

INTER-KOREAN RECONCILIATION AND THE ROLE OF THE U.S.: FACILITATOR OR SPOILER?

By Gabriela Bernal

ABSTRACT

Although the Korean Peninsula has been divided for over 70 years, North and South have not been able to make lasting progress in terms of reconciliation. While there are multiple factors directly influencing the extent to which inter-Korean relations can progress, this paper focuses on the role of the United States. When it comes to inter-Korean reconciliation efforts, is the U.S. more of a facilitator or a spoiler? By looking at three case studies spanning three South Korean administrations—Roh Tae-woo, Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in—this paper attempts to find patterns and lessons related to Washington's role in the complex inter-Korean reconciliation process. The cases reveal that the U.S. has played the role of both facilitator and spoiler in each case, and that whatever role the U.S. plays depends on its own relationship with North Korea at that time. The U.S. is most likely to play a facilitating role when the administrations in Washington and Seoul are both willing to engage diplomatically with Pyongyang, when progress is being made in denuclearization talks, when the geopolitical environment is conducive towards diplomacy and engagement with North Korea, and when the U.S. adopts a reciprocal negotiating strategy. The paper concludes by considering the conditions necessary to achieve inter-Korean reconciliation and to establish long-term peace on the peninsula. Key factors include the need

for trust-building and reciprocity between the U.S. and North Korea, and adopting a more holistic approach that goes beyond the nuclear problem and aims to establish a lasting relationship between Washington and Pyongyang.

Key Words: *reconciliation, diplomacy, inter-Korean relations, peace regime, negotiations*

INTRODUCTION

It has been over 70 years since the Korean Peninsula was divided. The division of Korea would not have happened if not for outside forces: the United States and the former Soviet Union. The former remains the most powerful and relevant outside player on the peninsula to this day. Although inter-Korean relations are too complex to make simplified conclusions that solely blame the prolonged division on just one party, the role that the U.S. has had on the peninsula over the decades cannot be understated. Despite the many efforts of successive South Korean administrations, progress made in inter-Korean relations has always been limited by Washington.

Although efforts to improve relations with North Korea had briefly been made under Park Chung-hee in the early 1970s, it was in the context of the post-Cold War world that the two Koreas began engaging in more serious, regular efforts

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aimed at reconciliation. During the Cold War, the U.S. and South Korea were both more focused on containing the threat posed by North Korea and preventing another invasion of the South.¹ The situation on the peninsula changed for the better in 1987 with the democratization of South Korea begetting greater interest in peace.

Given these domestic shifts in South Korea, the issue of inter-Korean relations also started to become more relevant to the U.S.² Since the election of Roh Tae-woo in 1987, subsequent South Korean presidents have all made their own efforts at reconciliation with North Korea. Although some were more successful than others, the two Koreas remain divided, geographically, politically, and emotionally. This paper examines inter-Korean reconciliation efforts and the role of the United States by looking at three case studies. The first will focus on the Roh Tae-woo administration. Although South Korean president Kim Dae-jung is often credited as having started the rapprochement period between North and South through his Sunshine Policy, the foundation of his and subsequent presidents' North Korea engagement policies can be found in the Roh Tae-woo administration. The second case study will look at the Roh Moo-hyun administration's efforts at inter-Korean reconciliation, policies largely built on those of Kim Dae-jung. The final case study will look at the most recent developments around inter-Korean reconciliation during the Moon Jae-in administration. Through the case studies, the paper argues that long-term progress in inter-Korean relations cannot be separated from U.S.-DPRK relations and the progress of U.S. diplomacy with North Korea. As such, South Korea requires the support of the U.S. to truly push forward its long-term reconciliation efforts with the North.

