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INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS BETWEEN STRATEGIES OF COOPERATION, UNIFICATION, AND CONFRONTATION

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Abstract. The article attempts to analyze new developments in the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In recent years, significant changes have occurred in inter-Korean relations. The leadership of the DPRK has abandoned the goal of unification of Korea, stating that it will proceed from the realities of the existence of “two warring states” on the peninsula. The administration of Yun Sok-Yeol, for its part, continued to raise the issue of unification, promoting plans to increase influence for these purposes directly on the population of North Korea, bypassing the official authorities. The new Cold War that has gripped the Korean Peninsula after a brief period of détente in 2018–2019, and the subsequent move by the two Koreas to mutual nuclear deterrence, has long buried hopes for inter-Korean reconciliation, dialogue and cooperation. Instead of gradual rapprochement with subsequent integration into one state entity, the opposite process is now gaining momentum – dismantling and destruction of all the acquisitions and developments of past years: the contractual and legal framework, cooperation mechanisms, communication channels. It has been shown that the idea of Korean unification, a goal that was considered quite realistic in the past, is now turning into an utopia, an abstract slogan behind which there is no real program of action. Despite the obviousness of the task to establish relations of peaceful coexistence, including, of course, the resolution of the consequences of the Korean War, the DPRK and the ROK are still far from finding a reasonable formula for settlement that would allow the contradictions existing between them to be removed. In the current conditions, the general dynamics of the development of the situation will most likely remain quite high and saturated with conflict events. This is fraught with the emergence of new complications on the Korean Peninsula, making peace and security in this region vulnerable to challenges of a military, political and other nature.

Keywords: Korean Peninsula, DPRK, ROK, unification of Korea, inter-Korean dialogue, economic projects, Kim Jong-Un, Yun Sok-Yeol.

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МЕЖКОРЕЙСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ СТРАТЕГИЯМИ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА, ОБЪЕДИНЕНИЯ И ПРОТИВОБОРСТВОМ

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу новых моментов в развитии ситуации на Корейском полуострове. В последние годы в межкорейских отношениях происходят значительные изменения. Руководство КНДР отказалось от цели объединения Кореи, заявив, что будет исходить из реалий существования на полуострове “двух враждующих государств”. Администрация Юн Сок Ёля со своей стороны продолжала ставить вопрос об объединении, продвигая планы усиления воздействия в этих целях непосредственно на население Северной Кореи в обход официальных властей. Нежелание или неспособность двух корейских сторон переформатировать свои отношения, чтобы найти новую формулу взаимоотношений, усугубляются обострением военно-политического противостояния между ними с упором на взаимное ядерное сдерживание.

Ключевые слова: Корейский полуостров, КНДР, РК, объединение Кореи, межкорейский диалог, экономические проекты, Ким Чен Ын, Юн Сок Ёль.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the so-called “Korean problem” encompasses a complex set of unresolved issues. These include a persistent military-political confrontation between the two Koreas, an ongoing nuclear arms race, the unresolved legacy of the Korean War (1950–1953), and the failure to convert the long-standing armistice into a formal peace agreement. At the core of these challenges lies the ambiguous status of inter-Korean relations and the inability – or unwillingness – of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to establish normalized bilateral relations. The absence of sustained dialogue and mutual efforts toward reconciliation and cooperation continues to hinder progress.

The first official contact between the North and the South commenced with the signing of the Joint Statement of July 4, 1972, which was an attempt to agree on the tasks and principles for achieving the reunification of Korea. At that time, the parties affirmed their intentions to move towards this goal peacefully, independently, and through national unity.

More than half a century has passed since then during which the external geopolitical environment and the internal political systems of both North and South Korea have undergone significant transformations. Despite these changes, the two sides have made little tangible progress toward achieving their declared goals. Inter-Korean relations have followed a complex pattern of cyclical fluctuations. Periods of rapprochement and increased cooperation have occasionally emerged, enabling the development of limited interaction. However, these phases have consistently been followed by setbacks, during which previous agreements were either dismantled or rendered ineffective, and aspirations for reconciliation were replaced by renewed hostility and heightened military tensions.

At present, not only does unification remain unattainable, but the parties have still not been able to establish a *modus vivendi* that would enable peaceful coexistence and good-neighborly relations. Paradoxically, rather than diminishing over time, historical contradictions have deepened, further entrenching mutual hostility and reinforcing a sense of alienation between the two states.

