

# The Park Chung-hee Administration amid Inter-Korean Reconciliation in the Détente Period: *Changes in the Threat Perception, Regime Characteristics, and the Distribution of Power*

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to explain South Korea's decision to open dialogue with North Korea in the détente period. President Park Chung-hee, who came to power in a military coup, did not pay much attention to unification matters in his early rule, but starting from the late 1960s, Park gradually began to change his North Korea policy due to a combination of external and internal conditions. I intend to explain the causes of Seoul's new approach toward Pyongyang through three variables: Threat perception, regime characteristics, and the distribution of power. A combination of these factors forced the Park regime to change its North Korea policy from confrontation to cooperation. However, inter-Korean cooperation proved to be short-lived. The early demise of rapprochement can be explained by the absence of compelling forces that could have driven the deepening of cooperation between the two parties.*

**Keywords:** South Korea, North Korea, détente, threat perception, distribution of power, inter-Korean relations, inter-Korean reconciliation

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## Introduction

The politics of the Korean peninsula is unusually full of surprises and twists of events. As it stands now, North Korea or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is stepping up its nuclear and missile programs, which is a major disruptive factor in the security of Northeast Asian politics. Pyongyang captured global attention by conducting nuclear test in October 2006 and May 2009. In spite of current tensions and security anxiety over Pyongyang's resolution to go nuclear, the history of the inter-Korean rivalry has witnessed serious de-escalation of tensions between the two. President Roh Tae-woo's Nordpolitik (*bukbang jeongchaek*) and President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy are two seminal examples. Yet, even before the dawn of the post-Cold War regional order, South and North Korea ventured into direct dialogue in the early 1970s.

This paper aims to explain South Korea's decision to open dialogue with its archrival North Korea in the détente period. President Park Chung-hee, who came to power in a military coup, did not pay much attention to unification matters in his early rule. But starting from the late 1960s, President Park's attitude toward the unification issue began to change, albeit gradually. He was forced to change his North Korea policy due to a combination of external and internal conditions. I intend to explain the causes of Seoul's new approach toward Pyongyang using the three variables: Threat perception, regime characteristics, and the distribution of power. It is contended that these changes forced the Park regime to alter its North Korea policy from confrontation to cooperation.

During the Red Cross talks, secret talks between agents of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) took place, which led to a historic visit by Lee Hu-Rak, KCIA Director, to Pyongyang. The secret exchanges between Seoul and Pyongyang produced the July 4 Joint Communiqué and the South-North Coordinating Committee.<sup>1</sup> However, inter-Korean cooper-

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1. The KCIA chose a Red Cross talks as a desirable channel to open dialogue between

ation proved to be short-lived. Following the introduction of the Yusin system in the South and the Yuil ideology and system in the North, the leaders of both Koreas lost interest in furthering talks. The early demise of rapprochement was caused by the lack of necessary driving force for the deepening of cooperation between the two parties.

### **Political Shocks and De-escalation of Rivalry**

Rivals are a pair of states locked in fierce competition, in many occasions involving militarized disputes. They share images of enemies and the behavior of the other is often interpreted with malice, which becomes the seed of escalating conflict. The rivalry tends to last for an extended period of time because the adversarial relationship is inherited from one generation to another through education and socialization (Woo 2008, 108-113).

The evolutionary expectancy theory of rivalry de-escalation proposes that changes in expectation of the opponent's intentions are integral to peacemaking processes. Because an actor's expectation, strategy, and behavior tend to be ruled by inertia, major shocks from outside are necessary. Shocks transform the actor's expectations, which in turn transform policy toward the adversary. The expectancy theory interprets shocks as changes in external threat perception, regime orientation/strategies, competitive ability, and domestic resource crisis (Thompson 2005, 8-9).

The domestic resource crisis was absent in the case of President Park's initiation of dialogue with North Korea. Despite labor strife and civil unrest sparked by harsh working conditions and increasing income gaps between the rich and poor, Seoul was still enjoying high growth rates at the time. Even in the North Korean case, which was

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South and North Korea following the August 15 declaration, in which President Park Chung-hee proposed a goodwill competition between the two rivals. While at Pyongyang, Lee Hu-Rak discussed with Kim Il Sung three principles of unification that later became the central piece in the July 4 Joint Communiqué. An Interview with Hong Jeong Jin, August 24, 2005.

then undergoing economic difficulties, it would be a far cry to assume that a domestic crisis was the major factor pushing the Kim Il Sung regime to push for peace.

