

# From Peaceful Unification to Two Koreas? Paradigm Shifts in Inter-Korean Relations

By Christopher Green

For more than three decades, inter-Korean relations have oscillated between confrontation and cautious engagement, grounded in a shared yet contested aspiration—more honored in the breach than the observance—of eventual peaceful unification. This aspiration, rooted in nationalist ideals on both sides of the thirty-eighth parallel, has shaped the political lexicon and security posture of the two Koreas. Yet, developments throughout the past year suggest that North Korea under Kim Jong Un is abandoning the peaceful reunification paradigm altogether.

At the turn of 2024, North Korea publicly reframed South Korea not as a compatriot regime but as a separate and hostile state. Speaking at a session of the country's rubber-stamp parliament, Kim issued orders to transform that political decision into reality in the country's society, military, and economy. Given the extent of these ambitions, it seems correct to conclude that the pivot marks a potentially irreversible rupture in inter-Korean relations. Even if there were to be more flexibility in the policy line than currently appears to be the case, it would be one with consequences not only for the Korean Peninsula but also for regional geopolitics.

This article explores three interrelated dimensions of North Korea's policy turn. First, it examines the nature, drivers, and implementation of the country's paradigm shift on unification and reconciliation, dating the beginning of the policy back to 2019 due to both the end of U.S.-North Korea dialogue and the global COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it analyzes the spectrum of South Korean political responses, from government policy to public sentiment. Finally, it reflects on the potential long-term implications of this shift for the future of the Korean Peninsula and the broader security environment in Northeast Asia.

## Kim Jong Un's Break with Reunification: Drivers and Implementation

### *Declaring the End of a Historical Mandate*

In December 2023, Kim Jong Un trailed a noteworthy recalibration of the country's approach to inter-Korean relations. Kim articulated this new direction at an annual year-end plenary meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea, which, since January 2020, has replaced the North Korean leader's annual New Year's speech and functioned as a forum for providing policy guidance across all fields for the year. Kim then repeated his position during a public appearance at a military installation on January 8, 2024, and the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), which functions as the country's formal legislative body, ratified the policy changes on January 15.<sup>1</sup> Speaking in stark terms during a speech to the SPA, Kim declared that the long-standing policy of pursuing peaceful unification with the South was no longer viable and would not be pursued. Therefore, he said that the North Korean people should be educated to regard South Korea as their country's "primary foe and invariable principal enemy"—a complete reversal of previous rhetoric centered on shared ethnicity and historical destiny.<sup>2</sup>

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He explained:

Since our Republic definitely defined the ROK as a foreign country and the most hostile state after completely eliminating the original concept contradictory to reality that the ROK is the partner for reconciliation and reunification and the fellow countrymen, it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, North Korean authorities soon set about implementing the new policy line, going well past mere “legal steps” in doing so. A demolition crew was sent to the Monument to the Three-Point Charter for National Reunification, or the Arch of Reunification, a landmark situated on the outskirts of Pyongyang that had hitherto symbolized the commitment of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Un’s grandfather and the founding leader of North Korea, to peaceful reunification.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, a number of online platforms previously administered by the United Front Department (UFD), the principal agency tasked with overseeing inter-Korean relations prior to the radical institutional reform, were taken offline.<sup>5</sup> The UFD itself was also dismantled, with many of its functions relocated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a logical step given the reframing of South Korea as a foreign country.<sup>6</sup> The North Korean Constitution has also reportedly been revised to reflect the new posture. These revisions have not been independently verified, although a session of the SPA appeared to be convened in October 2024 partly to do so.<sup>7</sup>

The policy reversal marks a clear departure from North Korea’s long-standing inter-Korean engagement strategy. The once-prominent slogan of “By Our Nation Itself” (*uri minjok kkiri*), a concept implied in the first inter-Korean statement of 1972 and that conceptually underpinned inter-Korean agreements in 2000, 2007, and 2018, has disappeared from official discourse along with any and all rhetorical commitments to “peaceful unification.”<sup>8</sup> The Unification Pavilion (*tongilgak*), a hall just across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) where the two Koreas met several times for peace talks, is now known simply as Panmun Hall (*panmungwan*).<sup>9</sup> The steps that North Korea has taken since Kim’s declaration in early 2024—in fact, since the collapse of U.S.-North Korea dialogue in 2019—suggest a key working assumption: that the change to the country’s inter-Korean policy is a strategic shift of considerable duration, not a tactical one that may prove ephemeral. Kim hopes to fundamentally redefine the inter-Korean relationship as one of two sovereign and antagonistic entities rather than long-lost brothers.<sup>10</sup>