The unification strategy, the need for which has traditionally been declared by both Pyongyang and Seoul, has never been formalized as a specific mutually acceptable plan of action or road map. Instead, it has remained a point of ideological contention, with each side insisting on the legitimacy of its own approach. In recent years, however, the situation has become significantly more complex. The crisis on the Korean Peninsula – intensified sharply at the beginning of the current decade – has impacted the core dimensions of inter-Korean relations. Consequently, fundamental goals such as reunification, once considered inviolable, are now subject to serious reconsideration. The discourse has shifted from pursuing inter-Korean consolidation and eventual unification, to contemplating a complete disengagement and the formal recognition of two separate states on the peninsula. This dilemma is currently perceived in markedly different ways by the leadership in Seoul and Pyongyang.

The collapse of joint inter-Korean projects and the disintegration of established dialogue mechanisms over the past two to three years have triggered an unprecedented escalation in tensions and mutual animosity between Pyongyang and Seoul – surpassing even the most volatile periods since the Korean War. This deterioration has been further intensified by the evolution of the conflict into a nuclear confrontation. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) continued development of its nuclear arsenal, alongside the Republic of Korea’s (ROK) engagement in joint nuclear deterrence strategies with the United States, has significantly exacerbated the severity and complexity of the current situation.

DPRK ABANDONS AIM OF UNIFICATION

The period spanning late 2023 to the first half of 2024 marked a turning point in inter-Korean relations, as profound disagreements between Pyongyang and Seoul over the future of the Korean Peninsula and the broader bilateral agenda came sharply into focus. While these divergences had been gradually intensifying beneath the surface in preceding years, they suddenly manifested in an overt and confrontational manner.

This shift began with a dramatic policy declaration by North Korea, whose leadership – unexpectedly, and seemingly even to its own population – announced an official abandonment of the long-standing goal of Korean reunification. In a series of public addresses delivered in December 2023 and early 2024, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un justified this reversal by arguing that the pursuit of reunification had lost its relevance amid escalating inter-Korean hostilities. He asserted that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) now shares nothing in common with the Republic of Korea (ROK), which he described as a hostile state seeking to “destabilize and change the regime” in the North, with the ultimate aim of absorption. Under these circumstances, Pyongyang declared its intention to pursue a policy on the premise that “two warring states” now exist on the Korean Peninsula [source 1].

Pyongyang’s abrupt reversal in policy appears particularly striking in light of its previous commitments. As recently as April 2018, during a landmark meeting with then-President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in, at Panmunjom, Kim Jong Un declared that North and South Koreans were “not warring peoples but one family, a people of the same blood,” and should live together in harmony and unity [1]. At that time, the North Korean leader relied entirely on the strategic guidelines and rich theoretical heritage of inter-Korean relations left by his predecessors, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which had been deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the people of the DPRK over the decades. This included the 10-point unification program announced in 1980, which envisaged the creation of a confederative Korean state, as well as the proposal of Kim Il Sung (1993), which substantiated the need for gradual integration based on recognition and respect for each other’s ideology and political systems. Despite the propaganda nature of these initiatives, they, albeit declaratively, emphasized Pyongyang’s intentions and readiness to develop dialogue and contacts with Seoul.

This approach was continued by Kim Jong Il, who, despite all the fluctuations in inter-Korean relations, advocated continuing negotiations and contacts with the South. At the same time, the intention to seek agreement not only with like-minded

people but also with the “ruling elite” and military circles in the ROK was emphasized, if this would advance the cause of unification [2, p. 17].

However, this time Kim Jong Un did not limit himself to a mere verbal statement of the qualitative deterioration of inter-Korean relations. He insisted on excluding all provisions concerning unification and interaction with South Korea from the Constitution and current legislation of the country and also proposed the abolition of all state, party, and public bodies and structures whose competence included issues of inter-Korean relations and cooperation [source 2]. These steps were later supported by military measures. In October 2024, the KPA General Staff announced the decision to close all roads and railways connecting to South Korea, impose a complete blockade of the border, and reinforce it through the construction of additional defensive structures [source 3].

