

*NAKA 2015 Essay Competition:
"Roadmap Towards Peace in the Korean Peninsula"
Co-Winner*

Sunshine in The Korean Peninsula?

By Jennifer Sabolsky, Grade 12, W.T. Woodson High School, Fairfax, VA

The political importance of relations between North Korea (DPRK) and South Korea (ROK), and the impact of the division of the Korean Peninsula on the Korean national consciousness, is difficult to overstate. Many South Koreans support the concept of reunification but there is much concern that reunification could have a significant, negative economic and social impact on the South as it would have to absorb under skilled DPRK workers and upgrade the North's outdated infrastructure. Another concern focuses on the possibility of a sudden collapse of the DPRK and the possibility of absorbing 25 million new citizens into the South's population of 50 million. As long as South Koreans have strong emotional ties to relatives, ancestors and long-lost relationships north of the 38th parallel, the ROK government has little choice but to make reunification a reality. The only question is how?

Any meaningful plan to have a reunified and lasting peace in Korea must start with the principles of the "Sunshine Policy."¹ In 1997 Kim Dae-jung became President of ROK and instituted the "Sunshine Policy" to promote reconciliation with the DPRK. As part of this policy, the ROK government began allowing South Korean's businesses and private citizens to have contact across the DMZ, and ramped up bilateral food and fertilizer aid to the North as it was recovering from a devastating famine. In 1998, an arm of South Korea's Hyundai Group began running tours of Mt. Geumgang in North Korea.² In June 2000, Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il met in Pyongyang for the first presidential summit since the countries were established, leading to a dramatic shift in ROK attitudes toward the North as well as in policy.³ The two sides agreed to begin family reunification meetings, and also decided to establish the inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) near the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).⁴ The "Sunshine Policy" was premised on separating humanitarian and economic cooperation from political issues, and engagement went forward even as the two

¹ James A. Foley, "'Sunshine' or Showers for Korea's Divided Families?" *World Affairs*, Vol. 165, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 179-184 "Mount Kumgang and Inter-Korean Relations," NCNK Issue Brief, November 10, 2009.

² "Mount Kumgang and Inter-Korean Relations," NCNK Issue Brief, November 10, 2009.

³ Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder, "Confidence and Confusion: National Identity and Security Alliances in Northeast Asia," *Issues & Insights*, Vol. 8, No. 16 (September 2008), 22-24.

⁴ Construction at Kaesong began after Kim Dae-Jung left office, in 2003.

Koreas engaged in naval clashes.

Roh Moo-hyun, 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. On October 2, 2007, President Roh Moo-hyun walked across the DMZ in travelling to Pyongyang for talks with Kim Jong-il. During the visit, there was a series of meetings and discussions between the leaders.

At the talks, the two sides reaffirmed the spirit of the June 2000 Joint Declaration and had discussions on various issues related to realizing the advancement of South-North relations, peace on the Korean Peninsula, common prosperity of the Korean people and unification of Korea. On October 4, 2007, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il signed the peace declaration. The document called for international talks to replace the armistice which ended the Korean War with a permanent peace treaty.⁵

Inter-Korean relations continued to deteriorate in early 2009, with North Korea declaring all past inter-Korean agreements “nullified”⁶ and the Lee administration condemning nuclear and missile tests by the North. 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.”⁷ North Korea refuted the report,⁸ and some South Korean and U.S. scholars and experts also questioned the investigative process.⁹ China did not assign culpability to the sinking, a stance echoed in the UN Security Council Presidential Statement issued in response.¹⁰ President Lee demanded an apology for the attack, and on May 24, 2010 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

⁵ Korean leaders issue peace call, BBC, 4 October 2007, 9:27 GMT

⁶ The Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group, “Investigation Result on the Sinking of ROKS “Cheonan,”” May 20, 2010.

⁷ The Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group, “Investigation Result on the Sinking of ROKS “Cheonan,”” May 20, 2010.

⁸ “National Defence Commission Issues Statement on KCNA,” *KCNA*, May 20, 2010.

⁹ “Most S. Koreans Skeptical About Cheonan Findings, Survey Shows” *Chosun Ilbo*, September 8, 2010; J.J. Suh and Seunghun Lee, “Rush to Judgment: Inconsistencies in South Korea’s Cheonan Report,” *Japan Focus: The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2010); So Gu Kim and Yefim Gitterman, “Underwater Explosion (UWE) Analysis of the ROKS Cheonan Incident,” *Pure and Applied Geophysics*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (April 2012), 547-560.

¹⁰ Chinese Foreign Ministry, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Statement on UN Security Council’s Presidential Statement on the Cheonan Incident” July 9, 2010.

and exchanges outside of Kaesong.¹¹ In November of that year, 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 civilians. In November 2010, the South Korean Unification Ministry officially declared the “Sunshine Policy” a failure, thus bringing the policy to an end.¹² Was the “Sunshine Policy” a failure or was it just prematurely ended before the fruits could be harvest? Nevertheless, every other option -- military pressure, containment, and waiting for the regime in Pyongyang to collapse -- has failed. To reduce tensions in the Korean Peninsula and bring lasting peace we must return to the principles of the “Sunshine Policy.”