## History

One key question on North Korea’s policy shift involves the timing. It is no secret that alternating cycles of engagement and estrangement have long shaped inter-Korean relations. Limiting our focus to the twenty-first century, we can see how the period between 2000 and 2008 was characterized by cautious optimism under the “Sunshine Policy” of engagement initiated by President Kim Dae-jung in the late 1990s and continued by his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, in the 2000s.<sup>11</sup> The two presidents’ approach, rooted in humanitarian and economic cooperation with the North, brought about a certain degree of warming in inter-Korean relations and led to two inter-Korean summits in 2000 and 2007, where both sides reaffirmed the richly symbolic commitment to eventual peaceful unification. These initiatives helped open channels of dialogue and establish joint ventures such as tours to Mount Kumgang and the Kaesong Industrial Complex.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, fueled by North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 and a string of deadly incidents beginning with the death of a South Korean tourist in the North in the summer of 2008, consecutive conservative presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye moved to a strictly conditional approach to dialogue between 2008 and 2017, refusing to overlook North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in contravention of an increasing number of UN resolutions. Lee's "Vision 3000: Denuclearization and Openness" policy and Park's "Trustpolitik" policy—their respective branding for what was mostly the same package of inter-Korean policies—emphasized a balance of pressure and cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

A return to a version of the earlier period came with Moon Jae-in's presidency from 2017 to 2022. It resulted in three summits with Kim Jong Un, a speech by Moon to a select audience of residents in Pyongyang, and a period of close U.S.-South Korea policy coordination under the first Donald Trump administration.<sup>14</sup> Trump and Kim's failure to reach a deal at the Hanoi Summit in February 2019 quickly reversed the momentum, however, and thereafter, North Korea became largely uninterested in seriously engaging either the United States or South Korea. Kim met with Trump (and Moon) in Panmunjom in July 2019, and North Korea attended working-level talks with U.S. officials in Sweden in October 2019, but without any of the impetus of the first two summit meetings. The COVID-19 pandemic erupted soon thereafter, and a policy review in Pyongyang birthed today's anti-South orientation.

This brief historical overview shows that inter-Korean policy whiplash has been a feature of relations between the two countries for a long time. Sometimes, relatively warm inter-Korean relations, mostly under left-wing administrations in South Korea, brought North Korea financial and other material resources but also produced complex political tensions at home. At other times, frosty relations, usually with South Korea's conservative administrations, alleviated North Korea's ideological contradictions but reduced income flows, impoverishing segments of the patronage networks that keep the Kim regime afloat.<sup>15</sup>

It is of great interest, therefore, that Kim Jong Un chose this moment to initiate a medium- to long-term realignment of inter-Korean strategic culture. For Kim to have made such a firm and potentially irreversible decision implies that North Korea perceived serious risks in the period between 2020 and 2024 that made the choice necessary, when it had not been necessary previously, and that the decision cannot have been driven simply by the shift in emphasis between the Moon administration and that of his successor, Yoon Suk Yeol.

## **Explaining the Shift: Domestic and Geopolitical Drivers**

### *Domestic Pressures*

Regime security and continuity are *the* perennial concerns for Pyongyang, and Seoul is a (arguably *the*) major source of risk for regime security. As such, internal North Korean political and social factors are vital in explaining the timing of the inter-Korean rupture.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the North Korean state had grown deeply wary of—and concerned by—South Korea's cultural and informational influences on society. From the regime's perspective, the spread of illicit South Korean cultural content among the North Korean population over many years

served as a pernicious influence on ordinary North Korean hearts and minds. To a lesser degree, political rapprochement between 2018 and 2019, during which South Korean music was played on North Korean television and then President Moon gave a speech in the May Day Stadium in Pyongyang, brought new and unwelcome ideas into the North.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, amidst the enduring effects of its pandemic border closure, the regime sought to narrow the aperture through which South Korean cultural content or ideas might infiltrate, thus sending a clear message to the domestic population about the acceptable limits of cultural liberalization amidst a marked threat to regime stability. In other words, the pandemic presented an opportunity for Pyongyang, guided by the timeless maxim that a crisis must never be allowed to go to waste, to try and slam the door on South Korea's negative influences, a policy through line that led to the infamous Law on Rejecting Reactionary Ideology and Culture in 2020, changes to the rules and regulations of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) in 2021, and the passage of the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act in 2023.<sup>17</sup>