North Korea’s revised doctrine on inter-Korean relations was articulated in concentrated form by Kim Jong Un during his visit to the National Defense University in October 2024. The core tenets of this new approach emphasize that Pyongyang now views the South as an irreconcilable adversary, whose enduring objective is the destruction of the DPRK. Consequently, engagement or dialogue with Seoul is deemed both futile and meaningless. Despite this, North Korea’s leadership asserts that it harbors no intention of launching an attack on the ROK. In the past, according to Kim Jong Un, Pyongyang did indeed set the goal of liberating the South and achieving unification by force, but he claimed such ambitions have since been abandoned. However, Pyongyang remains committed to preventing any shift in the “strategic balance” on the Korean Peninsula. In the face of perceived external military threats, North Korea will continue to strengthen its armed forces and reserves the right to fully employ its offensive capabilities in the event of aggression [source 4].

Seoul, at least at the official level, rejected North Korea’s newly articulated position as “anti-national and contrary to historical realities.” South Korean government officials reaffirmed that Pyongyang’s “hostile rhetoric” would not alter the Republic of Korea’s commitment to the goal of unification, which remains enshrined in the country’s Constitution [3].

Thus, in addition to longstanding disagreements, a new and more profound dividing line has emerged between the two Koreas. Whereas in the past, the central debate focused on the terms and mechanisms for achieving inter-Korean integration, the current question has shifted fundamentally: whether to continue upholding the goal of reunification or to abandon it altogether, severing all remaining ties and channels of cooperation. In this context, the fundamental incompatibility of the two sides' strategic interests and long-term visions for the Korean Peninsula has become increasingly stark and unmistakable.

EXPERIENCE OF INTER-KOREAN INTERACTION

In the past, a period of warming relations, accompanied by a gradual rise in mutual ties, began after the fall of the dictatorial regime and the establishment of democratic rule in South Korea in the late 1980s. President Roh Tae-woo was the first South Korean leader to publicly renounce the longstanding policy of confrontation and to advocate for dialogue and cooperation with the DPRK. During his administration, restrictions on direct trade with the North were lifted, and such exchanges were reclassified as "intra-Korean" rather than interstate activities. Reconciliation efforts accelerated under the liberal administration of President Kim Dae-Jung (1998–2003), who introduced the Sunshine Policy. This approach emphasized the importance of decoupling political considerations from economic cooperation with the DPRK. North Korea responded positively to these initiatives.

The period from 1998 to 2008, when progressive administrations governed South Korea, is often referred to as the "golden decade" of inter-Korean engagement. During this time, key areas and directions of cooperation were defined, and the legal and institutional frameworks for bilateral interaction were established. From the outset, the expansion of economic exchanges was prioritized, reflecting mutual interests – though the underlying objectives of the two Koreas differed significantly.

In recent decades, the economy of the DPRK has experienced sustained stagnation, with repeated attempts to accelerate growth through admin-

istrative measures proving largely ineffective. Kim Jong Un's rise to power in December 2011 was accompanied by cautious economic reforms, including limited experimentation with market-oriented practices. However, significant obstacles quickly emerged. These included a lack of managerial competence and commercial experience, a chronic shortage of modern technology, and, most critically, the absence of sufficient investment needed to modernize the country's industrial base.

In the subsequent period, Pyongyang began promoting the development of special economic zones. The "Law on Economic Development Zones," adopted in May 2013, outlined plans for the establishment of ten zones under central government control and an additional nineteen at the provincial level. These zones were designed to attract foreign investment and incorporate best practices from abroad, including potentially from South Korea. The obvious goal was to lay the foundations of a "two-tier" economy: maintaining the traditional state-controlled economy in the country's interior, while simultaneously fostering a network of market-oriented enclaves in coastal and border regions. These zones were intended to act as engines of growth capable of "feeding" the inefficient state sector [source 5, pp. 242–250].

South Korea, for its part, pursued its own strategic objectives. The ideological foundation of the Sunshine Policy – advanced by successive left-liberal administrations, including those of Kim Dae-Jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and later Moon Jae-in – centered on the belief that sustained engagement could encourage gradual transformation within the DPRK. These governments sought to demonstrate the benefits of the South Korean economic model and private-sector management practices, with the hope that economic cooperation would catalyze broader reform in the North. In particular, there was an expectation that, through deepening economic interaction, North Korea might embark on a path of modernization akin to South Korea's experience in the 1970s and 1980s – eventually leading to fundamental changes not only in the socio-economic sphere but also within the political system [4].

Joint economic projects were considered in Seoul a necessary condition for the economic integration of the two Koreas with the aim of forming

an “economic community” – envisioned as a transitional phase toward the eventual full political unification. At the same time, large-scale assistance from the ROK, both on a governmental and private basis, was intended to help overcome structural and institutional barriers and lead to the peaceful “digestion” of the North Korean socialist economy in a market-oriented framework. The notion of economic synergy – integrating the economic potentials of both North and South Korea – gained significant traction in South Korea, with the belief that such cooperation could produce a positive “explosive effect” that would elevate a unified Korea into the ranks of the world’s leading industrial powers.

