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Major Barriers to South and North Rapprochement

Introduction

Despite sharing the same culture and language the South and North Korea have been at war with each other since a long time. The differences arising since the Korean War back in 1945 have remained unresolved over these many years. Although there have been efforts of rapprochement and initiating peace between the two regions, there are still various barriers in achieving complete peace. The fact that people from South Korea cannot easily travel to North Korea and the constrained relations over military power point towards the immense barriers that exist in achieving rapprochement between the two countries. These barriers range from military issues, power dynamics, public policies, outside influences and international politics. The influence of the other countries and supposed allies goes way back in history and is maligned with the possibility of ulterior motives and power sharing. Instead of maintaining peace within the Korean peninsula, the North and South regions sought help and support from other countries. The most prominent part of international alliance is the military involvement of the US. The relation between South Korea and the US has been seen as a threat by North Korea and has fed to the fire of hostility among the people of North Korea. The military and nuclear forces have thus far been an obsession with North Korea and have resulted in continuity of the war between North and South Korea. The hostility towards international involvement has caused a negative impact so deep so that the recent ray of hope that these two regions will finally reach peaceful co-existence seems to be fading with external influence. All these political angles and the barriers which hold back the establishment of peace in a region that was once the same country points towards the crisis that power instigates. Historically, Koreans have been suffering not only due to external influences but also due to the motives of the political leaders within the country. A continuous cycle of initiating peace talks and then backing out on promises have led to trust issues among the Korean leaders. This essay will explore the roots of the problems which exist between the two regions of Korea in order to understand the barriers that make efforts of reconciliation so difficult to get through with. The following sections will provide an overview of the history of the Korean war, the reasons behind the military pressure of both the Korean regions on each other and the recent developments towards rapprochement efforts.

History

The division of Korea in the north and south regions came at the end of the cold war in 1945. The hostility and strained inter-Korea relations have become worse over the years due to the development of nuclear weapons and expansion of military potentials within the two divided regions. As is seen in many chapters of history, power dynamics and the lure of military advantages makes matters worst and maintaining peace between different regions and countries can go out of question. As history goes, the influence of international bodies and different allies of the North and South of Korea has managed to keep the war going for all these years. The cold war alone led to the loss of about 2.5 million people¹. By the year 1950, the war had gained height and other countries began joining in with the United Nations siding with South Korea

¹ Braiding, G., PS, E. N., Dawes, M., Chatswood, H. S., Ellis, A., HS, B. B., ... & Pollard, S. Korea: A Cold War Conflict 1950-1953: A Publication for Secondary Schools.

and the Soviet Union allying with North Korea². This led to increase in tensions and killings with over a million more people dying as a result of continued war. The fights on both ends ceased in July 1953 but the two regions of Korea have since remained divided and efforts of rapprochement have remained unsuccessful as yet³.

Some of the crucial issues throughout the history of Korean war relate to the internationalization of the problem. The fact that the political constraints between North and South Korea have not yet been resolved by talks between the two regions themselves go deeper than differences of opinions or ideologies. International policies such as the rapprochement efforts made by the US in 1995, simply overthrew the Geneva agreement which would have brought some stability to both regions. However, the agreement between the US and North Korea were highly tilted towards benefiting North Korea and making the Southern region suffer as a result. Naturally, South Korea was outraged and felt betrayed by the policies which clearly favoured the North. The rapprochement efforts resulted in making North Korea a much powerful nuclear power than the South, creating further enmity and outrage and divided the two regions even further. Here, it is crucial to understand that the international policies and lure of gaining military power is a toxic yet alluring phenomenon that tends to take even the best of nations in its wake. Naturally, the US sought its own benefit in having North Korea as strong allies by enabling them to become a nuclear power. Whereas, South Korea sought help from other regions, ranging from Russia to China⁴. The allies, help and friendship of other countries have been changing from time to time for Korea in the last many years but in each case, the North and South have remained divided, seeking friendships with other, stronger countries. This has not only destroyed the economy of Korea but has also led to an exhaustive list of issues between the North and South which make it hard to make any efforts of reconciliation into reality. To understand the reasons behind these regions being at war, one needs to look deeper into the motivation that each side keeps holding on to. The core reason is a hunger for power and the hope of becoming a strong internal community. The biggest barrier perhaps which has continued to lie at the base of the problems that Korea has faced in these many decades is the twisted and complicated involvement of countries allying with the two Korean regions.