THE ROH TAE-WOO ADMINISTRATION (1988-1993)

To better understand the modern-day dynamics of inter-Korean relations and reconciliation efforts, it is important to start with the Roh Tae-woo administration. The 1987 democratic elections in South Korea allowed for open discussion on unification, and relations with the North that were previously unthinkable.³ Although the U.S. was distracted by the Gulf War at the time, its attention shifted back to the Korean Peninsula on July 7, 1988 when President Roh announced his "Special Presidential Declaration for National Self-esteem, Unification and Prosperity," which set the basic direction of the government's North Korea policy

and Roh's so-called "Northern Policy." The latter was aimed at establishing and improving relations with socialist states, most of whom were North Korean allies.⁴ What Roh was suggesting represented a major shift in South Korea's policy towards North Korea and set the foundation for inter-Korean cooperation mechanisms that exist to this day. Particularly, it was also during this period starting around 1988 when North Korea began to show more interest in diplomacy.⁵

Roh's July 7th Declaration dealt with six major issues: 1.) inter-Korean exchanges; 2.) divided families; 3.) inter-Korean trade; 4.) non-opposition to North Korea's trade with South Korea's allies; 5.) the ending of the diplomatic confrontation between the two Koreas; and 6.) the actualization of the northern policy.⁶ The Roh administration forged ahead with its engagement policy and was able to get one of Korea's largest conglomerates, Hyundai Group, to take part.⁷ In November of that year, the Hyundai Group started importing clams from North Korea. Then, in January 1989, Hyundai Group's chairman, Chung Ju-yung (who was born in North Korea) and North Korea's Asia-Pacific Peace Committee reached an agreement on tourism to Mount Kumgang, located in North Korea. After this, inter-Korean trade gradually increased following the establishment of related laws in 1990.

Roh had also made it clear that he wanted to receive cooperation and help from the U.S. and the international community "to induce North Korea to come out into international society as a regular member of the international community."⁸ Seoul's change in direction did indeed have an impact on Washington's North Korea policy, with the U.S. unveiling its so-called "Modest Initiative" in 1988 under President Reagan. The move was meant "to open the window for greater, if still limited, contact with Pyongyang."⁹ Through this initiative, unofficial non-governmental visits by North Koreans to the U.S. were allowed, financial regulations which impeded travel to North Korea by American citizens were eased, permission was granted for limited commercial export of U.S. humanitarian goods to Pyongyang, and permission was granted for U.S. diplomats to engage in substantive discussions with North Koreans in neutral settings.¹⁰

Moreover, by 1989, the Roh administration was aware that Washington was considering reducing the number of its troops stationed in South Korea, which further fueled Seoul's overtures towards Pyongyang to secure some form of stability on the peninsula.¹¹ U.S. troops in South Korea

were indeed reduced from 44,000 in 1990 to 36,450 in 1992.¹² For North Korea, however, this was welcome news alongside President Bush's announcement that the U.S. was officially removing all its nuclear weapons from South Korea in October 1991.¹³

Another major step forward between the two Koreas was made in 1991 when the two sides signed the Basic Agreement, which called for mutual acceptance and respect for each other's political systems and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. The international political dynamic further shifted that same year when the two Koreas were separately to the UN. This was the moment in which the international community officially recognized the existence of two states on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁴

The winter of 1991 inaugurated a period of unusual progress in inter-Korean relations and in North Korea-U.S. relations. It was a time when the policies of the two Koreas were in alignment for conciliation and agreement, with all of the major outside powers either neutral or supportive.¹⁵ Then, in January 1992, North and South Korea signed the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. These agreements were critical in moving away from confrontation and towards reconciliation.¹⁶ Through the denuclearization agreement, the two Koreas pledged not to "test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons" and not to "possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities."¹⁷ South Korea also agreed to cancel the 1992 Team Spirit military exercises with the U.S. in return for North Korean willingness to permit outside inspection of its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.