These considerations were most comprehensively articulated in the proposals of South Korean President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), called the “Economic Map of the Korean Peninsula”, which were formed by the momentum generated during the successful inter-Korean summit of April 2018. The leader of the ROK proposed creating three powerful cooperation belts – extended areas of joint entrepreneurship on the east and west coasts of Korea and running from west to east, along the demilitarized zone. The plan envisioned the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects in North Korea, including the establishment of enterprises focused on the extraction of mineral resources. Ultimately, it aimed to develop a “single inter-Korean market” with extended connectivity to Russia and China, including the construction of a gas pipeline reaching the Korean Peninsula. However, these and similar projects were often criticized for insufficient attention to the complex political realities and a lack of thorough economic and financial planning. According to estimates by South Korean experts, the realization of this ambitious vision could require up to 306 trillion KRW (approximately 250 billion USD) over a ten-year period – an amount far exceeding the financial capacity of both the state and private sectors in the ROK. Consequently, even at the conceptual stage, analysts highlighted the necessity of forming an international consortium to mobilize resources from third-party countries – an objective many considered highly unrealistic [source 6, pp. 166-169; 5; 6].

In practice, the only truly functioning “test site” for inter-Korean economic cooperation was the Kaesong Industrial Complex, established in 2004 just north of the demilitarized zone. At its peak, the complex employed approximately 54,000 North Korean workers alongside around 800 South Korean personnel. While the project yielded some positive outcomes – such as the production of goods for the South Korean market and the exposure of North Korean workers to modern management practices and collaborative work environments – it ultimately remained a relatively small “market enclave,” largely disconnected from the broader economy of the DPRK. Despite its initial ambition to evolve into a “world-class industrial hub” integrating the North and South Korean economies, these plans were never realized for a number of reasons [7].

Following the nuclear test conducted by the DPRK in 2006, Seoul suspended many of its long-term cooperative initiatives. Tensions further escalated after a series of military incidents in 2010, prompting ROK President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) to terminate trade and investment relations with the North. Ultimately, the Kaesong Industrial Complex was shut down in 2016 as a direct response to North Korea’s continued nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches.

Seoul grew increasingly disillusioned with the outcomes of economic cooperation and the broader Sunshine Policy, as they failed to generate the anticipated momentum toward market reforms in the North, despite South Korea’s sustained engagement and support. Contrary to expectations, the DPRK did not pursue meaningful reforms or adopt a policy of openness. According to official South Korean sources, revenue generated from joint ventures was instead diverted to support the development of military programs and to reinforce the centralized structure of the North Korean state economy [8].

Externally, there was no significant improvement in the security environment on the Korean Peninsula, nor was there a strengthening of mutual trust between the two Koreas. The arms race persisted, and Pyongyang not only refused to pursue denuclearization but also continued to advance its nuclear capabilities. As a result, a growing consensus emerged in Seoul that future aid and in-

vestment cooperation with the DPRK should be strictly conditional—“tied” to tangible progress on denuclearization and the implementation of genuine market reforms. These conditions were increasingly viewed as essential prerequisites for any meaningful economic integration between the two Koreas [9].

North Korea also harbored its own grievances and sources of dissatisfaction. The volume of preferential aid received – whether through official state channels, international organizations, or private business initiatives (a total of \$ 3.05 billion from 1995 to 2018), clearly did not meet Pyongyang’s needs [source 7].

At the same time, Seoul’s unwillingness to decouple political issues from economic cooperation, along with its efforts to impose its own agenda and terms, was perceived by Pyongyang as a threat to the ideological and social foundations of the regime. Against the backdrop of increasingly stringent international sanctions on the DPRK – particularly following the collapse of U.S. – North Korea denuclearization negotiations – inter-Korean economic engagement lost much of its relevance. Notably, key agreements on economic cooperation reached at the inter-Korean summits of April and September 2018, including those concerning the reconnection and modernization of railways and roads, remained unimplemented, as these initiatives could not be exempted from the restrictive measures.