Core Issues

The military superiority of North Korea came crashing down when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The strong economic and military support that North Korea enjoyed from the Soviet Union ended as a result of the collapse and the trade enjoyed by North Korea was lost as well. The subsequent international isolation faced by North Korea made them follow a hostile and cult leadership mindset, which reflected the ideologies of the state's founder, Kim II-sung. The philosophy that followed has largely been based on the use of extreme militarism and relying on extreme independence to the point of restricted their international trade relations, which are now limited mainly to China alone⁵. This trade limitation is also in large part because of North

² Jonsson, G. (2017). *South Korea in the United Nations: Global Governance, Inter-Korean Relations and Peace Building*. World Scientific.

³ Klein, C. (2017). Cold War Cosmopolitanism: The Asia Foundation and 1950s Korean Cinema. *Journal of Korean Studies*, 22(2), 281-316.

⁴ Zakharova, L. (2019). Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy.

⁵ Lee, Y. S. (2018). International isolation and regional inequality: Evidence from sanctions on North Korea. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 103, 34-51.

Korea's opposition of the United Nation's Security Council regimes. The UN has tried to convince North Korea that they should follow the rules for Nuclear Weapons Test which are regulated by international laws and inspections by the Security Council⁶. However, the hostility showed by North Korea has resulted in their sanction from the international community and the resulting trade bans. Instead of bending to the international laws and adjusting their nuclear weapon testing plans, North Korea has been using its military superiority to its advantage and as a way to build its economy. In this regard, China became a very strong ally of North Korea and has enforced its trade relations with this region. By the year 2017, the North Korean leader, Kim Jongun had announced that their military program was successful and that they are leading the production of missiles and nuclear weapons. This achievement was further outlined by the claims that North Korea now had a military strong enough to even take over the United States. This threat is perhaps the main reason that the US has been working to develop strong ties with North Korea and turn a potential enemy into a strong ally. These military based friendships have turned in favour of North Korea and their GDP has been rising steadily since the rise in their military superiority. Also, this further became a reason behind the increased constraints within the North and South of Korea. Being a strong nuclear power, North Korea has focused its efforts on gaining economic stability through negotiations with other strong countries of the world but at the same time being conscious and maintaining a hostile and vigilant approach⁷.

The recent rise of international relations for North Korea have led to a bedrock in the relationships of South Korea with the international communities. The economic development of South Korea has although not been far behind the North but it has become quite hard for the South to gain resourceful allies. Interestingly, the US has been developing with South Korea as well. The military development of South Korea is also aided by the presence of US military troops which contributes significantly to the region's armed forces⁸. However, the military of North Korea remains to be twice as large and resourceful as compared to that of South Korea. These complex dynamics and the support from the US for both these regions could be a double-edged sword. While the international communities have their own agendas and are free to develop relations with any region they choose, the dual trade relations may be a problem and possibly a barrier in making the two regions develop a peaceful relation. Interestingly, since the last two decades, the US has been trying to propose a way forward for both Korean regions to promote trade and development within Korea. The US has proposed alliance such that cross-border cultural, economic and military relations could be strengthened and used for progressing the inter-Korean relations. However, the political parties within Korea have kept having a change of heart and a clear direction has not been achieved as yet. The proposed 'Sunshine Policy' which brought some hope for inter-Korean relations becoming stronger fell apart in the recent years when the conservative parties began pulling their support away from it⁹. The constant change of mind and the reservation of the leaders of the North and South Korea are among the core issues which make progress so difficult for these countries. The hunger for power and the belief that military strength equals superiority is everything that is wrong with

⁶ Bandeoğlu, Z. (2019). UNITED NATIONS'ROLE IN THE KOREAN WAR. *TURAN-SAM*, 11(43), 373-379.

⁷ Hastings, J. V. (2016). *A most enterprising country: North Korea in the global economy*. Cornell University Press.

⁸ Bernhardt, J., & Sukin, L. (2020). Joint Military Exercises and Crisis Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. *R&R at Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

⁹ Kim, I. (2017). No More Sunshine: The Limits of Engagement with North Korea. *The Washington Quarterly*, 40(4), 165-181.

the world and is in fact reflection in the inter-Korean relationship dynamics as well¹⁰. In this regard, the problem facing the Korean peninsula is not much different from the one that the entire world faces. Power dynamics and the internal instable relations between political parties leads to strange dynamics for maintaining international relations. This remains to be the biggest barrier in achieving North and South rapprochement in Korea.

