United States, and Japan have responded to the North's firings in a not-so-unified manner", going on to detail the different reports by Japan and the RoK, with the U.S. paying little attention. It would appear, at least for now, that the North's leadership has started to learn the pattern of South Korean unification policies and it is now exploiting the weaknesses as such. The experience and potential that the Sunshine and Peace and Prosperity Policies, which seemed lost, has now returned, albeit possibly only for a short time. The North is doing everything it can to take advantage of what it sees as a weak South Korean government.

## Conclusion

In this paper, it has been shown that South Korea's political evolution has been less than smooth, with almost four decades of dictatorships, followed by a rapid shift to democracy, all with no previous experience of how to administer one. As a result, the RoK's political system has been built on a foundation of party politics, centering around the ideals of the incumbent Presidents. The systemic partisanship still remains strong today and that is having large repercussions for North-South relations. The fact that partisanship is still so dominant in deciding relations with North Korea shows that even in recent years, when democracy has become much more established and stabilized, the two sides of the political spectrum are still more concerned about party policy than the interests of the whole Korean peninsula.

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<sup>18</sup> It of course should be noted that Kim Jong Un has an improving relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump, which also plays a role in driving a wedge between the two allies.

We have also seen how the unification policies of the authoritarian South Korean governments shifted from aggressive approaches of strong anti-communism, to a gradual push for peaceful coexistence, interspersed at times with a return to portraying the DPRK as an imminent threat when domestic democratic movements gained ground. In simple terms, individual interests of the leaders took precedence over national interests.

The preceding Sixth Republic, however, has ironically seen an increase in partisanship and party interests, with fewer efforts to bipartisan North Korean policies. The shift from a one-party, or at least a dominant party, state system to a multi-party democratic one has created a larger arena for debate and inadvertently formed a stronger left-right divide. The progress made by Roh Tae Woo, with the signing of the Basic Treaty in 1991, was then taken to the extreme with the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments' sunshine policies of unreciprocated engagement, which soon lost favor both with the public and opposition parties, leading to a rapid shift in policy with the Lee Myung Bak presidency.

More recently, with the impeachment of Park Geun Hye, the progressive democratic party of Moon Jae In has once again swung the North Korea policy back from a strict one to a generous, engaging one. The frequent shift from conservative to progressive party is causing North Korea to be able to play the South Korean government as it pleases. The current situation has seen Kim Jong Un take advantage of the Moonshine policy of Moon Jae In, by creating divides between the RoK and U.S. and Japan and exploiting the engagement policies of the Democratic Party for their own gain.

At the end of the day, all policies thus far have failed to deal effectively with the North Korean regime. If the lack of bipartisanship continues then all future policies will continue to be fruitless and the DPRK will continue to reap the benefits of South Korean domestic political conflict.

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