Equally unproductive were the attempts to launch a political “peace process” between the South and the North, which the Moon Jae-in administration advocated. One of the difficulties was that the DPRK leadership considered only Washington as its partner in negotiations on peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. In contrast, Seoul was assigned a secondary role, as Pyongyang perceived it to have limited influence. As a result, when the DPRK did engage with the South on issues such as confidence-building measures or the reduction of military and political tensions, it was often with the aim of securing short-term, tactical agreements intended to prompt further cooperation in areas deemed more strategically beneficial to the DPRK.

This approach prompted Pyongyang to engage in complex maneuvering with respect to Seoul’s numerous peace initiatives during the tenure of the liberal South Korean administration. At the height of inter-Korean détente in September 2018, both sides signed a significant military agreement aimed at reducing the risk of armed clashes along the land and maritime borders. During their summits, the leaders of the two countries reaffirmed their commitment to transforming the existing armistice into a permanent peace regime. However, North Korea subsequently rejected Moon Jae-in’s proposal to adopt a political declaration to end the Korean War, citing the fact that this would lead to “upsetting the strategic balance in the region” [source 8].

The aforementioned military agreement was proved to be short-lived. The consultative and coordination mechanisms it envisaged were never fully established, and the subsequent aggravation of inter-Korean contradictions particularly under the administration of Yoon Suk-yeol ultimately led to the agreement’s collapse and its *de facto* annulment.

Inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation had effectively reached a dead end by the beginning of the current decade. As neither side succeeded in achieving its strategic objectives, dialogue was suspended, contacts were severed, and both Pyongyang and Seoul gradually reverted to a state of confrontation and mutual hostility. In early 2021, the DPRK leadership announced a comprehensive program for the development and deployment of nuclear and missile capabilities. Following the inauguration of the conservative administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol in May 2022, South Korea adopted a more assertive stance, intensifying military tensions with the North and aligning more closely with the United States in pursuing a nuclear deterrence policy.

NEW PRIORITIES FOR SEOUL

Over the three and a half decades since the collapse of the military dictatorship and the beginning of democratic rule, the ROK state strategy in the field of inter-Korean relations and the reunification of Korea has not undergone any fundamental changes. The framework introduced by President

Kim Young-sam in 1994 outlined a three-stage process: beginning with reconciliation, advancing inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation, and progressing through an intermediate stage of a “Korean Commonwealth” toward eventual full political and state unification [source 9]. This foundational concept has served as a strategic reference point for successive South Korean administrations – both conservative and “progressive”—and has generally maintained broad societal support across the political spectrum.

Naturally, each successive administration sought to contribute to the realization of the reunification strategy, though with varying emphases. Left-liberal governments generally favored the unconditional engagement of the DPRK, advocating for the implementation of large-scale economic projects under the belief that sustained cooperation and assistance would gradually encourage Pyongyang to embrace change and greater openness. In contrast, center-right administrations adopted a more cautious stance, favoring a strategy of “measured” engagement in which aid and cooperation were contingent upon DPRK’s reciprocal actions – particularly progress on denuclearization and the reduction of military threats. A factor that seriously complicated cooperation was the conservatives’ pursuit of “principles diplomacy,” within the framework of which demands were made for the observance of human rights. These internal policy divergences within the South Korean political elite contributed to the inconsistency of inter-Korean relations, characterized by alternating periods of engagement and confrontation.

Yoon Suk-yeol, elected President in May 2022, became the first South Korean leader to respond to the prevailing disillusionment within the political establishment regarding the outcomes of previous inter-Korean engagement by proposing an alternative ideological approach to reunification. Central to this new orientation was a categorical rejection of the North Korean political system, a strategy of increased military pressure, and a focus on achieving unification through encouraging regime change in the North and promoting the adoption of the “liberal democratic values” established in the South. This ideological “reassessment of values” emerged amid an unprecedented intensification of hostilities between Seoul and Pyongyang,

characterized by increasingly aggressive rhetoric and large-scale military demonstrations on both sides – developments that now extend well beyond the conventional parameters of inter-Korean relations.

In matters of war and peace, Yoon’s policy marked a sharp departure from that of his predecessor. The previous administration’s military doctrine was primarily focused on fostering conditions for lasting peace and establishing a stable security regime on the Korean Peninsula. The Ministry of Defense’s strategic plans, adopted in 2020, emphasized a prompt but restrained response to enemy “provocations.” The objective was to localize any potential military incident at an early stage and to prevent its escalation into a broader conflict [source 10, pp. 48-51].