The decision to reject South Korea altogether represents the denouement of this line of political thinking.<sup>18</sup>

### *Geopolitical Realignments*

Externally, the strategic environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula changed significantly, just as North Korea needed it to, creating a political and economic environment conducive to the policy shift Pyongyang wished to undertake. U.S.-China competition escalated, cementing North Korea's relationship with its main trading ally.<sup>19</sup> North Korea's new comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia also brought opportunities for arms transfers and personnel deployments, economic and diplomatic insulation from Western pressure, and long-sought-after economic diversification away from China. At the UN Security Council, a Russian veto shuttered the Panel of Experts set up to monitor North Korean sanctions enforcement, opening the door to more and easier violations going forward.

Former South Korean President Yoon's uncompromising stance toward North Korea, coupled with the Biden administration's ambivalent policy of—in essence—strategic patience, served only to reinforce this dynamic, elevating the North Korean regime's threat perception and leading it to conclude that there was nothing to lose. The conservative Yoon administration prioritized deterrence, expanded joint exercises with the United States, and promoted trilateral coordination with Japan. These choices were reasonable, but they were undertaken without any related attempt to engage North Korea.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Kim, South Korea's constellation of policies only reaffirmed the desirability of casting the country as a strategic adversary rather than a potential partner.

### *Operationalizing the New Doctrine*

North Korea's shift from a policy of cautious inter-Korean engagement to open hostility is far-reaching in practical terms. Pyongyang has been systematically embedding this doctrinal shift across its military strategy, domestic information environment, diplomatic alignments, and border security posture.

First, North Korea has intensified the pace and scope of weapons development and testing, with the ultimate goal of securing second-strike capability.<sup>21</sup> This has been a constant policy of the North Korean state over decades and, as such, is not directly related to its policy pivot toward South Korea. But it is important to note that the rhetoric surrounding its weapons programs has altered somewhat since 2021,

when Kim issued a list of military development goals for the country's new five-year plan.<sup>22</sup> The North Korean government has adopted a posture that increasingly emphasizes operational readiness and potential preemptive use—with South Korea as an explicit target.<sup>23</sup>

Second, regime propagandists have recalibrated state media to reflect the new adversarial framing of the South. They have scrubbed slogans promoting the ethnic unity of the two Koreas from official communications. Even weather forecasts no longer feature the entirety of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>24</sup> Such messaging—a form of banal and effective statist communication—aims to reinforce a worldview in which adversarial coexistence, not eventual unification, becomes the normative frame.<sup>25</sup>

Third, North Korea has dismantled the institutional infrastructure built for inter-Korean dialogue. The regime blew up the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in Kaesong with great fanfare in the summer of 2020 and ultimately severed virtually all remaining direct communication channels with the South Korean government, including military hotlines. North Korea also declared the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), signed by the two at an inter-Korean summit in September 2018, as “void” after South Korea’s suspended portions of the agreement in response to a North Korean satellite launch.<sup>26</sup>

Relatedly, at the inter-Korean border, the regime has moved to physically reinforce the conceptual break. In February 2024, the South Korean military observed North Korean military-construction units laying concrete roadblocks and anti-tank barriers along roads near the Military Demarcation Line.<sup>27</sup> The same units have also dug up, barricaded, or otherwise obstructed rail and highway links originally developed under the 2000s-era engagement projects. North Korean authorities are also closely managing their northern border with China to tighten control over smuggling routes. These efforts reflect an intensified determination to isolate the population from external information flows, especially South Korean cultural content.

Together, these developments illustrate how Pyongyang is operationalizing its doctrinal shift not as a rhetorical escalation but as a cross-domain restructuring of its national strategy. The dismantling of the unification apparatus, the securitization of the border, the adversarial rebranding of the South, and the embrace of alternative alliances suggest that North Korea now sees long-term strategic and ideological benefits in institutionalizing division—even at the cost of foregoing economic engagement and, perhaps more importantly from the North’s perspective, a measure of diplomatic flexibility. The Korean Peninsula may not yet be formally divided in law, but in practice, North Korea is preparing for that reality.

