

# Power Transition and Inter-Korean Dialogue in the Early 1970s\*

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## Abstract

*The impact of power transition on inter-Korean rivalry has yet to be thoroughly studied. Interestingly, the period of power transition between Seoul and Pyongyang coincided with an increase in cooperation between the two countries. The main objective of this article is to show how the balance of power shifted in the early 1970s on the Korean Peninsula and to explain why South and North Korea managed to execute dialogue while undergoing power transition. As Seoul was overtaking Pyongyang, the two contenders believed that a peaceful transition was somehow possible. South Korean leader Park Chung-hee became confident of his country's increasing national strength, while North Korea's Kim Il Sung remained optimistic that inter-Korean relations would unfold in socialism's favor. The combination of South Korea's growing confidence and North Korea's optimistic outlook paved the way for transient inter-Korean reconciliation during a period of power transition.*

**Keywords:** power transition, transition peace, inter-Korean dialogue, inter-Korean relations, Park Chung-hee, Kim Il Sung

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## Introduction

Power transitions are common in international relations. History abounds with examples of power transitions at both the major and minor power levels. In 2010, surpassing Japan, China became the world's second largest economy as measured by GDP. Some predict that within a few decades China's economic strength will overshadow even that of the United States. There is ongoing debate regarding the political consequences of China's rise and expected overtaking of the United States (Roy 1994; Brown et al. 2000; Rapkin and Thompson 2003; D. Kang 2003a, 2003–04; Shambaugh 2005).

Power transition theory maintains that transitions are characterized by uncertainty and instability, and in some cases, may result in war (Organski [1958] 1968; Organski and Kugler 1980; Kugler and Organski 1989; Houweling and Siccama 1988; W. Kim 1992; Kim and Morrow 1992; Lemke and Werner 1996; Lemke 2002; Tammen et al. 2000).<sup>1</sup> Even though power transition theory holds that only some transitions between dominant and rising powers lead to war, unfortunately, the popular belief lingers that power transition dynamics are somehow dangerous and closely associated with security competition. Whether power transition leads to war or peace is an important theoretical and empirical question. Yet, the political impact of power transition on the states concerned is still debatable. Thucydides argued that the Peloponnesian War was caused by the rise of Athenian power and the resultant fear in Sparta (Thucydides 1954). However, British global hegemony was assumed by the United States in the nineteenth century without a major clash between the two giants (Qingguo and Rosecrance 2010).

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1. The idea that changing power differentials are somehow associated with war is not unique to power transition theory, but is quite prevalent among some "realist" international relations theories. Leadership long-cycle theory (Modelski 1987; Modelski and Thompson 1996), hegemonic stability theory (Keohane 1984), and hegemonic leadership theory (Gilpin 1981) all share the theme that a dominant state, hegemon, or world power provides the collective good of maintaining international stability and shapes global order in its favor and to its advantage. The erosion of power preponderance is said to be associated with global disorder. For a useful review on power transition, see Levy (1987).

The impact of power transition on inter-Korean rivalry has not yet been thoroughly studied.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the period of power transition between Seoul and Pyongyang coincided with an increase in cooperation, albeit temporarily, between them. South Korea (or the Republic of Korea, ROK) and North Korea (or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) were rivals from their inceptions and remain as such to this day.<sup>3</sup> Inter-Korean rivalry was consolidated with the outbreak of the Korean War. As in any typical rivalry, inter-Korean relations have been marred by repetitive and severe confrontation and mutual animosity. At times, however, the rivalry on the Korean Peninsula has experienced moments of de-escalation and enhanced cooperation.

The origin of inter-Korean dialogue in the early 1970s is by no means an unexplored topic. Many have studied the issue thoroughly and derived plausible and productive explanations. Some emphasize the impact of changes in major power politics (a.k.a. the Nixon shock) on the decision-making of Korean elites on both sides. Others point to the impure motives of South and North Korean leaders to consolidate their own domestic power by exploiting inter-Korean dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, inter-Korean rapprochement was influenced by multiple factors. An alternative explanation that has yet to be explored in detail has to do with the variable of power transition between Seoul and Pyongyang. As such, this article will seek to probe how power transition between South and North Korea influenced inter-Korean dialogue in the early 1970s. In the context of power transition

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2. D. Kang (2003b, 305) opposes the application of power transition theory in analyzing the dynamics of inter-Korean relations on the grounds that "the North was never preeminent over the South." Focusing on GNP per capita and political leaders' perceptions of relative power, among others, I contend that power transition was indeed an important factor influencing inter-Korean relations in the détente period.

3. On the study of rivals and rivalries in international relations theory, see Thompson (1995, 2001), Goertz and Diehl (1993), and Diehl and Goertz (2001).

4. Shim (1998) and Bae (1999) stress the roles and interests of the great powers. H. Kim (1985) argues that President Park Chung-hee initiated dialogue with an aim to strengthen his dictatorial rule in South Korea. Y. Cho (1999) also emphasizes the primary influence of domestic politics. Oberdorfer (2001) and S. Kim (2006) emphasize both the domestic and international factors. See also Ha (2014) and Jo (2014).

between the two Koreas, Seoul's newly-achieved confidence and Pyongyang's persistent optimism paved the way for inter-Korean rapprochement that had been unprecedented up until that time.