In contrast, President Yoon Suk-yeol adopted a markedly more assertive stance, publicly asserting that any “provocation” by the DPRK would trigger a military response strong enough to “bring an end to the North Korean regime” [10]. The newly articulated defense strategy placed a strong emphasis on preemptive military action, including the advance elimination of “sources of threat” in the event of a suspected or imminent attack by North Korea involving nuclear weapons or missiles [source 11, p. 57, 59]. This posture has prompted a reciprocal, or “mirror-like,” reaction from Pyongyang. In response to the rhetoric of the ROK leader, Kim Jong Un stated that any violation of the DPRK’s sovereignty by South Korean forces would be met with the full use of the North’s offensive capabilities, including nuclear weapons [source 12].

Paradoxically, at the height of heightened tensions with the DPRK, President Yoon Suk Yeol brought the issue of Korean reunification back into the spotlight by publicly articulating his administration’s new vision. The August 15 Doctrine (2024) categorically rejected the North Korean assertion that unification is unfeasible under conditions of continued confrontation between “two warring states.” In contrast, President Yoon proposed accelerating the process of Korean integration based on the framework of the South Korean Constitution, aiming to break the long-standing inertia surrounding reunification efforts. It is relevant to recall that Article 3 of the ROK Constitution stipulates that “the territory of the Repub-

lic of Korea shall consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands.” On this basis, residents of the northern part of the peninsula – that is, the DPRK – are considered *de jure* citizens of the ROK. Thus, this vision implies not reunification through mutual agreement, but rather the annexation of the North and the formation of a “*unified Republic of Korea*” [sources 13, 14].

The current doctrine, unlike previous South Korean strategies, aims not so much to have a dialogue with the DPRK authorities but to work with North Korean citizens, who are regarded as the primary agents of reunification. Central to this approach is the promotion of “the values of freedom and human rights” within the North through a comprehensive campaign of information dissemination, propaganda, and cultural influence aimed at reshaping public consciousness. This is intended to help change the consciousness of the people in order to encourage them to fight for the transformation of the internal order and rapprochement with the South. To this end, the presidential initiative envisaged the creation of a “fund for freedoms and human rights” to coordinate NGO activities in the North Korean direction, intensifying work with defectors from the DPRK, and appealing for help to the international community, primarily to Korea’s neighbors [source 15].

From a formal standpoint, Seoul does not entirely rule out the possibility of engaging in dialogue with Pyongyang through official channels. However, the importance of such dialogue has notably diminished, and the scope of the potential agenda has been significantly narrowed to a limited number of issues deemed of practical relevance to the current government of the ROK. These include, foremost, denuclearization – a subject that North Korea now categorically refuses to discuss with any party – as well as humanitarian concerns, such as human rights and the repatriation of South Korean citizens allegedly abducted by the DPRK. Additional topics include environmental cooperation and the prevention of natural disasters. In this framework, economic cooperation has been relegated to a secondary position, with any progress in this area strictly conditioned on concrete actions by Pyongyang to reduce its nuclear capabilities [source 16, p. 15].

The unification concept advanced by the current South Korean administration has sparked intense domestic debate over the appropriate framework for relations with the DPRK and the broader prospects for Korean reunification. The administration has adopted a notably assertive posture. In support of its strategy of “shaking the foundations” of the North Korean regime, the Ministry of Unification and other relevant agencies have initiated propaganda campaigns and organized international conferences. These events often center around several core claims: that the socio-economic situation in the DPRK is rapidly deteriorating; the regime is increasingly losing its grip on internal affairs; dissatisfaction is spreading among both the general population and the elite; and that North Koreans long for freedom and view South Korea as a beacon of hope. Based on these assumptions, officials have drawn highly questionable conclusions suggesting that unification may occur in the near future, thereby justifying the urgent need for accelerated preparatory measures [11, 12]. This emerging “unification mythology” is further supported by anecdotal evidence derived from interviews and conversations with North Korean defectors – whose numbers now exceed 30,000 in South Korea. However, the reliability of such data, collected under the specific socio-political conditions of the South, raises serious methodological concerns and questions about representativeness [source 17].

The political opposition, along with a significant segment of the expert community, has responded to the new unification doctrine and the related research activities with considerable skepticism. Critics argue that the strategy not only lacks feasibility but also risks further escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. A central point of contention remains the fundamental question of how to perceive the North Korean leadership: whether it should be regarded as an “illegitimate regime” that must ultimately be dismantled, or as a necessary counterpart in peace negotiations, with whom dialogue and compromise are essential for long-term stability.