Why has there been no success in achieving North and South rapprochement so far?

A deep, confused and strange history outlines the barriers which stand in the way of achieving North and South rapprochement in Korea. Throughout the years, all efforts of communicating and negotiating with each other have been met with hostility from one group or the other. The hunger for achieving competence, international recognition, power, economic gains and a sense of control has kept both these regions against each other. This hostility stems from the deplorable economic conditions which have prevailed in Korea since many years. Although blaming other countries for the deterioration of the Korean peninsula may seem unjustified, it cannot be denied that allying with one region automatically creates a sense of international isolation for the other. For example, the United States having strong relations with South Korea in terms of military forces can be a major security threat for North Korea. Losing the sense of security or searching for ways to overcome possible losses in wars makes governments turn aggressively defensive, which has been seen in the case of North Korea.

Mistakes in the recent past within Korea range from the unsolicited use of military force to siding with international parties and going against the agreements made by the leaders of North and South Korea with each other. The lack of inter-Korea trade and travel has led to economic crisis for both the regions, leading to an instable economy for the Korean peninsula. Safety issues for people from within the country has also been a major issue. Occasions such as banishing a minister from South Korea in an economic summit and the killing of South Korean tourists in the North have been seen as clear provocations and North Korea has taken their fair share of blame in aggravating the situation and delaying economic development of the Korean peninsula. These events occurred in 2010 and pushed the hopes of achieving inter-Korean stability in the depths of darkness. South Korea sought an apology and reassurance that such events would not occur and that the Northern region will not threaten or harm people from the South. However, North Korea failed to take responsibility for their actions or reassure the South that such incidences will be accounted for and prevented in the future. This failure put a major set back in achieving any rapprochement between the two regions. As a result, South Korea pulled back on its support of trade with North Korea, placed a ban on the sailing of ships from North Korea for trade across the Southern regions and also imposed a ban on all sorts of contact and dealings with the people of North Korea. All support and trade were thus pulled back and the two regions went way back in history to continue with a cold war¹¹. Such instances have been the core reasons why all attempts to achieve a reconciliation between North and South Korea have been a failure so far.

¹⁰ Millard, A. S. (2018). What Comes First, Denuclearization or Peace? Using Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik as a Case for an Integrative Engagement Approach on the Korean Peninsula. *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 6(12), 659-671.

¹¹ Milani, M. (2018). Securitizing Cooperation: Nuclear Politics and Inter-Korean Relations. *North Korean Review*, 14(1), 11-29.

Among the many wrong turns that have been taken by the Korean leaders, the differences in ideologies has been the biggest barrier in achieving any peaceful agreement between the two regions. The North and South of Korea have both remained largely divided on the concept of a ‘nation’. South Korea has been trying to achieve peaceful relations with the North and has been demanding that the North gives up on the Nuclear policies and military drills in the areas that have been demilitarized. However, North Korea believes in a nation that is strong and forceful on its own and relies largely on its nuclear program for progress¹². The ideology that North Korea has followed since after the Cold war implies an internationally isolated region where independence of individuals is not recognized rather based on ‘socio-political’ recognition. This hostile approach was further triggered when the US allied with South Korea. This was seen as a threat by the North and they have since then taken the US military threats as a personal assault, leading to further mistrust towards South Korea as a result¹³. The proposition by North Korean leaders makes somewhat sense in the form of the suggestion that the international influences should be cut away if peace is to be maintained in the Korean peninsula.

The negative influences of the US in the past have led to immense mistrust which has hampered the peace talks for many years now. In order for both regions to come to an agreement, they both need to analyse and realize their own mistakes and work on rectifying them. South Korea has been allying with the US for many years now and is seen as an American colony by the people of North Korea¹⁴. This is the core reason that North Korea refrains from working towards finding common goals with the South. In response to the negative influence of the US, North Korea has been proposing military reforms and making the entire Korean peninsula a communist country. On some level, the hostility of North Korea seems justified as they have turned defensive for protecting their own community. Seeing eye to eye on these issues is important for leaders of both the Korean regions so as to understand what is best for Korea irrespective of what can be gained by international support. Realizing that making a country strong from within is far more important than gaining support that results in further strained relations between the two regions will possibly help Korea end the long-standing Korean war.