Therefore, setting aside the domestic resource crisis variable, this research will investigate the impact of threat perception, regime characteristics, and competitive ability on South Korea's rapprochement efforts in turn.

### Threat Perception

The 1960s can be characterized by rising militarism in the DPRK. The post-Korean War recovery internally and the advance of anti-imperial, military struggle externally emboldened the DPRK leadership which incrementally took a more aggressive stance toward its archrival, the ROK. Buoyed by North Vietnam's success at fighting the Americans, Kim Il Sung sought to pursue a militant and adventurous path against South Korea and the United States in the late 1960s, culminating in the failed attempt to assassinate the ROK's president, the seizure of the U.S. intelligence ship USS *Pueblo* in January 1968, and the shooting down of the U.S. reconnaissance plane EC-121 in April 1969 (Schaefer 2004; Radchenko 2005).<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1960s, the ROK sensed that the U.S. commitment to defending South Korea in the face of communist aggression was dwindling. The aborted commando assault on the Blue House and the *Pueblo* and EC-12 incidents became the litmus test against which Washington's resolve to stand up to the challenge from Pyongyang was to be measured. The United States disappointed South Korea by taking an appeasement stance toward North Korea. Washington did not want to get bogged down in yet another military intervention in

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2. Lim Dong-won recalls that the January 21 attack on the Blue House made the ROK pay attention to independent national defense, and he and others in the Ministry of National Defense made a field trip to Israel to see successful case of independent defense preparedness (Lim D. 2008, 146-151). An Interview with Lim Dong-won, February 6, 2009.

East Asia while it was trying to extract itself from the Vietnamese War. Washington was also concerned that Seoul's attempt to retaliate might backfire and create an unstable situation on the Korean peninsula, and tried to cool things down. The United States was largely indifferent to the North Korean commando attack on the Blue House in particular. Washington's direct negotiations with Pyongyang to resolve the Pueblo incident worried the administration in the South, and was seen with skeptical and jealous eyes by Seoul (Shin and Ryo 2006; Cho J. 2003).

The rise of Richard Nixon as President of the United States posed a new challenge for the Park Chung-hee administration. President Nixon, in his informal address to the press corps in Guam on July 25, 1969, expressed his opinion that Asians should shoulder the majority of the burden for their own defense. The Guam Doctrine, Asian defense by Asian nations, was a shock to many policy-makers in the Asia-Pacific region (Kim S. 1976, 358-361).

Following the downing of a U.S. reconnaissance plane over the international waters in the East Sea, President Park wrote a letter to President Nixon, offering condolences for the death of the flight crews and expressing "unbearable hatred and anger" at Pyongyang's acts of provocation. President Park urged Washington to take strong countermeasures to teach Pyongyang a lesson and prevent it from launching further provocations.

I do not doubt that appropriate second-phase measures will shortly be taken following these interim measures. I believe, however, that, should the present measures end up with a mere demonstration or temporizing action, should we seek only temporary measures in the face of North Korean Communists' unpredictable acts of provocation without preparing any lasting counter-measures in advance, or should we indulge only in low posture of tolerance as in the case of the USS Pueblo incident, we would be unable to prevent any possible North Korean Communists' provocation in the future. It is comprehended that North Korean Communists' stepped-up acts of provocation led by their misguided confidence and miscalculation will all the more increase the tension in the Far

Eastern region, including Korea.<sup>3</sup>

In late August 1969, President Nixon invited President Park to San Francisco for a summit, during which the former alluded to the fact that the U.S. troop cut from South Korea was not in sight. Referring to the EC-121 incident, Nixon remarked that, “should such a provocation of grand scale be committed by the North Koreans in the future, the United States (1) will take countermeasures, (2) has a plan to take immediate measures, and (3) the countermeasures will outweigh the seriousness of an aggression.” After assuring that Washington would faithfully carry out its pledge to Seoul, President Nixon declared that “we have no thought about withdrawing U.S. troops from Korea when Kim Il Sung is committing provocative actions.”<sup>4</sup> Despite Nixon’s private assurance to Park, Washington at the time was already reviewing the possibility of troop withdrawal from South Korea. Throughout the year of 1969, controversy surrounding the U.S. troop withdrawal persisted in spite of Washington’s official denials.<sup>5</sup>