Supporters of this more pragmatic approach emphasize that all previous attempts to “reform” North Korea through external pressure or inducement have ultimately failed. Concurrently, public fatigue with the repeated but fruitless efforts

of successive South Korean administrations to achieve reunification has grown, accompanied by deepening pessimism regarding the feasibility of this long-standing national objective. As a result, a recurring theme in many expert assessments is the recommendation to accept North Korea “as it is,” avoiding risky attempts to change it or “transplant” other values onto North Korean soil without due regard for the complex realities that prevail within the country [13].

Complex underlying processes are taking place in South Korean society, which also affect the perception of the external environment, including relations with the closest neighbor. The first democratically elected president of the ROK, Kim Young-sam, in his inauguration speech in February 1993, stressed the importance of the goals of unification, stating that “no ally is better than the nation”, and “no ideology or political belief can bring greater happiness than blood kinship.” At that time, this emotional appeal consolidated South Koreans, becoming the embodiment of their collective aspirations [14]. Much has changed in the ROK over the past decades: interest in developing dialogue and interaction with the North, as well as the desire for unification, are fading as generations change and attempts to “build bridges” are systematically failing. In the past, popular support for contact and reunification was significantly fueled by the enthusiasm of millions of members of separated families who had close relatives or roots in the North. However, according to official data, as of mid-2024, there are no more than 38,000 such citizens remaining, most of whom are aged 80 or older [source 18].

Opinion polls show a steady decline in the number of citizens who consider unification to be relevant. A survey published by the research center at Seoul National University showed that the number of supporters and opponents of unification was divided approximately equally: 36.9% of respondents believed that it was “to some extent necessary,” while 35% did not see the point in this.

The breakdown by age group is particularly noteworthy, as there is a significant divide: 47.4% of citizens under 30 believe that unification is an unrealistic goal, while only 22.4% think otherwise. Few people seem to feel outright hostility towards North Korea, but it is perceived as an incompre-

hensible, alien environment – a country isolated from the world with an authoritarian order, a stagnant economy, food shortages, and a poor and disenfranchised population. Young people are also concerned about the potentially high economic cost of unification, which will be a burden for the South. The deep social, political, and other differences between the two countries and the incompatibility of their economic systems are also seen as obstacles to integration [15]. Therefore, an increasing number of South Koreans believe that a model of relations in which the two Koreas continue to coexist separately, without interfering in each other’s affairs, but at the same time remain good neighbors, maintaining contacts across open borders, is preferable.

In other words, the feelings of national unity with North Korea that existed in the past, based on the awareness of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, common history, culture, and language, are gradually weakening in the South, losing their attractive force. Although for Koreans belonging to older age groups, the significance of ethnocultural motives is still great, the younger generation is inclined to identify their country as a separate nation, the “specialness” of which is associated with the values and achievements accumulated in the post-war period on the path of development and modernization. The academic community in South Korea is also trying to understand the new realities. Some researchers, albeit in a debatable manner, argue that the long separate existence of the two Koreas has already in fact led to the split of a single national field and the formation of two Korean nations, the differences between which are much greater than the similarities [16, 17, 18].

The new moods are being picked up by representatives of the political class. Thus, the former head of the Moon Jae-in administration, Im Jong-seok, known in the past as one of the architects of the inter-Korean integration strategy, now calls for postponing the task of unification “until better times” and focusing on building a system of peaceful coexistence between the two Korean states, taking into account the realities on the peninsula. The current government categorically rejects the acceptability of such a prospect, based on the well-known thesis about “only one legitimate state” on the Korean Peninsula – the ROK. An-

other argument of conservatives is that the earliest possible unification is the shortest path to removing military threats and denuclearizing Korea [19]. In a broader conceptual sense, official Seoul has long been trapped in the South's ingrained dual attitude toward Pyongyang, within which the DPRK is viewed, on the one hand, as a dialogue partner, but on the other, as an "anti-state organization" opposing the ROK [20]. All this, along with the extreme polarization of society in its approach to the problems of inter-Korean relations, blocks the possibility of searching for and finding constructive solutions to these issues.

WHAT NEXT?

The emergence of a new "cold war" on the Korean Peninsula – following the brief period of détente between 2018 and 2019—and the subsequent shift by both Koreas toward mutual nuclear deterrence have effectively extinguished prospects for reconciliation, dialogue, and sustained interaction for the foreseeable future. Rather than progressing toward gradual rapprochement and eventual integration into a unified state, the current trajectory points in the opposite direction: the systematic dismantling and erosion of achievements made in previous decades. This includes the collapse of the legal frameworks, cooperation mechanisms, and communication channels.