President Bush also adopted a more positive tone in January 1992, voicing America's support for Korean reconciliation efforts: "The American people share your goal of peaceful reunification on terms acceptable to the Korean people. This is clear. This is simple. This is our policy."¹⁸ Moreover, although the U.S. was not yet prepared to discuss establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea, American officials did float the possibility of holding a meeting with Pyongyang if they agreed to meet their nuclear inspection obligations, and they informed the North Koreans of this through the U.S.-DPRK political counsel channel in Beijing.¹⁹ This move may have played a significant role in North Korea's decision to ultimately sign the nuclear agreement with South Korea and the subsequent nuclear safeguard agreement that was signed with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

on January 30. The North Koreans proved to be cooperative with the inspectors and even showed them facilities of which they were previously unaware.²⁰

But things quickly started to unravel from there. Although the North Koreans had expected big rewards after signing the agreements with South Korea and the IAEA, they were left disappointed. With both Washington and Seoul distracted by their presidential elections that year, the presence of IAEA inspectors in North Korea was only causing trouble for Pyongyang. Things got even worse in October when the U.S. and South Korea decided to resume their joint military drills the following year. This decision turned out to be "one of the biggest mistakes" of America's Korea policy at the time, according to former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, Donald Gregg.²¹ Three days after the exercises resumed the following March, North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), citing the treaty's escape clause on defending supreme national interests. Pyongyang gave two reasons: the Team Spirit "nuclear war rehearsal" which, according to North Korea, had violated the spirit of the NPT and of the North-South denuclearization agreement; and the IAEA demand for special inspection of two suspected sites, which it described as "an undisguised strong-arm act designed to disarm the DPRK and strangle our socialist system."²²

These issues highlight the importance of policy continuation throughout successive administrations. This counts for both the U.S. and South Korea. One reason why Pyongyang is so distrustful and skeptical of diplomacy is because of this lack of consistency by other parties. As Ambassador Gregg said, "If we could have kept the same people in Washington and Seoul working on the North Korean problem for twelve more months, I think we could have solved it."²³ Another issue is trust. The negotiating parties can't just suddenly decide to change the terms of an agreement or spontaneously demand extra concessions by the other party that were not previously agreed to, especially not without offering anything in return themselves. Progress was being made and more could have been achieved if reciprocal steps were taken by all sides in a consistent and timely manner.

THE ROH MOO-HYUN YEARS (2003-2008)

Although the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 brought about a positive shift in the relations between the two Koreas, the inauguration of U.S. president George W. Bush in 2001 cast a shadow on the progress made with North

Korea under the Kim Dae-jung administration. Bush quickly labeled North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” and made it clear that he would take a much tougher stance on North Korea than his predecessors. Particularly, since 9/11, the U.S. framed its North Korea policy through the lens of countering terrorism and started having less consideration for Seoul’s policy positions.²⁴ Therefore, in the early days of the Bush administration, Washington had a rather negative impact on inter-Korean relations.²⁵ Bush was particularly not impressed with Roh’s perceived lack of interest in the North Korean nuclear issue.²⁶

Bush was especially skeptical of inter-Korean cooperation projects such as tourism to Mt. Kumgang and the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). He believed that any further funding of such projects would result only in enriching North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and propelling the country’s nuclear program further.²⁷ The U.S. was particularly interested in getting the tours canceled because this represented a much larger sum of income for the North Koreans compared to the KIC.²⁸ Pressure by Washington for Seoul to end such programs became especially intense after North Korea’s conducted its first nuclear test in 2006.

Nevertheless, the Roh administration did not back down. In October 2006, Song Min-soon, National Security Adviser for President Roh, told reporters that South Korea’s projects with the North could not be changed “following somebody’s order to do this or that,” adding “We are not deviating from the international community only because we differ with a certain country,” likely referring the U.S.²⁹ A large part of the South Korean populace was similarly displeased with Washington’s interference, and called for Seoul to continue improving ties with Pyongyang.³⁰

Throughout this time, talks were taking place between the U.S, South Korea, North Korea, China, Russia, and Japan—the so-called Six Party Talks (SPT). However, any diplomatic momentum built up through the SPT was quickly fading after the U.S. designated Macao-based Banco Delta Asia as “a primary money laundering concern” in 2005 for working with North Korea. In response to the accusations, authorities in Macao froze 50 North Korean accounts worth \$24 million.³¹ As a result, Pyongyang boycotted the talks in protest to Washington’s move. Then, when North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006, this was quickly followed up by UN Security Council Resolution 1718, which imposed an arms embargo, froze assets, and placed travel bans on those involved in North Korea’s nuclear program as well as a ban on a range of North Korean imports and exports.