Recent Developments

As of early 2018, there have been a certain level of progress in attaining peace talks between the North and South Korean regions. There is some hope that the long-standing Korean war may come to an end in the near future. These developments have come through the initiative of the political leader of North Korea (Kim) who proposed that North Korea would be willing to develop peaceful relationship and using the military for a better future of the entire Korean peninsula¹⁵. A treaty was proposed and discussed between the leaders of both the regions. The treaty has been seen as a white flag being raised by North Korea in favour of a peaceful and progressive Korea. The alliance with the United States has been a crucial point in these peace

¹² DiFilippo, A. (2020). History, Ideology, and Human Rights: Why the North Korean Nuclear Issue Endures. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 53(2), 153-176.

¹³ Huang, C., & Woo, Y. J. (2017). Repetitive Threats and Strained Peace: Understanding the Effect of North Korean Nuclear Tests on South Korean Currency Value and Tourist Inflows. In *University of Virginia Working paper*.

¹⁴ Aoki, N. (2017). Seeing Missile Defense as US Hostility, North Korea Aims at More and Better Weapons.

¹⁵ Shin, G. W., & Moon, R. J. (2019). North Korea in 2018: Kim’s Summit Diplomacy. *Asian Survey*, 59(1), 35-43.

talks as the involvement of the Trump government has remained crucial due to their involvement in the South Korean military groups. After many decades of no cross-region collaboration between North and South Korea, peace talks were initiated in 2018 and the presidents from both the sides met in a historic meeting. This meeting has not only brought hope but has also initiated the realization of common goals between the two regions. This meeting resulted in North Korea demanding an agreement and understanding in return for giving up their nuclear programs that are currently being run in the country¹⁶. A nuclear-free Korea had been seen as a far-fetched dream before this, but this meeting has paved way for working on the betterment of both the countries.

The US has been playing the role of a regulatory body in managing the peace talks between North and South Korea. The use of forced military actions by North Korea and their unfulfilled promises of giving up on the nuclear weapons have been a hold back in managing negotiations in the past. However, as of recent, Mr. Kim has expressed his interest in coming to a mutual understanding with South Korea regarding the disputed areas and removing troops from the demilitarized areas between the two countries. This being successful, the rapprochement efforts will be half way achieved. However, the reservations held by North Korea towards the US can still prove to be a barrier¹⁷. It is important that Korea unites as one nation and dissects the interests of third parties so as not to harm the national interests.

Some of the positive points that have come out of the recent peace talks between the North and South of Korea are agreements for a better future of the country as a whole. South Korea has agreed to invest in the rail and road systems of North Korea if the latter agrees on removing their military troops from the areas that were agreed to be demilitarized. Moreover, the disputes over the Western sea border are likely to end as a result of this peace treaty which proposes the development of a joint fishing zone¹⁸. One of the key ways to continue on the road of progress is to maintain honest and peaceful relations. Some reservations about the US's true motives still remain and North Korea has been looking at this peace treaty with scepticism. Since the peace treaty is till in its nascent stages, treading carefully is the only option that both the Korean regions have. Any misgiving or failure to deliver on promises from either end or undue interference from the US can greatly harm the progress that has been made thus far in achieving some level of negotiations.¹⁹

Recommendations

Analysing the history and the dilemma facing the Korean peninsula points towards issues that seem based on quite simple dynamics. However, easy as it may seem to understand that power dynamics lies at the basis of all the issues, resolving these barriers is just as difficult. With the entire world looking for power supremacy and military leadership, achieving a balanced and

¹⁶ Seok, H. (2018). Trump's new North Korea strategy might actually work. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 35(1), 38-41.

¹⁷ Landler, M. (2018). Trump orders Pentagon to consider reducing US Forces in South Korea. *New York Times*.

¹⁸ Kim, S. K. (2017). Disputes over the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea. In *Maritime Disputes in Northeast Asia* (pp. 17-34). Brill Nijhoff.