## **South Korea’s Political Responses and Interpretations**

### *The Yoon Suk Yeol and Lee Jae Myung Administrations*

Under President Yoon from 2022 to 2025, South Korea mirrored North Korea’s policy about-face by foregrounding deterrence and alliance coordination with the United States and Japan. The Yoon administration’s *National Security Strategy*, released in 2024, emphasized a “clear perception of the enemy”—clearly indicating that this is North Korea—and countering the threats posed by the North through robust trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, the newly ruling Democratic Party (DP) has adopted a more ambivalent stance reflecting internal party configurations. While recognizing the gravity of Pyongyang's actions, DP lawmakers argue that a complete disengagement from dialogue would foreclose future options. They advocate for a "conditional engagement" approach that maintains pressure but also leaves space for diplomacy.<sup>29</sup>

The person whose views matter most at present is Lee Jae Myung, the former DP leader and newly anointed president, who spent time on the campaign trail advocating a policy of conditional engagement with North Korea rooted in—as Lee says—pragmatism and reducing the risks posed by North Korean nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. While he has been critical of Pyongyang's provocative behavior and acknowledges the need for deterrence, Lee also emphasizes the dangers of abandoning inter-Korean dialogue altogether. He has called for the revival of humanitarian cooperation and suggested reestablishing liaison channels to lessen the likelihood of miscommunication or accidental escalation. Lee has also signaled support for revisiting the 2018 inter-Korean documents, including the military agreement that led to some level of de-escalation in the Yellow Sea. At the same time, Lee insists that denuclearization must remain a long-term objective and that economic engagement, which North Korea has effectively forsworn, should proceed only if the North demonstrates tangible restraint in its weapons programs.

Lee's somewhat ambivalent, middle-ground approach largely reflects how deeply divided South Korean progressives and civil society more broadly have become over inter-Korean issues. Humanitarian organizations warn that abandoning engagement entirely would worsen the plight of the North Korean people, who are deprived of basic human rights and suffer from high levels of malnutrition and impoverishment.<sup>30</sup> Religious groups and academic voices also lament what they see as the erosion of a national ethos of reconciliation.<sup>31</sup> Yet, even within these sectors, the belief in near-term unification is waning, replaced by calls for stable coexistence and humanitarian pragmatism.

### *Public Opinion: Disillusionment and Realignment*

The shifting politics of unification reflect the fact that for two decades, a growing number of South Koreans have seen unification as unnecessary or undesirable.<sup>32</sup> Economic concerns, cultural divergence, and security fears have all contributed to this reassessment, which has been happening mostly along generational lines. Younger South Koreans, raised in a hyper-connected, globally oriented society, tend to view North Korea less as family and more as a foreign—even alien—polity.<sup>33</sup> The emotional resonance of unification has faded, replaced by pragmatic anxieties about the financial burden and social integration challenges it would entail. While older generations still voice support for reunification in principle, even they acknowledge the deepening divide in identity, politics, and daily life.

Shifts in perception of this type are relatively subtle, but over time, they shape how societies imagine the future—and whether reconciliation remains within the realm of possibility. There is no particular reason to believe that North Korean citizens, already exposed to decades of ideological insulation, see things dramatically differently, and the regime's recent efforts to erase kinship narratives further entrench an adversarial posture.



Popular culture reflects these ongoing shifts. In the democratic era of the 1990s, South Korean dramas and films depicted North Koreans as either sympathetic victims of circumstance or comic figures. This persisted into the twenty-first century, but more recent works, conversely, came to treat the North as distant or alien. Themes of surveillance, defection, and espionage dominated films such as *Secret Reunion* (2010), *The Spies* (2012), *The Berlin File* (2013), and *Secretly, Greatly* (2013).<sup>34</sup>