The North Koreans refused to rejoin the SPT until they received their money back.³² Although many in Washington wanted to continue pursuing a hardline policy with North Korea, any chances for negotiations to continue were looking increasingly slim unless changes were initiated by the U.S. The American approach represented the minority in the SPT and the pressure was on to change course and get the North Koreans back to the negotiating table.³³ With few options left, the Americans decided in March 2007 to give the North Koreans their funds back.

With just months left in office, these developments helped the Roh administration in Seoul to push for one last effort at improving inter-Korean relations. In July 2007, the director of the South Korean National Intelligence Service and the director of North Korea’s United Front Department reached a final agreement to hold a second inter-Korean summit in October.³⁴ Before the summit took place, U.S. president Bush indicated that he would join the leaders of the two Koreas to declare an end to the Korean War and engage in discussions to create a permanent peace regime if North Korea’s denuclearization was complete.³⁵

The change in the Bush administration’s policy towards North Korea played a major role in making the summit possible as it probably wouldn’t have happened during Bush’s first term.³⁶ The summit was held and the leaders of the North and South unveiled the Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity. The agreement reiterated many of the points that were made in the June 15 declaration of the first inter-Korean summit in 2000. The content was mainly related to boosting inter-Korean cooperation in various fields. Regarding denuclearization, however, the agreement stated only that the two sides had agreed to “work together” to implement previous agreements made in this area.

Moreover, days before the summit was held, the six parties agreed to the text of an agreement, released on October 3, which outlined a roadmap for a declaration of North Korea’s nuclear programs and disablement of its core nuclear facilities at Yongbyon by the end of the year.³⁷ It was a significant development as Pyongyang agreed to shut down its nuclear reactor for the first time since 2001.³⁸ In return, the other parties pledged to supply the North with energy aid and the U.S. agreed to ease sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act and delist North Korea as a “state sponsor of international terrorism,” as a gesture of reconciliation.³⁹

However, similar to what had happened in the early 1990s, the U.S. was once again demanding more concessions than North Korea was willing to give. Washington was now calling for a “verification protocol” for other nuclear facilities not publicly listed by North Korea. U.S. officials gave Pyongyang a draft with demands for “highly intrusive verification,” and later announced Washington had delayed delisting them as a “state-sponsor of terrorism” until they agreed to it.⁴⁰ In retaliation, North Korea began restoring the facilities at Yongbyon and barred IAEA inspectors from visiting the site. As Roh left office and was replaced by a new conservative president, Lee Myung-bak, North Korea was being pressured from multiple angles to sign a verification protocol to receive energy aid. Seoul refused to provide the aid and the SPT reached a dead end.

This case highlights the importance of consistency, mutual respect, trust, and reciprocity. All were missing in the U.S. strategy. The elections in Seoul and the new administration’s overhaul of Roh’s approach also did not help Inter-Korean reconciliation. When new concessions are demanded in exchange for something already promised, North Korea has demonstrated a sense of betrayal and further loss of the already near non-existent trust it had in the other parties. North Korea has made it clear over the years that it demands to be treated as an equal partner in any negotiating process with larger powers.

MOON JAE-IN’S EFFORTS (2017-2022)

Little progress was made in inter-Korean reconciliation under the two conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. In fact, when President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, the situation on the peninsula was as tense as ever. Not only was North Korea practically a full-blown nuclear state, testing its weapons on an increasingly regular basis, but South Korean society was also still recovering from the impeachment scandal of former president Park. The U.S. was not particularly helpful either, with newly-elected U.S. president Donald Trump exchanging insults with Kim Jong-un on a regular basis, culminating in the serious consideration of a preventative attack on North Korea. Still, Moon was optimistic and made it clear from the outset that inter-Korean reconciliation was going to be his major priority. Despite the heated rhetoric between Pyongyang and Washington, Moon saw the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics as a golden opportunity to not only warm ties between South and North Korea, but also to kickstart diplomacy once again between the U.S. and North Korea.