### **Power Transition and an Increase in Cooperation**

In general, power transition spells trouble in international politics. Power transition is frequently associated with an increase of uncertainty and confrontation, if not outright war, between contenders. Many consider the transitional period to be unstable because it invites difficulties in gauging the relative power and intentions of enemies, and because fear, uncertainty, and miscalculation often lead to militarized confrontation. The scholarship on power transition has long been aware of the fact that transitional confrontation is contingent on certain risk factors. Though there certainly are other variables, the literature on power transition theory seems to cherish two variables most: the presence of a dissatisfied challenger and a dominant state's preventive motivation.

Concerning the first variable, dissatisfaction arises from the perceived gap between the rising power's own stature and the unfavorable, or even hostile, environment surrounding it. Somehow, an increase in national strength may cultivate self-confidence, instead of grudge and dissatisfaction, in the rising power. Rising powers become proactive in peace negotiations as they become more confident about their strength absolutely and relatively vis-à-vis their declining rivals. They are more likely to propose dialogue, feel comfortable talking to their erstwhile enemies, make compromises with intermittent concessions, and make sincere efforts to produce concrete outcomes. Whereas weak powers are likely to remain timid and reactive in general, rising powers become more audacious in dealing with their counterparts.

A defender's strong motivation for preventive action will be present if it lacks optimism. As a dominant state faces a future wherein it is expected to lag further behind or face worsening situations, it will be more tempted to strike sooner rather than later. By contrast, a dominant power, having an

optimistic outlook that a peaceful and gradual resolution of the pending rivalry issues is still possible, will be less tempted to strike first. The leading power, believing that time is on its side because it can continue to make progress while its opponent will become less hostile and threatening or that the opponent's challenge can be solved through negotiation, will be devoid of preventive motivation.

Contrary to academic and popular expectations, under certain conditions a period of power transition may lead to an increase in interstate cooperation. With the pacific cocktail of confidence and optimism, power transition may lead to transition peace instead of transition confrontation. Transition peace refers to an increase in cooperation and efforts at reconciliation via meetings, proposals, and agreements for reducing tensions and building trust, and increasing transactions of people, goods, finance, and information during the period two rivals are undergoing power transition.

Of course, here we need to be mindful of the role major power politics plays in minor power interactions. It is no secret that the South Korean-North Korean rivalry had been embedded within the US-Soviet rivalry, US-Chinese rivalry, and/or US-Soviet-Chinese triangle. As the major powers in the region at the time were seeking *détente* and did not wish to encounter distractions from minor powers, they pressed the two Koreas to avoid conflict and seek accommodation of their own. This would have had some impact on the behaviors of Seoul and Pyongyang. An offensively oriented Pyongyang would have had to factor in the presence of the US military stationed in South Korea. So Pyongyang's strategy was to create a space that was more conducive to US troop reduction or withdrawal instead of directly challenging Seoul militarily. Pyongyang was optimistic that North Korea's ideological and physical strengths relative to South Korea would be maintained into the future, that it would be able to drive US forces from the Peninsula, and that it could convince the South Korean public to voluntarily reject its leaders.

## The Birth of Inter-Korean Dialogue in the Early 1970s

In the latter half of the 1960s, the DPRK assumed an increasingly militaristic posture toward its archrival to the South. The most notorious manifestations of this include Pyongyang's failed attempt to assail the ROK's presidential residence, the Blue House, in January 1968 and its deployment of a 100-plus commando team to the Gangwon region, in northeastern South Korea, in November 1968. Pyongyang also escalated tensions on the Korean Peninsula by seizing an American spy vessel in the East Sea in January 1968 and downing an American intelligence aircraft in April 1969 (Lerner 2010; Michishita 2010, chap. 2–3).

The DPRK's objective at the time was to destabilize South Korean society and to instigate a military coup or a popular uprising that would bring "patriotic forces" to power. The North Korean military was then to intervene with or without the request of the patriotic faction in order to unify the fatherland. The military hardliners in Pyongyang are said to have prepared a plan to liberate South Korea by early 1970 through a combination of revolution in South Korea and armed intervention by North Korea (Hong 2001, 181–185; Schaefer 2004; Radchenko 2005).

Throughout the 1960s, the Park Administration focused its energies on accelerating economic growth in South Korea. Under the slogan of "growth first, unification later," Park Chung-hee preferred to sideline the unification question altogether. Despite some popular protests for direct contact with Pyongyang, President Park stubbornly defended his "no-recognition, no talk" policy toward Pyongyang. However, as Seoul's economic development programs began to produce some positive results, the Park Administration slowly began to soften its rigid attitude toward Pyongyang, and to seek an alternative North Korean policy.