It should be noted that this erosion of unification sentiment among South Koreans does not ipso facto mean hostility toward North Koreans as people, although events that foreground the most distasteful elements of North Korea's brutal politics—sobbing crowds at the funeral of Kim Jong Il in December 2011, which suggested (inaccurately, but nevertheless) a brainwashed North Korean populace, or the ruthless purge and execution of Jang Song Thaek in December 2013—do have the capacity to diminish South Koreans' feelings of similarity to the people of North Korea.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it reflects a profound disillusionment with the anachronistic and nuclearized state apparatus in Pyongyang and a broader sense that peaceful reconciliation may no longer be feasible, irrespective of its alleged desirability as an end-state. This attitudinal shift is, perhaps, the most underappreciated development of all—and one that is contributing to reshaping South Korean policy discourse in real-time.<sup>36</sup>

The most recent collapse of inter-Korean engagement is often described in terms of broken summits or canceled agreements. But something deeper is unfolding—a mutual redefinition of what the two Koreas are to each other. For North Korea, as Kim made clear in his January 2024 speech, the South is no longer a wayward sibling to be reunited with but a hostile state aligned with foreign powers. In the South, the North has long appeared as a foreign country rather than a long-lost twin. To reiterate, this is not just a failure of diplomacy; rather, it is the erosion of a shared narrative that once—however tenuously—linked the two.

That is why strategic concerns alone are insufficient to fully explain North Korea's change. Kim could have pursued confrontation without scrapping the principle of peaceful unification—just as South Korea strengthened its defense without revisiting its own constitutional vision of national reunification.<sup>37</sup> What has changed is not only the relationship between the two states but the stories they tell about the relationship. The narrative of one people divided by history has long been giving way to a view of two distinct nations with separate futures. In this sense, identity and perception are shaping policy just as much as missiles and alliances. The shift now underway is not simply tactical; it is conceptual.

## Implications for Inter-Korean Relations and Regional Security

The implications of the paradigm shift are far-reaching. At the inter-Korean level, military escalation is an ever-present risk. The breakdown of prior agreements—such as the 2018 inter-Korean military deal that Lee Jae Myung says he wishes to revive—has already led to increased border tensions. Diplomatically, channels of communication have fallen silent. Inter-Korean hotlines, liaison offices, and family reunion programs—once symbols of cautious engagement—are either defunct, abandoned, or destroyed. The prospects for renewed talks are dim.

Assuming the status quo persists, as seems likely, South Korea will eventually begin to adapt to the new reality that unification with North Korea is not a widely desired or sought-after outcome. While no South Korean administration is likely to explicitly renounce the constitutional principle of unification—such an action would carry a high cost in terms of political capital and yield little reward—bureaucratic and curricular reforms may gradually de-emphasize the principle in the way that popular culture already does.<sup>38</sup> National identity, long anchored in the idea of a singular Korean people, can be redefined in ways that normalize the two-state status quo, which tracks existing sentiment changes among the public in any case.

The collapse of the unification paradigm is doomed to reverberate beyond the Korean Peninsula. Most immediately, it will strengthen the rationale underpinning the U.S.-South Korea-Japan security triangle. Trilateral missile defense integration, joint command-and-control systems, and shared intelligence platforms are all already underway or in the plans. Whilst the Lee administration might not trumpet these as successes in the way the Yoon administration used to, Lee has already indicated that they will not be forsworn either. President Yoon's rapprochement with Japan will outlive his failed administration, and with good reason. These arrangements serve not only to deter North Korea but also to hedge against rising Chinese assertiveness in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, making them a no-brainer for everyone involved, including the United States, which values highly its presence inside the first island chain. Northeast Asian security concerns are being integrated at pace, driven primarily by U.S.-China competition and the repercussions of the Ukraine conflict. North Korea's policy pivot is an additional catalyst on the one hand and, on the other, likely to be cemented in place by the changing security landscape.

## Conclusion

We do not yet know whether the Korean unification era that began in 1945 is truly over, but its decline is well underway in practice. Kim Jong Un's explicit abandonment of even a rhetorical commitment to peaceful unification has crystallized what many analysts have long suspected: that the North's political leadership now sees strategic advantage in institutionalized division. This presents an identity challenge—one that demands a recalibration of policy and a reckoning with deeply held national ideals.

With both Koreas appearing to settle into a long-term posture, the road ahead is uncertain. Several scenarios are possible, each capable of shaping the future in divergent ways.

The first is a continued stalemate, where intermittent tensions flare along the DMZ and in cyberspace, but neither side crosses proverbial red lines. This would resemble a protracted Cold War dynamic, with robust deterrence but limited engagement. For this, the two Koreas would need to find ways to initiate dialogue if they wish to know each other's red lines, and the influence of Russia on North Korea will have to be mostly stabilizing, rather than the opposite.