On March 27, 1970, Ambassador William J. Porter officially informed President Park of its policy of troop reductions stationed in Korea. The Nixon Doctrine and U.S. troop reduction forced Park to find a way to become independent of Washington’s security umbrella. Park Chung-hee figured that the United States was not reliable enough and the insecurity caused by several international transformations was rising to a new level. In late 1970, the ROK manage to

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3. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, April 29, 1969, Confidential U.S. State Department Central Foreign Policy Files: Korea (hereafter, Confidential DOS Files: Korea), 1967-1969, National Archives and Record Administration (NA).
  4. “Conversation between President Park and Nixon,” August 21, 1969, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CN 724.11 US, RN 3017.
  5. In the morning of October 28, 1969, while chatting with the ROK Foreign Minister, Ambassador Porter reiterated the U.S. stand denying either reduction or withdrawal of U.S. troops. “Statements and Media Reports on the Reduction of U.S. Troops Stationed in Korea,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1969, CN 729.23, RN 3104. The KCIA secretly launched a campaign opposing U.S. troop reductions. An Interview with Kang In-Duk, January 31, 2008.

establish institutes and committees such as the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) and the Weapons Exploitation Committee (WEC) devoted to manufacturing indigenous weapons systems. Eventually, President Park even toyed with an idea of becoming a nuclear state (Cho C. 2000, 26-42).<sup>6</sup>

While hosting a group of statesmen including former Prime Minister Paik Too-chin in Washington, D.C., Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green observed that “he hoped Korea could avoid an over-reaction, as this might lead to pressures for greater reductions than are currently contemplated.” He then proceeded to nudge his guests to accept what he thought inevitable, and suggested that “an atmosphere of quiet cooperation” would be beneficial to both Washington and Seoul.<sup>7</sup> The Park administration sought to have the Nixon administration to accept an eight-point draft entitled “Agreed Minutes,” one point of which was to make the further reduction of U.S. troops contingent on South Korean approval. The ROK’s effort turned out fruitless because the Department of State was unwilling to endow the South Korean government with virtual veto power over the level of the U.S. armed forces.<sup>8</sup>

President Nixon began approaching China with the aim of solving the Vietnamese maze. The United States-China rapprochement was perhaps the most critical factor influencing the threat perception of the South Korean policymakers. The shock caused by the Washington-Beijing courtship propelled the two Koreas’ change of strategy

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6. On the ROK’s efforts to produce weapons, see the following documents: “Promotion Plan of the Development of Weapons,” November 15, 1971, National Archives of Korea, Daejeon, M/F and ODF; “Weekly Reporting on the Progress of Weapons Development,” reported by Oh Won-cheol, November 14 and 21, 1971, Office of the President, Republic of Korea, National Archives of Korea, Daejeon M/F and ODF; and “Framework and Budget for the Study of Weapons Development,” reported by Oh Won-cheol, November 29, 1971, Office of the President, Republic of Korea, National Archives of Korea, Daejeon, M/F and ODF.

7. Memorandum of Conversation, “Troop Reductions in Korea,” July 22, 1970, DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.

8. “Talking Points for Your Appointment with Korean Foreign Minister Choi Kyuhah,” December 1, 1970, Confidential DOS files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.

toward each other (Kimiya 2007; Jo 2007; Oberdorfer 2001, 11-46). The easing of tension between the United States and China had some spillover effect on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, South and North Korea were worried about the U.S.-China collusion, and their fear of abandonment from the major powers increased to a new level.