On August 15, 1970, in his Liberation Day speech, President Park proposed to Pyongyang a goodwill competition between the two states with the aim of testing whose system better served the people. An early draft of the President's August 15 declaration was prepared by the Press Office of the Presidential Secretariat and included more audacious proposals for enhancing inter-Korean relations. The proposal included, for example,

exchanges and cooperation in various areas such as culture, sports, and trade, much of which was toned down significantly due to opposition from the Ministry of Justice. On August 12, 1971, the South Korean Red Cross had made public its proposal to hold inter-Korean talks for the purpose of reuniting families separated during the Korean War, an idea that was accepted by North Korea two days later. The Red Cross proposal had originated from the ideas of the Wednesday Group (Suyohoe), a group of academics and journalists that occasionally proffered informal advice to President Park on international matters, and was studied by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and finally approved by the President (J. Kim 1997, 140–148).

In January 1969, as North Korea's aggressive tactics failed to bear fruit, Kim Il Sung purged the hardliners in the military who were behind the militant offensives against the South and began to make peace proposals. The opening of Sino-American relations in the early 1970s became the background of North Korean-South Korean rapprochement during the same period. Kim Il Sung reasoned that the forthcoming Nixon visit to Beijing scheduled for early 1972 was a sign of weakening American imperial power. He predicted that US forces would have to retreat from South Korea, Taiwan, Indochina, and Japan in due course (Schaefer 2004, 35). In a Pyongyang mass rally welcoming Cambodia's leader Norodom Sihanouk on August 6, 1971, Premier Kim Il Sung announced that "we are ready to establish contact at any time with all political parties, including the [ruling] Democratic Republican Party, and all social organizations and individual personages in South Korea" (Oberdorfer 2001, 12). This proposal represented a dramatic reversal from the DPRK's long-held policy of no recognition and no contact with the so-called repressive and antirevolutionary Park Chung-hee regime.

During the inter-Korean détente in the early 1970s, the two Koreas managed to exchange high-level secret visits and hold a series of Red Cross talks and so-called Coordinating Committee meetings, through which Korean representatives exchanged ideas on expanding inter-Korean communication, solving the humanitarian problem of divided families, promoting cooperation on cultural, political, and economic fronts, and taking

steps to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula and build mutual trust (Suh 1988, 253–260; B. Lee 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Following a series of working-level meetings at Panmunjeom, KCIA Director Lee Hu-rak paid a secret visit to Pyongyang during May 2–5, 1972, which included two rounds of meetings with Premier Kim Il Sung at Kim Il Sung's office Mansudae. While meeting with Premier Kim, Director Lee proposed discontinuing the past practices of slandering and provoking each other using military force. Kim Il Sung and Lee Hu-rak exchanged suggestions for easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula:

Kim Il Sung: Talk to President Park. Let us eliminate the DMZ. If we discuss it well, it can be eliminated.

Lee Hu-rak: Our ultimate goal is to get rid of it. However, for now the important matter is to reduce tensions between the soldiers.

Kim Il Sung: We need force reduction and arms control. . . .

Lee Hu-rak: That is also due to mistrust. Who would want to maintain a large army?

Kim Il Sung: Let us promise not to use military force and to reduce the size of our armies. Then the DMZ will disappear. If we let the current situation continue, an adventurer may set it on fire and things will turn quite dangerous (Munhwabangsong Sisagyoyangguk 2004, 133).

At the time when the two Koreas engaged each other, the level of economic interdependence was virtually nonexistent. However, both states now showed interest in the prospect of gains from future economic cooperation, as the conversation between Kim and Lee reveals:

Kim Il Sung: That is right. And the President's idea of economic exchange is a good thing. We have a lot to do regarding economic expansion or economic development. If we pool our strength, there is no reason

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5. The inter-Korean de-escalation in the early 1970s is meaningful in that it was the first-ever attempt by the two Koreas to make peace with each other. However, it should be noted that Park Chung-hee and Kim Il Sung alike did not believe that they would open the road for enduring peace for and integration between the two Koreas through dialogue. As each side's threat perception and suspicion of the other was still high, the peace on the Korean Peninsula at the time was circumscribed.



why we cannot be better off than Japan. We are trying to develop light industry and we know that the South's light industry is well-organized. The South has the foundation for light industry from the past. We can achieve economic expansion if we buy and sell between ourselves. Without the help of foreign capital, we can do it between ourselves.

Lee Hu-rak: That is the right idea. We can engage in mutually productive trade by buying and selling from each other at adequate prices.

Kim Il Sung: We can become strong internationally when we have the basis for an independent economy (Munhwabangsong Sisagyoyang-guk 2004, 134–135).

In their second meeting in November 1972, Premier Kim again revealed his enthusiasm for potential economic cooperation between the two Koreas. He suggested to Director Lee that the South send its unemployed to the North so that they could help in developing resources abundant in the mountainous North. His interests included elaborate trade proposals, joint fishing, common irrigation projects, joint movie production, and even collaborative historical research and integrated sports teams (Schaefer 2010, 18).