A second, more volatile path—emerging from a failure or unwillingness from one side or the other to initiate dialogue, and with Russia actively stoking instability—involves accidental or calculated escalation. Given the militarization of the inter-Korean border and the lack of functional communication channels,



a misstep or tactical provocation could spiral into open conflict. For now, both sides have incentives to avoid this outcome, but an absence of guardrails would increase latent risk.

A third scenario of selective re-engagement cannot be ruled out. If conditions change sufficiently—for example, a leadership shift in either Korea, external pressure from the United States or China, a too-good-to-refuse offer emanating from the Trump administration, or a severe economic crisis engulfing the North—tactical dialogue could resume. However, even this would likely be transactional rather than transformative, ultimately aimed at goals other than peaceful unification. Even here, there would be no turning back to the past.<sup>39</sup>

Given the desirability of an outcome that preserves the somewhat fragile peace and security of the Korean Peninsula, it is time for the international community to reconsider its role as well. For decades, the default approach of international actors to Korean diplomacy has been to treat unification as the end goal to be encouraged or facilitated. That assumption appears to be no longer tenable. The United States, Japan, the European Union, the United Nations, and other actors will need to adopt a more flexible framework that acknowledges the reality of division while still advocating for peace, human rights, and nuclear restraint.

At present, the task for North and South Korea is to manage their shared conceptual separation without closing the door entirely on future transformation. History on the peninsula has shown that periods of hostility can give way to surprise openings. But the terms of engagement must now be rebuilt from the ground up. That process begins with a clear-eyed understanding of where the relationship stands today: not at a crossroads, but on a new and very different path.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kap-sik Kim, “Why Did Kim Jong-un Delete Unification? Issues and Implications of North Korea’s Position on ‘Hostile Relations Between Two States,’” *Asian Perspective* 48, no. 4 (2024): 675; “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 16, 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1705369092-194545332/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-makes-policy-speech-at-10th-session-of-14th-spa/>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Green, “Korean Reunification: Abandoned or Merely Deferred,” *International Crisis Group*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/korean-peninsula/korean-reunification-abandoned-or-merely-deferred>.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA,” January 16, 2024, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/19216>.

<sup>4</sup> Whilst ostensibly a symbol of North Korea’s commitment to peaceful unification, the landmark was actually not often visited by North Koreans, as domestic “political tourism” tends to focus almost exclusively on monuments to the Kim regime such as the statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in central Pyongyang.

<sup>5</sup> “North Korean propaganda sites targeting South go dark in simultaneous outage,” *NK News*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/2024/01/north-korean-propaganda-sites-targeting-south-go-dark-in-simultaneous-outage/>.

<sup>6</sup> “N. Korea shifts United Front Department roles to foreign ministry, military,” *Daily NK*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-shifts-united-front-department-roles-foreign-ministry-military/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Minyoung Lee, “North Korea’s Post-Parliament Tension Signaling,” *38 North*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/10/north-koreas-post-parliament-tension-signaling/>.

<sup>8</sup> “The July 4 South-North Joint Communiqué,” *United Nations*, July 4, 1972, <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9000>.

<sup>9</sup> “North Korea expunges ‘unification’ from name of JSA building that hosted summit,” *NK News*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.nknews.org/2025/05/north-korea-expunges-unification-from-name-of-jsa-building-that-hosted-summit/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Erasing unity: N. Korea’s dangerous symbolic shift,” *Daily NK*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/erasing-unity-n-koreas-dangerous-symbolic-shift/>.

<sup>11</sup> President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) was personally more concerned with deepening South Korean democracy than with inter-Korean relations per se and persisted with a version of his predecessor’s engagement policy as a means by which to do so.

<sup>12</sup> Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen, *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Park Geun-hye, “A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/northeast-asia/2011-09-01/new-kind-korea>; “Lee Myung Bak, ‘3000 Plan for Denuclearization and Opening of North Korea,’” *Daily NK*, September 27, 2007, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/lee-myung-bak-3000-plan-for-denucl/>.