Kim Il Sung depicted Nixon's visit as "a great victory" for the Chinese people and of the world revolutionary forces and sought to connect it with U.S. withdrawal from South Korea.<sup>9</sup> Park Chung-hee proposed Red Cross talks and began a dialogue with his archrival. President Park was concerned that the minor power's national interest be sacrificed under the power politics of the great powers. President Nixon sought to comfort Park with his letter dated November 29, 1971. Nixon expressed his hope that the U.S. dialogue with the PRC would "result in a reduction of tensions in Asia" over a longer period. He added:

You can be sure, Mr. President, that in taking steps toward the goal of a peaceful Asia, the United States will not overlook the interest of its allies and friends nor seek any accommodations at their expense. . . . The United States has no intention of disengaging from Asia. We intend to honor all of our treaty commitments.<sup>10</sup>

The Park administration made efforts to hold a summit with President Nixon prior to his visit to Beijing, but Washington was not interested in the proposal.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the South

9. FBIS Trends in Communist Propaganda, August 11, 1971, CIA Records Search Tool, NA.

10. Richard Nixon to Park Chung-hee, November 29, 1971.

11. Telegram from Department of State to U.S. Embassy in Seoul, "Letter to President Park from President Nixon," December 2, 1971, Oberdorfer Korea Collection, 1998. The ROK's Foreign Ministry was pressing Ambassador Habib for "a meeting of two hours duration between the presidents at whatever place President Nixon wishes." Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, December 4, 1971, DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA. Under Secretary Johnson informed Ambassador Kim Dong Jo that "Summit meeting at this time was not feasible." Telegram from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Seoul, December 13, 1971, Oberdorfer Korea Collection, 1998.

Korean policymakers' threat perception was swinging widely due to a number of environmental changes, including the Nixon Doctrine and U.S. troop reductions (Shin W. 2005). The ROK responded by proceeding with its own ROK military modernization program.

### **Regime Characteristics**

After seizing power by military coup in 1961, Park Chung-hee actively sought to unite his people under the banner of economic growth. Externally, General Park quickly mended fences with the United States and internally the exit from long-lasting poverty became the seed of legitimacy for Park's leadership. The Park government placed economic growth ahead of redistribution of wealth and unification issues. The essence of governance under President Park is often described as a developmental state. The developmental state seeks to make a long-term and strategic intervention on the market with an objective of swift and effective economic development while protecting private property and the market economy (Kim I. 2005). In the 1960s, the Park regime pursued export-driven industrialization, subsequently opening diplomatic relations with Japan and sending its troops to Vietnam (Kimiya 2008). In the 1970s, a program of heavy and chemical industrialization was also adopted (Cumings 1997, 322-336).

As President Park was preoccupied with enlarging the size of Korea's economic pie, he was rather passive in making positive gestures towards North Korea. This passivity became problematic as the opposition coalition was proposing more and more daring proposals for national reconciliation. Especially, opposition presidential candidate Kim Dae-jung called for a more proactive North Korea policy during his presidential campaigns.<sup>12</sup>

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12. In December 1970, Kim Dae-jung was weighing a visit to the United States with the hope of meeting President Nixon, or if that was not possible, the Vice President or Secretary of State (see Telegrams from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, "Possible Visit to US by NDP Presidential Candidate Kim Tae Chung,"

On December 6, 1971, Park Chung-hee declared a national emergency on the pretext that it was necessary to organize national power in order to continue economic development under the security threat. In less than a year, on October 17, 1972, President Park stood before his people to announce the special declaration of the October Reform.<sup>13</sup> With the declaration, he dismissed the National Assembly and put an end to all political activities. He made it clear that the aim of this extraordinary measure was to facilitate the progress of inter-Korean dialogue. Rationalizing it based on the special situation of Korea, he said the concentration of power was necessary in order to fight political inefficacies of liberal democracy. He said that special measures had to be taken in order to uphold national security in the face of U.S. troop reductions and Kim Il Sung's aggression, and to

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December 3 and 9, 1970, DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA). The Department of State thought it unwise to "involve Cabinet level or White House in Kim's election strategy" (Telegram from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Seoul, December 7, 1970, DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA).

13. Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil informed Ambassador Habib about martial law proclamation a day ago, at 18:00, October 16. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, October 16, 1972, Oberdorfer Korea Collection, 1998. The U.S. was indignant that there was no prior consultation and decided to keep distance with President Park's action. Telegrams from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Seoul, October 16, 17, and 18, 1972, Oberdorfer Korea Collection, 1998. At the request of Ambassador Habib, direct mention of US policy in Asia as a rationale for the imposition of political restructuring was modified. Telegram from US Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, "Modifications in ROKG Presidential Declaration," October 17, 1972, Oberdorfer Korea Collection, 1998. Habib remarks that President Park is turning away from democracy but that persuading Park to abandon his decision would be impractical. Telegram from U.S. Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, "U.S. Response to Korean Constitutional Revision," October 23, 1972, Oberdorfer Korea Collection, 1998. KCIA Director Lee Hu-Rak informed his North Korean counterpart Park Sung-chul of a South Korean constitutional reform scheme "in very vague terms" during their meeting in Panmunjeom on October 12. On October 16, Chung Hong Jin provided a more concrete notification to Kim Duk-hyun at Panmunjeom (Telegram from U.S. Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, October 31, 1972, "South-North Contacts," Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA. See also Intelligence Note, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, December 18, 1972, Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA).

continue economic growth for the sake of the betterment of the Korean people (Kim S. 2006, 142-158). Days before making a special speech for the enactment of the national emergency measures, President Park privately confided to his Press Secretary Kim Seong Jin that:

In light of today's emergency situation, not a few weaknesses are embedded in our peace system. If democracy is of the highest value, what should we do when someone confronts us to steal or obliterate it? Aggression using guns and swords cannot be prevented by mere slogans of liberty and peace. In order to preserve our cherished values, we need to make some sacrifices and pay some dividends. We need a strong resolution that we can reserve part of our rights to enjoy freedom, if necessary (Kim S. 2006, 144-145).

The rise of external threats provided a pretext for erecting a more authoritarian type of governance. Setting aside full-fledged democracy, Park Chung-hee placed national survival and state protection as the top priority, and called for national unity for the cause of national security, using all available resources. In the face of Communist threat, President Park believed there was no room for inefficacy, waste, and discord aroused by party politics and political maneuvering. He opined that instead of borrowing Western democracy that may not fit Korea, perfectly it was time to invent a unique style of democracy borne out of Korea's culture and physical settings.

Park Chung-hee was not particularly enthusiastic about inter-Korean dialogue. From the early stages of the inter-Korean talks, he did not for a moment believe that dialogue alone would pave the way for an eventual unification, or even necessarily reconciliation between the two archrivals. President Park was of opinion that there was no need to hurry. He considered trust building between South and North Korea to be most important, which would naturally take some time. He preferred starting with nonpolitical issues, such as separated family reunions and then gradually moving towards political integration (Kim S. 2006, 121-139).

Park's inner circle was divided on how to manage inter-Korean dialogue. While Lee Hu-Rak spearheaded the effort for the talks, his rivals did not enjoy Director Lee receiving the media spotlight. A notable example is Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil who was wary of Lee Hu-Rak's personal ambition. While meeting Ambassador Habib, Kim was largely pessimistic about the prospects of inter-Korean dialogue and critical of Lee's handling of the matter. He blamed Lee for conducting the negotiations "with undue haste." Premier Kim confided to Ambassador that he had discussed "the possibility of reducing the level of leadership at the coordinating committee and of having someone other than Lee Hu-Rak lead the South Korean delegation" with President Park.<sup>14</sup>

ROK Foreign Minister Kim Yong Sik was also assuming a conservative attitude toward the talks. At his meeting with U.S. Ambassador on November 10, 1972, he told Habib that President Park was not planning a summit with Kim Il Sung and was "irritated at the speculation." He predicted that "the military, political, and diplomatic subcommittees of the Coordinating Committee would exist in form only." On the rumors about South-North consultations on unification methods, Foreign Minister Kim said "confederation is impossible" and the idea "cannot be considered" at that moment.<sup>15</sup>

Former Prime Minister Chung Il-kwon was more forthright in expressing his opinions on unification schemes. While chatting with Habib, he said that "he personally favors establishment of a 'supreme assembly' to which each side [i.e., Seoul and Pyongyang] would send perhaps 50 representatives." He projected that a confederation could be realized within three years. Chung anticipated that inter-Korean exchanges including sports groups, artists, journalists, and mail could