Premier Kim's active proposals may have been triggered by his sense of economic superiority over the South, and he may also have been motivated by the fact that his nation's superiority was fast eroding at the time. Nonetheless, the fact remains that both Koreas felt the need for economic cooperation and sensed that each party would benefit from engaging the other. Even though inter-Korean economic cooperation did not materialize at the time, two Koreas would actually engage in multiple, joint economic projects in the early 2000s.

The DPRK secret mission led by Vice Premier Park Sung Chul paid a reciprocal visit to Seoul during May 29–June 1, 1972 and held talks with President Park Chung-hee and Director Lee Hu-rak. Kim Il Sung's message to Park Chung-hee, conveyed through Park Sung Chul, was that North Korea preferred high-level political negotiations, including a summit between Park Chung-hee and Kim Il Sung, and wanted to push for political unification. South Korea opted instead for a more gradual approach starting with the exchange of people, goods, and letters, building trust and confidence between the two regimes with the intent of turning to political discussions at

the last stage. President Park explained his position to his guests from Pyongyang as follows: “When we take an exam, we solve easier questions first, and then tackle harder ones. South-North talks should advance like this” (J. Kim 1997, 158–160). President Park added that “we need to do it one brick at a time” and recognized the difficulties of establishing peace on the Peninsula by stating that “it cannot be completed overnight” (I. Kang 1993, 377).

Through secret meetings, the two Koreas managed to announce the historic July 4 Joint Communiqué of 1972, which became the harbinger of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement of 1991, the June 15 Joint Declaration of 2000, and the South-North Joint Declaration of October 4, 2007. Article 1 of the Joint Communiqué held that the two Koreas would seek national unification on the principles of independence, peace, and grand national unity. In addition, the Joint Communiqué stressed that the two Koreas would refrain from slandering one another, discontinue military provocations, large or small, take measures to prevent unwanted confrontations, and promote cooperation and exchanges in various fields.

Inter-Korean meetings at the time were filled with ideas and proposals for building trust and mitigating the security dilemma between the two. The two Koreas toyed with the idea of reducing troop levels to 100,000 each, and allocating the resultantly spared resources for economic development. Pyongyang tried hard to push the idea of building a confederation in which both Koreas would have retained their respective political systems. However, Seoul responded to the idea lukewarmly and with suspicion (Schaefer 2010, 18).

### **The Power Shift**

For decades since their respective inceptions in 1948, North Korea had been more industrialized and urbanized than its southern counterpart. Among Asian communist countries, for quite some time North Korea had been viewed as an exemplar of socialist growth. Its industrialization was boosted by Japanese colonial inheritance and postwar assistance from

Soviet Bloc countries. For at least a decade following the Korean War the DPRK saw rapid economic growth with early successes in its recovery programs due to the efficient mobilization of its people and resources, racing ahead of its southern counterpart. In the early 1960s, having been successful in its postwar rehabilitation programs, Kim Il Sung grew comfortable with North Korea's relative superiority over its counterpart. On October 5, 1963, in a speech at the graduation ceremony of the Kim Il Sung Military Academy, he asserted, "We have stopped importing rice for the past five to six years. However, the South Korean government receives agricultural surpluses from the Americans to feed its soldiers" (G. Cho 1991, 380). In his letter to the President of the Korean Affairs Institute in Washington dated January 8, 1965, Kim Il Sung toys with the idea of economic exchange between industrialized North Korea and agriculture-based South Korea, and reveals his willingness to assist underdeveloped South Korea:

Economic exchange between the North and the South will combine organically industry in North Korea with agriculture in South Korea and facilitate the uniform, independent development of the national economy, revive the ruined South Korean economy, and open the door for improving the living conditions of the South Korean people, who are in a dire plight. We have already built a developed industry and agriculture in North Korea and laid the firm economic foundation of an independent state. This provides the economic wherewithal for our nation to live by its own means when the country is unified at a future date. When we rebuilt the economy utterly devastated by the US imperialist aggressors, tightening our belts, we were at all times mindful of the interests and future development of the whole nation. We have not forgotten our compatriots in South Korea even for a moment; we consider it our sacred national duty to help the suffering people in South Korea (I. Kim 1971, 71-72).

About three months later, on April 14, 1965, Kim Il Sung proudly announced the DPRK's economic achievements while delivering a lecture at the Ali Archam Academy of Social Sciences in Indonesia:

On the basis of the nationalization of the key industries that was effected immediately after Liberation, our Party vigorously pushed ahead with

industrial construction, and in the postwar period especially carried out this work on a large scale. In this way we have achieved great success in the creation of a modern industry. The annual rate of growth of industrial production in the ten postwar years from 1954 to 1963 averaged 34.8 percent. Our country's industrial output in 1964 was about 11 times that of the prewar year 1949 and more than 13 times that of the pre-Liberation year 1944. As a result of the rapid growth of industrial production, the proportion of industry in the total value of industrial and agricultural output jumped from 28 percent in 1946 to 75 percent in 1964 (I. Kim 1971, 78).