Kim Jong-un ended up responding positively to Moon’s overtures, saying he was ready to open his country’s doors “to anyone from South Korea, including the ruling party and opposition parties, organizations and individual personages of all backgrounds, for dialogue, contact and travel, if they sincerely wish national concord and unity.”⁴¹ Kim also said he was willing to send a delegation to the Pyeongchang Olympics, and he did.

The trip was a success, with the North Korean leader even inviting President Moon to Pyongyang through a personal invitation delivered by his sister, Kim Yo-jong. Throughout the Olympics, the U.S. was publicly supportive of the sudden North-South rapprochement, but that did not mean that Washington had changed its view on North Korea. At the time, Vice President Mike Pence described the developments around the time of the Olympics as “maximum pressure and engagement at the same time,” while also expressing his government’s will to talk.⁴²

Before Moon went to North Korea, however, it was Kim Jong-un who visited the South first in April 2018. It was the first time a North Korean leader had set foot on South Korean soil. The summit between the two leaders culminated in the Panmunjom Declaration, which vowed to strengthen inter-Korean ties and cooperation, diffuse military tensions, and build a permanent and stable “peace regime” on the peninsula.⁴³ A month later, the two sides held another meeting, this time in the North at the northern side of Panmunjom, to discuss details about the upcoming DPRK-U.S. summit. By then, Pyongyang had agreed to suspend nuclear and missile tests, signaling its satisfaction with the direction diplomacy was going.⁴⁴

As a result of Moon’s initial diplomatic efforts to strengthen inter-Korean relations, diplomacy between North Korea and the U.S. finally resumed after years of stalemate. The first U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore culminated in a Joint Statement in which the two leaders agreed to establish new relations, build lasting peace on the peninsula, work towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and recover POW/MIA remains.⁴⁵ The momentum during this time gave hope to many of president Moon’s planned inter-Korean projects, including reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex, resuming tours to Mt. Kumgang, constructing inter-Korean railways, and more. Moon was able to forge a close relationship with Trump; he knew what to say and how to say it to get the U.S. president to support his inter-Korean rapprochement policies. Moon even went as far

as crediting Trump for the breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and suggested he should receive the Nobel Prize for his willingness to engage with Kim Jong-un.⁴⁶

However, despite the progress made between Washington and Pyongyang in Singapore, there were challenges elsewhere. Trump decided to continue the U.S. national emergency with respect to North Korea, which was first declared in 2008.⁴⁷ The issue of denuclearization also remained unresolved. Despite not having achieved any concrete steps towards denuclearization during their summit, Trump continued to believe that Kim would get rid of his nuclear weapons.⁴⁸ Compared to past efforts of U.S. and South Korean administrations, diplomacy went rather differently under Trump and Moon. Trump relied on his own negotiating experiences in business and was confident he could strike a favorable deal with North Korea. For example, Trump assumed that the main thing Kim was interested in was economic development, so he created an elaborate video showing Kim what his country could gain if a nuclear deal was achieved. The four-minute video depicted “a new world” where North Korea was modernized and where foreign investment was possible.⁴⁹ Despite Trump’s strategy, however, the North Koreans were unimpressed and he failed to convince them to buy into his vision.

This lack of understanding of what the North Koreans actually wanted proved to be a critical mistake at the second U.S.-DPRK summit held in Hanoi in 2019. Although talks seemed promising from the outside, no actual, concrete progress was being made behind the scenes on North Korea’s nuclear program. In the end, Trump arrived in Hanoi with a very distorted image of what kind of deal the North Koreans were actually prepared to accept. When Trump’s team insisted, as many administrations had unsuccessfully done, that North Korea denuclearize before the U.S. would agree to any meaningful concessions, the talks broke down and a prolonged stalemate in diplomacy ensued.⁵⁰

This particular case highlights how Trump clearly did not understand the psychology of the North Koreans, what exactly they wanted, where they were coming from, and how to negotiate with them in a way that would not repeat the same mistakes of the past. Since progress in inter-Korean relations depended on progress in U.S.-North Korea talks, Moon’s plans to boost ties with the North and propel reconciliation forward came to a standstill.