<sup>14</sup> “Translations of President Moon Jae-in’s Speeches in Pyongyang: Mokrangwan Address in Reply, May Day Stadium Speech, and Mt. Baekdu,” *HRNK*, October 2018, <https://www.hrnkinsider.org/2018/10/translations-of-president-moon-jae-ins.html>. The document also includes the text of Moon Jae-in’s dialogue with Kim Jong Un on Paektu Mountain during the same visit.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that North Korea’s trade with China, especially in the period 2009–2016, greatly alleviated any pain felt due to the slow death of the Sunshine Policy from the summer of 2008, when a South Korean tourist was killed at Kumgang Mountain, to February 2016, when South Korea shuttered the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

<sup>16</sup> “North Korea ‘Concerned’ Over Public Response to South Korean President’s Speech,” *Radio Free Asia*, September 27, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/speech-09272018143257.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Kim, “Why Did Kim Jong-un Delete Unification? Issues and Implications of North Korea’s Position on ‘Hostile Relations Between Two States,’” 673-674; “Crushing dissent: N. Korea’s anti-reactionary thought law and its effect on daily life,” *Daily NK*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/crushing-dissent-north-korea-anti-reactionary-thought-law-effect-daily-life/>; “Suppressing Foreign Influence: The Impact of the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Law on North Korean Society,” *Daily NK*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/crushing-dissent-north-korea-anti-reactionary-thought-law-effect-daily-life/>; “Daily NK obtains the full text of the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act,” *Daily NK*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/daily-nk-obtains-full-text-pyongyang-cultural-language-protection-act/>. The regulations of the ruling KWP are a much more important indicator of change than the wording of North Korea’s Constitution, which is principally a piece of propaganda for overseas consumption.

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, institutionalizing confrontation with South Korea in this way gives Kim an additional mechanism by which to consolidate elite loyalty and preempt factionalism, especially among military and security institutions that benefit from an ongoing state of high alert. Across 2024 and 2025, the apparatus of North Korea’s police state has become the key player in deciding if, when, and on what terms North Korea opens its borders to outsiders and to which outsiders it opens.

<sup>19</sup> There are signs that friction in the China-North Korea relationship has been created by North Korea’s warming with Russia in the wake of Russia’s war against Ukraine, but there is no serious possibility that this will cause China to abandon North Korea.

<sup>20</sup> Former President Yoon Suk Yeol’s “Audacious Initiative,” though morally appealing, cannot be seen as a serious attempt at engagement with North Korea. Following in the footsteps of the twin initiatives of presidents Lee and Park noted on page 3, Yoon’s plan was not likely to succeed for several reasons, all of which are explored in detail by Scott A. Snyder, “Why North Korea Might Reject Yoon Suk-yeol’s Audacious Initiative,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-north-korea-might-reject-yoon-suk-yeols-audacious-initiative>.

<sup>21</sup> Taehyun Kim, “North Korea’s Efforts to Attain De Facto Nuclear Weapon State Status and ROK-US Response Strategy,” 38 *North*, March 14, 2025, <https://www.38north.org/2025/03/north-koreas-efforts-to-attain-de-facto-nuclear-weapon-state-status-and-rok-us-response-strategy/>.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Green, “North Korea Plots a Course of ‘Heavy Agony’ for 2022,” *International Crisis Group*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/korean-peninsula/north-korea-plots-course-heavy-agony-2022>; “On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 9, 2021, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/161015511-665078257/on-report-made-by-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-at-8th-congress-of-wpk/>.

<sup>23</sup> “North Korea marks the delivery of 250 nuclear-capable missile launchers to frontline units,” *Associated Press*, August 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-jong-un-tactical-nuclear-weapons-missile-launchers-29674804c22aea7d7de8bb6a6aa5a92d>; Kim, “Why Did Kim Jong-un Delete Unification? Issues and Implications of North Korea’s Position on ‘Hostile Relations Between Two States,’” 685-686.

<sup>24</sup> Robert King, “Kim Jong-un Changes Policy on Inter-Korean Reunification and Issues Threats of War,” *Korea Economic Institute of America*, January 19, 2024, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/kim-jong-un-changes-policy-on-inter-korean-reunification-and-issues-threats-of-war/>.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (SAGE Publications, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> However, North Korea had not been observing the agreement in full for several years.