While Premier Kim's speech was full of self-confidence in Pyongyang's material superiority, President Park, by stark contrast, made a rather dismal observation about the situation of the South Korean economy at the time of his coup in 1961:

I honestly felt as if I had been given a pilfered household or a bankrupt firm to manage. Around me I could find little hope. . . . I had to destroy, once and for all, the vicious circle of poverty and economic stagnation. Only by reforming the economic structure could we lay a foundation for decent living standards (Oberdorfer 2001, 34).

Despite its early successes, by the late 1960s the DPRK began to face difficulties with the economic stagnation and depression that have continued to today. The North was suffering from an aging industrial infrastructure, obsolescent technology, and the inefficacies of the self-imposed self-reliance policy, which severed itself from the benefits of the spread of global technological breakthroughs (Cumings 2004, 185–187). Heavy investment in the military sector began to have negative effects on Pyongyang's economic performance. The Seven-Year National Economic Plan, put forward by the Fourth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in September 1961, was belatedly completed in 10 years.<sup>6</sup>

The slowdown in North Korea's economic performance was in marked contrast to the spurt in South Korea's economic growth in the 1960s and

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6. For the official account of the DPRK's grand strategy for the 1960s, see the Party History Institute of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (1969, chap. 7).

1970s. General Park Chung-hee, as he seized power in the South by fiat, sought his regime's legitimacy through the pursuit of anti-Communist and economic revitalization policies. He meticulously masterminded the nation's development programs, starting with the growth of light industry and then moving on to heavy industry development (Cumings 1997, 322–336; Oberdorfer 2001, 31–37).

With the Nixon Administration's plan to cut the number of US troops in Korea by 20,000 in the early 1970s, the Park Administration made a decision to push for parallel advances in the defense, heavy, and chemical industries while simultaneously launching a five-year military modernization plan. President Park outlined his policy prioritizing the development of the heavy and chemical industries, namely iron and steel, shipbuilding, chemicals, electronics, nonferrous metals, and machinery, in his New Year's address in January 1973 (J. Kim 1995, 322–324; Y. Kim 2005, 457–459).

Under President Park's watch, South Korea transformed its backward, agricultural base into a modern, industrialized machine. Symbolically, the expressway connecting Seoul and Busan was completed on July 7, 1970. The Pohang Iron and Steel Company, South Korea's first integrated steel mill, was built and began operations in July 1973 (Cha 1999, 94–97). The government-led, export-driven economic development programs began to bear fruit and moved Seoul ahead of Pyongyang. In late December of 1978, President Park solemnly declared that "our national strength now overwhelms North Korea's."<sup>7</sup>

At the order of President Park, the North Korea Bureau of the KCIA began compiling data comparing the national competitiveness of the two Koreas, the final result of which came out in 1974. The 1969 interim report indicates that by that year South Korea had surpassed the North in terms of GNP per capita.<sup>8</sup> Kang In-deok, Director of the North Korea Bureau, testified:

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7. Presidential Archives, accessed October 19, 2013, [http://pa.go.kr/online\\_contents/speech/speech02/1306606\\_6175.html](http://pa.go.kr/online_contents/speech/speech02/1306606_6175.html).

8. This result can be contrasted with CIA data, which is more conservative in nature. CIA data indicates that Seoul drew even with Pyongyang in per capita GNP in 1978 (Cumings 2004, 185–187).

In the late 1960s, at the latest, the President became confident about inter-Korean relations. This is a very important matter. At the time of the May 16 Coup in the [early] 1960s, the GNP [per capita] was probably around 80 dollars. However, it was reversed within 10 years. I started to compile a report comparing the economic competitiveness of South and North Korea. The project started in 1968 and the draft was released in 1969. With regard to individual income, according to the report, South Korea was over 200 dollars and North Korea was below 200 dollars. At least the difference was six to seven dollars. What this meant was that in terms of total GNP we doubled that of Pyongyang because our population was twice as big (Munhwabangson Sisagyoyangjuk 2004, 61).

Kang In-deok recollected how President Park was overjoyed by this report. A comparison of the national strengths of the two Koreas at this time shows different results depending on which data you adopt. However, what is critical is how policymakers on both sides calculated and perceived their relative power. A close investigation of the historical records shows that South Korean policymakers at the time sensed that the South had achieved the edge in inter-Korean competition. President Park's chief secretary at the time, Kim Jung-ryum, makes a modest and somewhat qualified observation comparing the two states' relative strengths in his memoir:

If we compare the national strength of the two Koreas as of 1971, South Korea overtook North Korea that had been superior in the 1960s in terms of economic power. However, the gap was not as wide as today. In terms of military power, North Korea was by far stronger than us. In conclusion, we were not able to achieve the supremacy of power that West Germany was enjoying over East Germany (J. Kim 1997, 148).