There have been many books, theses, and pamphlets written about the “Sunshine Policy” touting it as the ultimate instrument for peacemaking in the Korean Peninsula. The world acquiesced that was the case. The former President of South Korea Kim Dae-jung, a distinguished Nobel laureate and a close friend of Nelson Mandela championed the “Sunshine Policy” and believed it could bring peace to the Peninsula.

The “Sunshine Policy” was a proactive policy to induce incremental and voluntary changes in North Korea for peace and reform through the patient pursuit of reconciliation, exchanges, and cooperation. This policy was not perfect and had some flaws but it was the most successful policy ever implemented in the Korean Peninsula. The key element of this policy was incremental and voluntary change. We cannot force or change North Korea overnight. We need not isolate North Korea but pursue reconciliation and provide opportunities to comprise several components such as military deterrence, international collaboration, and domestic consensus. Nevertheless, its objective is crystal clear: to lay the foundation for peaceful Korean unification by breaking the vicious cycle of negative, hostile actions and reactions through peaceful coexistence and peaceful exchanges and cooperation.

The sunshine policy is based on three fundamental principles as outlined in President Kim’s inaugural speech. The first principle is non-tolerance of military threat or armed provocation by North Korea. Peace cannot be attained if North Korea continues it’s hostile actions in the region. Diplomacy must be expanded in many fields based on the South-North Basic Agreement. This includes exchanges of special envoys and commencing summits to promote the implementation of the South-North Basic Agreement.

The second is the official abandonment of the idea of unification by absorption and the negation of any other measures to undermine or threaten North Korea.

¹¹ Council on Foreign Relations, “South Korean President Lee's National Address, May 2010,” May 24, 2010.

¹² South Korea dumps Sunshine Policy with North, opts to go solo, International Business Times, 19 November 2010

The international community must continue to recognize and respect North Korea as a solvent country. North Korea fears possible detrimental effects improvement in Inter-Korean relations and reform could have on their regime. If South Korea can show North Korea that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain from economic cooperation induced by the rekindled "Sunshine Policy," it may alleviate their tendency for military adventurism towards the South. This policy can assuage North Korean fears that reform and improving relations must necessarily lead to an implosion of their state, which can establish an atmosphere where North Korea would feel comfortable in opening up voluntarily. The capitalistic influence permeating North Korea has grown through the efforts of the "Sunshine Policy." Although North Korea outwardly claims to be a socialist country, in reality it has already begun to change into a market economy. With an ever-growing wealth gap in North Korea the very fact that the North Korean government cannot control the widening wealth gap testifies that its socialism is not working. What is actually working is a growingly market-based capitalism.

Third, push reconciliation and cooperation between the South and North beginning with those areas, which can be easily agreed upon. Numerous members of separated families have become old and are passing away. We must let relatives separated from their families in the South and North meet and communicate with each other as soon as possible. South and North need to expand cultural, academic and economic exchanges on the basis of separating the economy from politics. Too much criticism, mainly assessing the impact of the "Sunshine Policy" in terms of political and military aspects, is fundamentally wrong about the sequence of how things are resolved. In the case of German unification exchanges came first and then other changes such as political and military followed. If you look at it from the success on the civilian exchange front, there certainly has been progress.

Andrei Lankov, a Russia-born expert on North Korea, nods to the impact of civilian exchange between the Koreas. "North Korea is a regime that can be toppled peacefully on a long-term basis by South Koreans working together with North Koreans side by side. Projects like Kaesong are good. We need more. The more the better," Lankov told Asia Times Online, adding, "If I were the Dear Leader, I would ... " He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he made the gesture of beheading, trying to make a point of how "dangerous" such projects are to North Korea.

Lankov is an unusual right-wing scholar in that he doesn't approve of the North Korean regime but still sees the usefulness of the "Sunshine Policy" in terms of how it can "destroy" the North Korean regime from within, by enabling more North Koreans to be in contact with South Koreans and foreigners, thereby exposing them to the absurdity of the regime in which they live.

Years later, Kim Dae-jung criticized the George W Bush administration's hardline North Korean policy, saying it "reversed the age of warm sunshine back to the

age of cold wind". As a consequence North Korea broke away from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, ousted International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, fired long-range missiles, while the tension ultimately climaxed with the October 2006 nuclear experiment. "Since then, the nuclear issue has not seen its solution," Kim said in the speech. a tough policy on North Korea will actually work is naive at best. After all, the "Sunshine Policy" started because a prior confrontational policy against North Korea for 40 years didn't work.

President Kim's inaugural speech raised hope for a unified Korea in 1998 and his speech still resonates true in 2015. The "Sunshine Policy" is still a reasonable track toward peace and reconciliation between North and South! No provocation by the North! No absorption attempts by the South! Pursuit of cooperation! Bring on the sunshine! Bring back the "Sunshine" and reduced tension and peace may soon prevail in a unified Korean Peninsula.