¹⁹ Park, Y. H. (2014, January). South and North Korea's Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations. In *2nd KRIS-Brookings Joint Conference on Security and Diplomatic Cooperation between ROK and US for the Unification of the Korean Peninsula.%*

stable relation between North and South Korea is tricky. However, understanding where the problem lies is the basis of finding a way forward. The history of this region clearly identifies that the Korean peninsula has been suffering economically since the cold war and has been struggling ever since. Perhaps understanding that achieving friendly relations with the neighbouring country and helping each other out can resolve the issues should be the first step. The political parties in power within both the regions need to seek a way for resolving the barriers to rapprochement. Trade relations and strong alliance within the North and South can not only make both the countries strong allies but also enable economic growth in a much better way than approaching other countries for alliance. The fact that the trade relations between the two regions have previously been ever changing due to security issues and lack of cooperation among the two governments should be understood and worked upon. Ensuring that inter-Korean trade and tourism is safe and secure with no life-threatening situations and unsolicited attacks as have occurred in the past can help in achieving better relations between the two regions

One of the key methods of achieving rapprochement between North and South Korea is to recognize the negative effect of international allies. The war drills and military pressure directed towards the North by the joint alliance of South Korea and the US troops is an example of the negative relation²⁰. Using foreign alliance to build pressure on the North is surely a way to further create barriers in managing relationships rather than resolving conflicts. Although the US has recently been expressive a positive interest in helping create peaceful regions between North and South Korea, it is important to understand that no international support comes without ulterior motives. This being recognized, the position of the US should be analysed and leaders from the two Korean regions should maintain transparency in all their actions. Honest and clear policies are the only way that an understanding can be developed within the Korean peninsula. The past teaches us that the major reason behind the continued war is the misgivings and the constant change of heart that the Korean leaders have had. Going back and forth on their words and promises have led to mistrust and hostility towards each other. The peace treaty and the new developments towards a better and peaceful Korea should be maintained and promises should be fulfilled by both ends without falling prey to the lure of personal gains. Korea needs a vision where both the North and the South understand that their progress lies in working together towards a peaceful and stable region. Even with differences, refraining from harming each other can help achieve harmony. Ending the unfulfilling hunger for power and realizing that harming neighbouring regions can never bring long term progress is a necessity for Korea.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the cold war in Korea seems to have been continued for all these years and the end to this cold draught seems further still. Many times, in history, efforts have been made to achieve a peace treaty between the two regions but none of these efforts have so far borne any fruits. The reason behind the continued war between North and South Korea lies in the way these countries have sought power by allying with foreign regions instead of initiating peaceful relations with each other. The goal of becoming a strong nuclear power, using forced military operations and disputes over borders have kept the two regions from coming to terms with any

²⁰ Roehrig, T. (2017). The US nuclear umbrella over South Korea: Nuclear weapons and extended deterrence. *Political Science Quarterly*, 132(4), 651-685.

peace treaties. The international communities have also at times played a negative role in the Korean region by allying with a region depending on their own motives and hopes of gains associated with such relations. The role of the US is the most prominent and ever shifting in the history of the Korean war. The presence of American troops in South Korea and their military testing have been seen as a threat by the North which in turn has led to military hostility and further clashes. However, the most recent act of the Trump government has brought a ray of light for the Korean peninsula as peace talks have been initiated by both the Korean governments for the first time in these many years. It is important that both the regions come to an agreement which benefits both of them and focus on maintaining long term peace. Understanding that a peaceful unification is the ultimate way to become a stronger region and powerful economy in the long run can greatly aid the rapprochement of North and South Korea. The overall analysis of the tensions between the two regions sheds light on the major barriers that have led to the continuation of the Korean war for so many decades. The views and ideologies held by South Korea by far remain to be more sensible and are likely to be a peaceful way forward. Military hostility and undue use of nuclear threats have caused immense damage to both the regions. Progress of the Korean peninsula has also been hampered by the maligned goals of the international allies. The lack of peace within the region has been taken advantage of by other regions and the hostility of North Korea shares a large share of the blame for the internal disruptions in Korea. A sensible approach and a mutual understanding can help overcome these barriers to rapprochement. This sensible approach can come in the way of removing military threats from each other and agreeing on a peace treaty that takes the interests of both the regions into consideration. Another important area to work on is to analyse the motives of allies and not letting the hope of international cooperation disrupt the peace within the Korean peninsula. Understanding the reasons behind the differences and strains in maintaining inter-Korean peace will surely help in building better policies and hopefully lead to a better future for the Korean peninsula.

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