While South Koreans seemed to increasingly enjoy comparing the two Koreas' relative national strengths with hard data, North Koreans were inversely losing its appetite for such endeavors. They instead alluded to North Korean socialism's moral superiorities and South Korea's structural dependence upon the United States and Japan. The following analysis made by the East German Embassy in Beijing in June 1972 takes a note of an ongoing power shift on the Korean Peninsula. Even to the eyes of the

East German whose country was closely aligned with North Korea, it was becoming clear that Pyongyang was losing ground on the economic front:

Korean unification must be achieved before the economic gap between the ROK and DPRK widens further to the latter's disadvantage. Pyongyang assumed the population in South Korea still to be in favor of reunification, but such might change with rising individual and collective prosperity due to Japanese investment (Quoted in Schaefer 2010, 9).

Kim Il Sung was still of the opinion that a power reversal between the two Koreas would not be realizable since Pyongyang's socialism would continue to make progress as well (NKIDP 2012, 15). Somehow, the reality was that the DPRK's economy was failing to deliver the promised results. Heavy military spending had become a burden on the national economy resulting in a downfall in economic performance. Feeling the strain on his country's coffers, Kim Il Sung wanted to spend less on the military and more on resurrecting the nation's economy. Kim reasoned that easing tensions with Seoul would allow the DPRK to devote its energies and resources to rehabilitating its increasingly inefficient economy. As a prelude to any such rehabilitation, on November 2, 1970, in his report to the Fifth Congress of the WPK, Kim Il Sung lamented that "our national defense has been earned at a high cost." And he regretted:

If we had allotted a portion of what had been spent in the national defense into economic development, the people's economy would have developed faster and the people's living standards would have risen higher (Quoted in G. Cho 1991, 388-389).

Back in December 1962, the WPK Central Committee came up with a resolution stating that the DPRK would "fortify the national defense even at the cost of partially limiting the economic development." Between 1961 and 1966, the DPRK's military spending averaged 19.8 percent of its government budget, and then rose to 30.9 percent between 1967 and 1971. However, in 1972, this heavy-spending trend was reversed as the DPRK officially announced its decision to cut military spending to 17 percent of its annual budget (Hamm 1998, 11, 110, 163). The DPRK changed its course from

self-reliance and a closed economy toward opening diplomatic relations and increasing trade with Western countries, seemingly shocked by the ROK's remarkable growth as witnessed by the visit of DPRK Vice Premier Park Sung Chul's delegation to Seoul in 1972. Pyongyang normalized diplomatic relations with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland in 1973, with Australia, Austria, and Switzerland in 1974, and with Portugal in 1975 (Haruki 2002, 221–222).

The following tables reveal the trends in the comparative strength of the two Koreas.<sup>9</sup> Table 1 compares the overall national capabilities of the

**Table 1.** General Indicators of National Capabilities of the Two Koreas

Year	Population (millions)			GNP (US\$ millions)			GNP per capita (US\$ millions)			Military spending (US\$ millions)		
	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK
1960	24.7	10.6	2.33	2,002	1,265	1.58	81	120	0.68	-	-	-
1961	25.5	10.9	2.34	2,122	1,372	1.55	83	125	0.66	-	-	-
1962	26.2	11.2	2.34	2,266	1,485	1.53	87	132	0.66	-	-	-
1963	27.0	11.5	2.35	2,641	1,616	1.63	98	140	0.70	-	-	-
1964	27.7	11.9	2.33	2,812	1,818	1.55	102	153	0.67	-	-	-
1965	28.3	12.3	2.30	3,005	1,983	1.52	106	162	0.65	110	610	0.18
1966	29.0	12.6	2.30	3,648	2,067	1.76	126	164	0.77	150	620	0.24
1967	29.5	12.9	2.29	4,233	2,328	1.82	143	180	0.79	180	640	0.28
1968	30.2	13.3	2.27	5,057	2,584	1.96	168	195	0.86	230	810	0.28
1969	30.7	13.6	2.26	6,405	2,649	2.42	208	194	1.07	280	830	0.34
1970	31.3	14.0	2.24	7,549	2,920	2.59	242	209	1.16	320	990	0.32
1971	31.8	14.3	2.22	8,754	3,222	2.72	275	225	1.22	360	1,040	0.35
1972	32.4	14.7	2.20	9,822	3,853	2.55	303	262	1.16	440	1,090	0.40
1975	35.3	16.2	2.18	20,900	6,500	3.22	594	415	1.43	960	2,020	0.48
1980	38.1	18.2	2.09	60,500	13,500	4.48	1,592	766	2.08	3,700	3,390	1.09
1985	40.8	20.0	2.04	89,700	15,100	5.94	2,194	766	2.86	4,300	3,500	1.23
1990	42.9	21.7	1.98	242,200	23,100	10.48	5,659	1,064	5.32	9,680	4,960	1.95

*Source:* Data from 1960 to 1972 are from KCIA (1974), with the exception of military spending; data for 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1990 are from Statistics Korea (1995), with the exception of military spending; data for military spending are from KDI (1996).

*Note:* SK = South Korea, NK = North Korea

9. Data on North Korea is quite controversial. A thorough, comparative analysis on North Korean data can be found in Hamm (1998).



two Koreas. South Korea has the edge over North Korea in terms of population and total GNP for the entire observation period. South Korea is twice as populous as North Korea. South Korea's GNP per capita gradually approached that of North Korea, finally overtaking it in 1969, after which the former greatly outpaced the latter. Military spending remained high in North Korea until the late 1970s, but from that time until present day, South Korea has outpaced North Korea in that regard as well.