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14. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, November 24, 1972, "Prime Minister's Views on South-North Dialogue," Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.
  15. Department of State Information Memorandum from Marshall Green to Secretary of State, November 20, 1972, "Coordinating Committee Cochairman Meeting in Pyongyang, November 2-4," Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.

be carried out within a year or so. In his telegram to Washington, D.C., Habib observes that there are indications that “confederation is currently a subject of concentrated study in the planning group dealing with South-North contacts.”<sup>16</sup>

Habib’s telegram notes that Lee Hu-Rak did not favor Kim Il Sung’s federation scheme. Director Lee told Habib that he considered it to be a propaganda initiative and figured that a federation between two different systems was unachievable.<sup>17</sup> In a late October meeting with Habib, Director Lee flatly denied “rumors that he or other ROK representatives were exploring outlines of a federal system or a confederation between South and North Korea.”<sup>18</sup> Director Lee was of opinion that Red Cross talks and political discussion via Coordinating Committee could proceed side by side. President Park believed that political talks could begin once some progress had been made on divided families issue and limited exchanges.<sup>19</sup>

President Park sought to balance those who actively promoted exchanges with Pyongyang and others who preferred more cautious approaches and were rather suspicious of the North’s underlying intentions. While permitting inter-Korean dialogue to proceed, he did not budge from his gradual and measured approach. He believed that unification would take time and shrugged off the idea of a summit

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16. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, November 4, 1972, “South-North Contacts Conversation with Former PM Chung Il-kwon,” Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.
  17. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, December 20, 1972, “Discussion with ROK CIA Director Yi Hu-Rak on South-North Developments,” Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.
  18. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, October 31, 1972, “South-North Contacts,” Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.
  19. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, October 13, 1972, “Red Cross Talks—October 24 Meeting,” Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA. Kim Il Sung, during his meeting with Lee Hu-Rak in Pyongyang, said that making headway in political talks was important and Red Cross channel was unnecessary. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, December 20, 1972, “Discussion with ROK CIA Director Yi Hu-Rak on South-North Developments,” Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.

with Kim Il Sung.<sup>20</sup> He was sharply focused on deterring Kim Il Sung's provocations, and on preventing the outbreak of another war on the Korean Peninsula. As the talks were underway, he used his political skills to use the South-North talks for the introduction of Yusin system.

### **Distribution of Power between South and North Korea**

Changes in the distribution of power affected strategic calculation of divided states alike. The DPRK began to feel the pinch first. While falling short of becoming an internal resource crisis, Pyongyang's high-yielding economic performance in the postwar era started to lose its luster in the 1960s. Partly because of the heavy burden of military spending, and partly because of the limits of economic growth based on mass mobilization, the DPRK economy revealed signs of slowdown.

Meanwhile, South Korea showed a high growth rate since the Park administration launched its five-year economic plans. Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, South Koreans believed that the economic disparity between the two Koreas was disappearing. The report comparing the economic strengths of the two Koreas compiled under the auspices of the KCIA showed that in 1969, the South overtook the North by US\$208 to US\$194 in GNP per capita (Kang 1993, 365). According to data compiled by the Board of National Unification, the ROK had been trailing the DPRK by US\$94 to US\$137 in terms of GNP per capita in 1960, which was reversed into US\$591 to US\$579 by 1975 (Board of National Unification 1987). The following table helps us trace the growth of comparative economic capabilities between the two Koreas.

Despite the differences, several data indicate that Seoul's eco-

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20. The idea of a summit floated during reciprocal visits of Lee Hu-Rak and Park Sung Chul (Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, October 31, 1972, "South-North Contacts," Confidential DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA).