FACILITATOR OR SPOILER?

By looking at these three case studies, it is clear that the U.S. can play the role of both a facilitator and a spoiler in inter-Korean reconciliation efforts. There are several factors that contribute to Washington being a facilitating force for inter-Korean reconciliation. First, the U.S. must be willing and open to engage in diplomatic discussions with North Korea. Second, the U.S. must adopt a reciprocal negotiating strategy with North Korea. Third, Seoul must be willing to support Washington’s diplomatic efforts with Pyongyang and play a mediating role if necessary. Fourth, the geopolitical environment in the region should be conducive to diplomacy. In the best-case scenario, all the relevant parties should agree on the need to engage North Korea and promote denuclearization and peace talks. And fifth, progress must be made on denuclearization to keep the U.S. on board.

BUILDING LASTING PEACE

The ultimate goal on the Korean Peninsula should always be peace. Not peace that lasts for a few weeks, months, or years but a long-lasting peace that can result in a prosperous, secure, stable, united Korea. For this goal to be realized, however, the role of the United States cannot be understated. As history has shown, without active U.S. support and cooperation it is impossible for inter-Korean relations to progress to the levels needed for long-term peace. Although many South Koreans would prefer to directly deal with North Korea on their own without external involvement, this is simply not a viable option. External powers divided the two Koreas and external powers must help bring the two back together. This does not mean that everything falls on Washington’s shoulders. Rather, close cooperation is necessary between Seoul and Washington (and other relevant parties) throughout every step of the way to solve the nuclear issue, achieve reconciliation between the two Koreas, create an environment of cooperation and free exchange on the peninsula, and build a true peace regime that can stand the test of time.

For inter-Korean reconciliation to be effective and possible at a deep level, Pyongyang and Washington must resolve the core of their decades-long enmity with each other: the nuclear problem. Although it is necessary for North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, this will remain an

impossible task if the U.S. government continues to adopt tried and failed strategies from its outdated North Korea playbook. When dealing with North Korea, trust-building and reciprocity are key for the U.S. No deal with Pyongyang will last or produce any desirable results if these two points are missing. Not only must these points be included in any U.S. strategy towards North Korea, but they must also be at the center of such a strategy.

The U.S. must make it a priority to build trust with North Korean officials through regular unofficial communications, lower-level talks, and other forms of correspondence that will help build a foundation for not just negotiations but also an actual relationship. If the focus remains solely on nuclear weapons the North Koreans will not feel any sincerity or goodwill coming from Washington.

The U.S. also cannot expect North Korea to give up its very lifeline in exchange for words of reassurance or future promises. A consistent, reciprocal process by which both sides continuously give something to get something is vital to successful negotiations. The key problem is that the U.S. has never properly evaluated what exactly it is that Pyongyang wants before entering a negotiation. Leon Sigal, who was closely involved in Track II diplomacy with the North Koreans in the 1990s, put it aptly when he said that “Insofar as [U.S. proliferation experts] focused on North Korea, or any other country, they studied the details of its nuclear capabilities, not its internal politics, its foreign policy, or its motives for acting the way that it did. Yet preventing proliferation required an intimate knowledge of North Korea’s peculiar fears, wants, and needs.”⁵¹

It is necessary to understand the background of North Korea’s actions. Pyongyang still sees the U.S. as the country that first divided Korea, then invaded the North, bombed their cities, mercilessly killed their people, and that now wants them to give up their nuclear weapons—seen as a main reason the regime has survived this long—without any meaningful reciprocal action. Although diving deeper into the psychology of the North Korean government is beyond the scope of this paper, officials in Washington must do more to address the North Korea issue in a more holistic way, realizing that nuclear weapons are simply the result of dozens of variables that came before over the course of decades. What is Kim Jong-un calling for in 2022? For the U.S. to end its “hostile policy” towards his country.⁵² Although these terms used by the North Koreans can make for catchy headlines, it’s important to go deeper and find exactly where this logic comes from and why North Korea feels the way it does. The U.S. must place greater emphasis on addressing the more complex foundations of North Korea’s nuclear program if it is to get anywhere with North Korea in the long run.