Table 2 shows that North Korea maintained greater coal and iron ore production than South Korea, whereas the opposite was true in the case of

**Table 2.** Primary Products of the Two Koreas

Year	Grain (millions of tons)			Marine products (x 1,000 metric tons)			Coal (millions of tons)			Iron ore (x 1,000 tons)		
	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK
1960	5.3	3.2	1.66	-	460	-	5.4	10.6	0.51	392	3,108	0.13
1961	5.9	3.8	1.55	448	590	0.76	5.9	11.8	0.50	500	3,549	0.14
1962	5.4	3.7	1.46	-	607	-	7.4	13.2	0.56	470	3,336	0.14
1963	5.7	3.9	1.46	-	653	-	8.9	14.0	0.64	501	3,861	0.13
1964	7.1	4.0	1.78	-	687	-	9.6	14.4	0.67	685	3,923	0.17
1965	7.0	3.9	1.79	-	723	-	10.2	17.9	0.57	735	4,865	0.15
1966	7.6	4.0	1.90	702	760	0.92	11.6	20.0	0.58	789	-	-
1967	6.8	3.8	1.79	750	800	0.94	12.4	21.4	0.58	698	-	-
1968	6.9	4.4	1.57	852	841	1.01	10.2	26.6	0.38	830	-	-
1969	7.7	4.5	1.71	863	885	0.98	10.3	-	-	710	-	-
1970	7.5	4.6	1.63	935	931	1.00	12.4	27.5	0.45	571	6,000	0.10
1971	7.3	5.0	1.46	1,074	996	1.08	12.8	-	-	504	-	-
1972	7.2	5.0	1.44	1,344	1,066	1.26	-	-	-	-	-	-
1975	7.7	4.4	1.75	2,135	1,304	1.64	17.6	20.9	0.84	574	7,500	0.08
1980	5.3	3.7	1.43	2,410	1,700	1.42	18.6	30.3	0.61	545	8,300	0.07
1985	7.0	4.2	1.67	3,103	1,781	1.74	22.5	37.5	0.60	625	9,800	0.06
1990	6.6	4.0	1.65	3,275	1,455	2.25	17.2	33.2	0.52	650	10,300	0.06

Source: Data from 1960 to 1972 are from KCIA (1974); data for 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1990 are from Statistics Korea (1995).

grain production, conditions which can be partially explained by the abundant natural resources in the North and the rich soil of the South. South Korea overtook North Korea in marine yields in the late 1960s. Table 3 most vividly demonstrates that power transition was taking place in the area of major industrial production. South Korea overtook North Korea in the production of automobiles in the late 1960s, in chemical fertilizers in the early 1980s, in cement in the late 1960s, and in electricity in the mid-1970s. A similar pattern is also observed in the amount of steel production, as Seoul overtook Pyongyang in the mid-1970s.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 3.** Industrial Production of the Two Koreas

Year	Automobile (x 1,000)			Chemical fertilizer (x 1,000 tons)			Cement (millions of tons)			Electricity (billions of kwh)		
	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK	SK	NK	SK/ NK
1960	-	3.1	-	-	561	-	0.5	2.3	0.22	1.9	9.1	0.21
1961	-	3.3	-	-	661	-	0.5	2.1	0.24	2.0	10.0	0.20
1962	1.9	3.0	0.63	81	779	0.10	0.8	2.4	0.33	2.3	11.4	0.20
1963	1.8	4.0	0.45	98	853	0.11	0.8	2.5	0.32	2.5	11.8	0.21
1964	1.0	4.0	0.25	141	750	0.19	1.2	2.6	0.46	3.1	12.4	0.25
1965	2.9	7.0	0.41	163	713	0.23	1.6	2.4	0.67	3.7	13.3	0.28
1966	6.9	7.0	0.99	190	878	0.22	1.9	-	-	4.4	12.5	0.35
1967	12.1	7.0	1.73	417	1,200	0.35	2.4	2.8	0.86	5.6	-	-
1968	35.6	7.0	5.09	1,054	-	-	3.6	-	-	6.8	14.0	0.49
1969	45.0	6.7	6.72	1,214	-	-	4.9	3.4	1.44	8.8	-	-
1970	46.6	10.0	4.66	1,277	1,500	0.85	5.8	4.0	1.45	10.5	16.5	0.64
1971	35.3	10.0	3.53	1,291	-	-	6.9	7.5	0.92	12.0	-	-
1972	19.4	10.0	1.94	-	1,840	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1975	166.2	24.0	6.93	1,905	2,550	0.75	11.2	5.2	2.15	19.8	18.3	1.08
1980	366.0	30.0	12.20	3,129	3,110	1.01	22.2	8.1	2.74	37.2	21.1	1.76
1985	644.0	30.0	21.47	3,098	3,514	0.88	25.2	9.0	2.80	58.0	25.2	2.30
1990	1,902.0	33.0	57.64	4,302	3,514	1.22	42.1	12.0	3.51	107.7	27.7	3.89

Source: Data from 1960 to 1972 are from KCIA (1974); data for 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1990 are from Statistics Korea (1995).