Table 1. ROK vs. DPRK: Per Capita GNP

Year	(Unit: US\$)	
	ROK	DPRK
1968	169	266
1969	210	261
1970	252	303
1971	288	345
1972	318	384
1973	395	440
1974	512	506
1975	590	589
1976	797	628
1977	1,008	675

Source: Hamm (1998, 287).

conomic capability overtook that of Pyongyang between the late 1960s and mid-1970s. The newly achieved balance of power on the Korean Peninsula emboldened the leadership in Seoul. Pride and confidence replaced a long-held sense of inferiority among the elites in Seoul. Realizing power parity, President Park Chung-hee was able to suggest to his northern counterpart a goodwill competition between the two Koreas on which system was able to provide better welfare for its people on August 15, 1970 (Woo 2004, 101-102). While giving advice to Lee Hu-Rak, who was scheduled to go to Pyongyang in early May 1972, President Park emphasized that the delegation should approach meetings with North Korea with the firm conviction that the South's overall national capabilities overshadowed those of Pyongyang.<sup>21</sup>

### The Park Regime's Interpretation of Shocks

As proposed by the evolutionary expectancy theory of rivalry de-

21. Park Chung-hee, "Presidential Directive on the Special Area Dispatch," April 26, 1972, MBC Document Collection, 2004.

escalation, this paper has ventured to investigate the influence of the changes in the threat perception, regime characteristics, and distribution of capabilities in the ROK's decision to reconcile with its counterpart. It has found that some notable transformations in all the three key variables have taken place, which explains why de-escalation was attempted in the first place. Changes in threat perception, regime characteristics, and relative power distribution had an impact on President Park's policy changes towards the DPRK. That understood, why did inter-Korean rapprochement face an abrupt end and why was it ultimately unsuccessful, failing to lead to a gradual erosion of the rivalry? The answer also lies in the three key factors mentioned above. A short and simple answer is that the changes were too shallow to permit the termination of inter-Korean rivalry. A more subtle answer is that those changes were not of the right kind to facilitate the early death of the rivalry.

First, the transformation of threat perception is most highly recognizable in the case of the ROK during the détente period. The Nixon administration's new Asia policy was taken by Park Chung-hee as a weakening of their commitment to fend off Communist threats in the region. President Park had to adapt to a new international environment in which the United States was less willing to be involved in Asian affairs.

What role did the United States play in the ROK's decision to engage North Korea? Recently, documentary evidence has arisen implying that Washington had pressured a reluctant Seoul to the negotiation table with Pyongyang (Park, Park, and Woo 2003). However, the argument depicting the United States as a facilitator of the inter-Korean talks is opposed by the Korean officials who were involved in analyzing and making North Korea policy. Kang In-Duk makes his case that the U.S. influence on Seoul's Pyongyang policy was indirect at best.

There is no denying the fact that the U.S. policy affected ours indirectly. It is a natural thing. It is natural that changes in the U.S. policy had an impact on us. However, it does not mean that we did

what we did because the United States pushed us into inter-Korean dialogue.<sup>22</sup>

Kang argues that the South Korean policymakers came to the conclusion that they needed the conversion of North Korea policy after the Nixon doctrine. South Korea feared that Nixon's new initiative might be followed by a military retreat from Vietnam and the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Korea, and felt the necessity of added flexibility in South Korea's strategy toward North Korea.

At a time when Seoul was sensing the U.S. enthusiasm to deter the communist threat was declining, the Park administration believed that the DPRK's revisionist goals were becoming more explicit. As the direct threat from the DPRK and the fear of abandonment from its close ally were rising, the Park regime decided to take the matter into its own hands. Throughout the dialogue, the ROK kept reminding the United States that its support was essential for a fruitful outcome.<sup>23</sup> The ROK also became suspicious of direct U.S. contact with Pyongyang.<sup>24</sup>

The relationship between the distribution of power and the occurrence of peace is not straightforward. Focusing our interest in a dyadic relationship, balance-of-power theorists argue that an equal distribution of power between the two contributes to stability. The preponderance of power theory posits that a skewed power distribution is associated with peace. Both equal and unequal distribution

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22. An Interview with Kang In-Duk, March 26, 2008. Kim Dal Sul concurs with Kang's point. An Interview with Kim Dal Sul, April 15, 2008.

23. Throughout the dialogue, the ROK kept reminding the United States that U.S. support is essential for a fruitful result. Assistant Secretary Marshall Green assured Park Chung-hee and Lee Hu-Rak of continued U.S. support for the inter-Korean talks (Telegram from U.S. Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, "Assistant Secretary Green's Conversation with ROK CIA Director Lee Hu-Rak, July 6, 1972," July 7, 1972, DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA).