The idea of the unification of Korea, a goal that was considered quite realistic in the past, is now turning into a utopia, an abstract slogan, behind which there is no real program of action. The DPRK and the ROK, which are following different civilization paths in their development, are now too different not only to raise the question of reunification but even to simply coexist in the world as good neighbors.

The main question – are Pyongyang and Seoul ready to radically reformat their relations in order to find a new meaningful formula for peace and cooperation – has no answer today. This uncertainty largely stems from the Korean War of 1950–1953, essentially a civil war which, in the absence of a formal peace treaty, remains unresolved not only in terms of international law but also in political and, crucially, psychological terms. This is expressed in the decisive rejection of each other's

ideology, state foundations, political systems, social practices, and way of life. Such differences were reinforced by a latent but fierce struggle for the right to be the sole legitimate representative of the entire Korean people that had been going on for decades. As a result, economic and humanitarian cooperation has followed a cyclical pattern of expansion and contraction, ultimately failing to produce lasting outcomes. Even promising initiatives, after brief periods of progress, have stalled or collapsed, leading to material losses and growing disillusionment on both sides.

The DPRK was the first to seek a definitive resolution to the longstanding inter-Korean impasse, doing so in line with its own unique interpretation of the situation. In a surprising shift, Pyongyang adjusted its inter-Korean policy by formally acknowledging the reality of two separate states on the Korean Peninsula. This strategic turn appeared to be driven in part by profound disillusionment with the outcomes of economic cooperation – an area in which Pyongyang had initially placed considerable hope. In practice, however, the tangible benefits were minimal, particularly as Seoul increasingly conditioned bilateral cooperation on political and commercial terms. Amid tightening international sanctions and the ROK's insistence on the abandonment of the North's nuclear programs as a prerequisite for further engagement, Pyongyang concluded that continued cooperation with the South was neither viable nor advantageous. Consequently, the DPRK resolved to address its internal economic challenges independently, without relying on external assistance from its southern neighbor. Against the backdrop of entrenched antagonism and ideological divergence, the North made the strategic decision not only to sever all inter-Korean ties and isolate itself from the South but also to formally abandon the long-standing objective of national unification as a strategic goal.

Since the early 2020s, the institutional prerequisites for inter-Korean interaction have steadily eroded. At the VIII Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (January 2021), a course was set for accelerated development of the defense complex, which required the maximum mobilization of all state resources. The time for economic experiments was over. Accordingly, the national economy was tasked with strengthening the foundations of a "national

self-sufficient economy” and reducing dependence on foreign equipment and technology.

Seoul, in contrast, has chosen a different path – one focused on stimulating change in the North and continuing the pursuit of unification, but increasingly by bypassing the DPRK’s official leadership and appealing directly to the sentiments of the North Korean population. However, this strategy appears to be less a viable solution to the crisis in inter-Korean relations and more a potential catalyst for a new, and possibly more dangerous, crisis. The available options are limited: the radicalism of Seoul’s current approach may remain largely rhetorical, or it may provoke consequences beyond the administration’s capacity to manage. The Yoon Suk-yeol administration’s ability to sustain its declared course is highly uncertain – not only due to the bold and arguably adventurist nature of its strategy but also because of significant divisions within South Korean society over the country’s policy toward the North and over the broader vision of Korean unification.

The above-mentioned contradictions became one of the reasons for the acute political crisis in

South Korea towards the end of 2024. The attempt to introduce martial law, unexpectedly undertaken by the president on December 3, was motivated by the intention to repel the “pro-North Korean anti-state forces” in parliament – a characterization he applied to his political adversaries who opposed his North Korean policies. The failure of this insurrection may lead, in all likelihood, not only to a change in the balance of power in the domestic arena but also to a profound rethinking of the country’s entire course in the field of inter-Korean dialogue.

Despite the clear and pressing need to establish a framework for peaceful coexistence – including a definitive resolution to the lingering consequences of the Korean War – the DPRK and the ROK remain far from reaching a viable formula for reconciliation. Under current conditions, the overall trajectory of inter-Korean relations is expected to remain highly volatile and prone to conflict. This persistent tension poses a significant risk of further complications on the Korean Peninsula, rendering peace and security in the region increasingly vulnerable to military, political, and other destabilizing challenges.

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