To ultimately reach the successful long-term reconciliation of the two Koreas, the step-by-step process outlined in Table 1 could be an effective guide for South Korea and the United States. While it may be a simplified version of a process that is likely to be highly complex and involve many twists and turns, it nonetheless represents the ideal blueprint for successfully advancing talks with North Korea.

Table 1. The Path Towards Inter-Korean Reconciliation

<p>1. Seoul and Washington willing to engage and pursue diplomacy with North Korea.</p>	<p>2. US adopts holistic policy approach towards North Korea centered around trust-building and reciprocity.</p>	<p>3. South Korea proactively engages with North Korea while supporting US overtures towards Pyongyang.</p>	<p>4. Seoul and Washington maintain close communication with key parties throughout the process.</p>
<p>5. US and North Korea engage in regular talks, leading to negotiations, resulting in agreements based on reciprocity.</p>	<p>6. Implementation of key inter-Korean projects becomes possible as certain sanctions are lifted.</p>	<p>7. Gradual and consistent strengthening of US-DPRK and ROK-DPRK relationship.</p>	<p>8. Establishment of official U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations, after which inter-Korean reconciliation can make lasting progress.</p>

CONCLUSION

Although there are various factors that influence inter-Korean relations and the reconciliation process, the role of the U.S. is undeniable and arguably one of the most influential factors that affect how North and South Korea interact with each other. The case studies examined in this paper show how, despite the best efforts to improve inter-Korean relations by South Korean presidents Roh Tae-woo, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in, their policies towards the North could never be completely decoupled from Washington. In the end, the progress in inter-Korean reconciliation can only go as far as U.S.-DPRK relations allow. The moment Pyongyang and Washington have a falling out, the repercussions are immediately felt in Seoul. The South Korean Ministry of Unification can draft up as many plans as it can think of to boost cooperation and engagement with North Korea, but without progress in negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. South Korea will be limited in how close it can get to the North.

History shows us that the U.S. can play both a facilitating and spoiling role when it comes to inter-Korean reconciliation. What hat it wears depends on its own relations with North Korea at that given moment. Progress will never be made without engagement. In turn, engagement does not have to mean capitulation either.

What is needed from the U.S. is an honest willingness to approach the North Korea issue in a holistic way, aiming beyond denuclearization towards establishing a real relationship with North Korea. For this to succeed, the strategy must be based on trust-building and reciprocity. The U.S. needs to put more effort into understanding the North Korean psychology, why it is that the government acts the way it does, why it even built nuclear weapons in the first place, and then the U.S. must incorporate these insights into its diplomatic approach. A simple yet effective way to start would be to include academic experts specialized in North Korea, particularly those from South Korea, in the policy-making process. Although there are North Korea experts around the world, most are in South Korea, including those who have either studied in or worked closely with North Koreans. It would thus be a good idea for the U.S. to coordinate with the South Korean government to regularly receive policy guidance from such experts. Although it sounds like an obvious move, it is critical to the success of any diplomatic strategy aimed towards North Korea. Without understanding these basics there is no way any peaceful or diplomatic solution can be reached to resolve this problem. Korea has been divided for over seventy years, largely due to a hasty decision made by the United States. The U.S. thus has a major responsibility to do everything it can to bring the two Koreas back together. The goal must be peace because the cost of war is too high for all involved. It is time for Washington to look at the bigger picture, draft a long-term holistic strategy, and finally end America's longest war.

ENDNOTES

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