24. "Conversation of ROK Ambassador with Assistant Secretary Green," February 16, 1972, Records of the U.S. Department of State relating to the internal affairs of Japan, 1970-1973, NA.

can be associated with either peace (cooperation) or war (conflict). In the current case, power parity between the two Koreas led to the increase of cooperation on the Korean peninsula. The balance of power between the two compelled the leaders on both sides to seek a room of accommodation and find some time to readjust their strategies toward each other.

The regime change had taken place from an authoritarian regime to a more authoritarian one. The Park coalition of the 1960s showed no interest in approaching or engaging Pyongyang. President Park instead wanted to keep distance from the DPRK and preferred not to get bogged down in unification affairs. The priority set by the Park administration was reducing poverty in South Korea rather than advancing unification. With the dawn of the *détente* era, however, Park Chung-hee's North Korea policy began to be challenged from both inside and outside. Sensing the pressure, some direct and others indirect, President Park ventured moderately scaled and tightly controlled dialogue initiatives with Pyongyang. Nonetheless, from the very beginning, Park Chung-hee did not for a second believe that inter-Korean dialogue would pave the way for national reconciliation and reintegration. Rather, inter-Korean dialogue was a temporary measure to buy peace until the national capabilities of the ROK would overshadow those of the DPRK.

The introduction of the Yusin system all the more necessitated an enemy in order to justify tighter control of society. Inter-Korean dialogue gave an excuse for the rise of a more authoritarian rule but the Yusin regime was not totally dependent on it. Rather, the deepening of peaceful ties would have the continuance of the authoritarian regime style either impossible or irrelevant so inter-Korean dialogue was conveniently situated to buttress the Yusin regime.

President Park made his point clear when he was having a meeting with Assistant Secretary Marshall Green, briefly following the announcement of the July 4 Joint Communiqué. Park Chung-hee explains to his guest that the purpose of inter-Korea dialogue was “to forestall reckless acts by Kim Il Sung” and “to reduce chances of war.” He opined that the “ROK is still suspicious, but wants to make

sincere test of the North's intentions."<sup>25</sup>

President Park did not believe that a long-lasting peace could be achieved through dialogue. On the contrary, he believed in peace obtained by overwhelming power. In this sense, he was a staunch realist and not interested in building a foundation for a liberal peace where contacts, exchanges, communication, and institutions at various levels would promote peace and stability.

## Conclusion

This paper made an effort to test the impact of political shocks on the state's decision to reconcile with its erstwhile adversary. Changes in the threat perception, regime characteristics, and distribution of power all had influence on ROK policymakers during the Park Chung-hee administration. The DPRK's South Korea policy hit a wall because its military adventurism was unable to arouse social unrest in South Korean society or create a schism between the ruling elites and the masses. Kim Il Sung, abandoning his policy of not having direct contact with Seoul's ruling party, the Democratic Republicans, made peace overtures to South Korea. Ultimately, Kim's goal was a complete withdrawal of the U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, which would have created a favorable situation for national unification by indigenous forces.

Park Chung-hee was as calculating as Kim Il Sung in initiating the inter-Korean talks. The external environment of détente opened at an awkward moment for the Park regime. No longer able to depend on a U.S. commitment for the defense of the nation, Park set out the military modernization program as well as the inter-Korean talks. The dialogue was not intended to bring about a stable peace on the Korean peninsula, but to postpone a direct confrontation as long

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25. Telegram from U.S. Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, July 7, 1972, "Assistant Secretary Green's Conversation with President Park Chung-hee, July 6, 1972," DOS Files: Korea, 1970-1973, NA.

as possible.

All in all, the inter-Korean talks progressed without the downgrade of threat perception on either side. This makes a clear contrast with the latter day rapprochement attempts in the 1990s and 2000s. Presidents Roh Tae-woo, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun managed their engagement policy toward Pyongyang under the material conditions of southern superiority. Facing a much-under the material conditions of southern superiority, the South Korean administrations had pride and confidence in inter-Korean relations and correspondingly perceived a low level of threat emanating from North Korea. It was a luxury Park Chung-hee could not afford in the early 1970s.

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