<sup>27</sup> “N. Korea cuts power lines supplying electricity to shuttered Kaesong complex,” *Yonhap News Agency*, November 26, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241126002500315>; “N. Korea’s explosion of inter-Korean roads epitomizes leader Kim’s animosity against S. Korea,” *Yonhap News Agency*, October 15, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241015008000315>; “Map Shows Where North Korea Has Placed Land Mines in Demilitarized Zone,” *Newsweek*, April 30, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/north-south-korea-map-dmz-land-mines-1895427>.

<sup>28</sup> Office of the President, “The Yoon Suk-yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy,” 17, 88, [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1).

<sup>29</sup> “South Korea’s new President Lee vows to pursue talks with North and bolster ties with US and Japan,” *Associated Press*, June 4, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-president-lee-a754f6c7fe8f44d15e2898b59b9a5f3c>.

<sup>30</sup> “[2025대선] 더불어민주당 선대위와 남북관계 개선과 한반도 평화 정착 관련 정책협약체결 [[2025 Presidential Election] Democratic Party Campaign Committee Signs Policy Agreement on Improving Inter-Korean Relations and Establishing Peace on the Korean Peninsula],” *People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.peoplepower21.org/peace/%ED%95%9C%EB%B0%98%EB%8F%84-%ED%8F%89%ED%99%94/1992759?ckattempt=1>.

<sup>31</sup> Wondong Lee, “From Nationhood to Peoplehood: A Crisis of Meaning in South Korea’s Unification Discourse,” *Pacific Focus*, March 23, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12276>.

<sup>32</sup> The state-run Korea Institute for National Unification and Institute for Peace and Unification Studies of Seoul National University survey South Koreans annually to examine current opinion of unification in South Korea. See The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, *Consciousness Survey*, [https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/archives/publications\\_cat/unification-consciousness-survey](https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/archives/publications_cat/unification-consciousness-survey).

<sup>33</sup> Saeme Kim, “MZ Generation’s Perspective on Korean Unification,” *Korea Economic Institute of America*, August 26, 2024, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/mz-generations-perspective-on-korean-unification/>; Emma Campbell, *Korea’s New Nationalism: Politics, Identity and Culture in South Korea* (Routledge, 2016); Emma Campbell, “The End of Ethnic Nationalism? Changing Conceptions of National Identity and Belonging among Young South Koreans,” *Nations and Nationalism* 21, no. 3 (2015): 385–403.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Epstein, “Sympathetically, Gravely? North Korean Spies in Recent South Korean Cinema,” unpublished manuscript.

<sup>35</sup> Ra Jong-yil, *Inside North Korea’s Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-thaek* (State University of New York Press, 2019); “North Korea: The Dramatic Fall of Jang Song Thaek,” *38 North*, December 9, 2013, <https://www.38north.org/2013/12/amansourov120913/>; “Kim Funeral, As North Koreans Wail and Mourn,” *Associated Press*, December 28, 2011, <https://youtu.be/4BDz4rFPTqY?si=FP3JuETH9ho9Vtlo>;

<sup>36</sup> This process has been underway for years, but a summary of the latest trends can be found in Darcie Draudt-Véjares, “The Transformation of South Korean Progressive Foreign Policy,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/the-transformation-of-south-korean-progressive-foreign-policy?lang=en>.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in his August 15 Liberation Day speech in 2024, former President Yoon sought to take ownership of the peaceful unification agenda. “Address by President Yoon Suk Yeol on the 79th Liberation Day,” *Korea.net*, August 15, 2024. <https://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=256919>.

<sup>38</sup> This would have the additional, largely unintended consequence of rationalizing South Korea’s national identity by moving it away from ethnic nationalism, which is articulated principally in the inter-Korean field. As such, it runs counter to the country’s otherwise curricular commitment to multiculturalism and diversity. See Rennie Moon, “Globalisation and citizenship education: diversity in South Korean civics textbooks,” *Comparative Education* 49, no. 4 (2013): 424–439.

<sup>39</sup> President Lee Jae Myung has embarked on trying to create the conditions for dialogue, but it remains unclear how North Korea’s top decision-makers regard his efforts. See “北 고위 간부 ‘평화 의지 있다면 9·19 군사합의 복원될 수도 [Senior North Korean official: If there is a willingness for peace, the September 19 military agreement could be restored],” *Daily NK*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.dailynk.com/20250617-1/>.