10. In steel-production capacity, the Seoul to Pyongyang ratio changes from 0.2:1 in 1965, to 0.4:1 in 1970, 1.0:1.0 in 1975, 2.3:1 in 1980, 3.6:1 in 1985, and 4.3:1 in 1990 (Statistics Korea 1995).

At some point between the late 1960s and 1970s, power parity was achieved between the two Koreas, after which economic growth in the South continued to increase rapidly while that in the North stagnated such that economic competition between the rivals became meaningless. Currently, Seoul's liberal regime is brimming with prosperity and aiming high to enter the ranks of the advanced nations while Pyongyang is struggling to escape the poverty and isolation that have resulted from its failed governance.

### **Confidence and Optimism**

The two Koreas sought reconciliation as the economic gap between them narrowed. South and North Korea initiated dialogue as power transition was occurring on the Korean Peninsula. I contend that South Korea's confidence and North Korea's optimism were two contributing factors to the inter-Korean dialogue in periods of power transition. South Korea's newly-achieved confidence against North Korea as well as North Korea's optimistic outlook that it could maintain its superiority over its archrival and that revolution in South Korea was possible without resorting to military offensive paved the way for inter-Korean reconciliation.

#### *South Korea's Rising Confidence*

As South Korea was catching up with North Korea in terms of economic strength, it grew emboldened and began initiating dialogue with Pyongyang. President Park's message began to take on a positive tone. As early as 1967, in his inaugural speech as South Korea's sixth president, he remarked how he could "observe the birth and eventual spread of the creative self-help consciousness among his people and the bright light of national restoration over the black clouds of stagnation and dependence" (Presidential Secretariat 1973a, 4). Many involved in inter-Korean talks at the time credited Seoul's proposal of goodwill competition under peaceful coexistence, as exemplified by the August 15 Declaration of 1970, to the country's new self-confidence in its heightened national power (S. Woo 2004, 101).

South Korea in the 1970s was determined to maintain its course of rapid economic growth through export-led industrialization. Park Chung-hee was confident that economic growth would become the foundation for eventual democratization and allow Seoul to prevail over Pyongyang in their competition over which system better served its population. For President Park, South Korea's remarkable economic achievement was a testimony to the efficiency and victory of liberalism over communism. In his inaugural speech as the seventh president of the ROK on July 1, 1971, Park Chung-hee revealed his resolution to launch the era of heavy and chemical industrialization, spread the miracle of Hangang river to other four major rivers, export Korean goods across five oceans, and modernize farming and fishing communities. President Park was content with the economic progress achieved since the May 16 Coup and determined to stay the course in the 1970s (Presidential Secretariat 1973b, 3–6). He strongly believed that South Korea's economic growth would convince North Korea to abandon its military adventurism and eventually pave the way for a stable peace on the Korean Peninsula. President Park observed the following at the graduation ceremonies for the National Defense Graduate School on July 20, 1971:

In the mid-1970s when the third five-year economic plan is concluded, I forecast that our GDP will excel that of the North Korean puppet by four to five times, and the conclusion of our military modernization plan will allow us to overwhelm Pyongyang in the military sector as well. By that time, the North Korean puppet will surrender to the unstoppable trend and abandon its illusion of unifying all of Korea by force. Then, we shall be able to proactively approach our goal of peaceful reunification. Now is the time to make preparations for the opportune time (Presidential Secretariat 1973b, 11).

In his speech for Liberation Day ceremonies in 1971, President Park made a solemn remark on the nation's achievements in a relative short period of time:

20 years after [the Korean War], we have made a comeback from the destruction of war, and have accomplished a sparkling achievement of national restoration and modernization by challenging adversity with our

tenacity and creativity. We have now gained enough national strength not to reiterate the tragedy of the past, and we possess confidence and pride that our strength will even continue to grow (Presidential Secretariat 1973b, 34).

Park Chung-hee was of the opinion that economic growth had allowed the Korean nation to regain its lost pride and confidence. On the October 24 (United Nations Day) of the following year, President Park again emphasized his policy of economy first. He urged the nation to cultivate national strength even further, and then to effectively reorganize the amplified strength (Presidential Secretariat 1973b, 302). President Park believed that a strong economy would create a solid foundation for safeguarding South Korea and achieving unification in a timely fashion without resorting to force.

Before dispatching a delegation led by KCIA Director Lee Hu-rak to Pyongyang on April 26, 1972, President Park summoned Director Lee and handed down the “Presidential Directive on the Special Area Dispatch.” The Presidential Directive stated that the ROK delegation should “deal with its counterpart with the firm belief that the national strength of the ROK is absolutely superior to that of the DPRK, and destroy the latter’s illusion” (Munhwabangsong Sisagyoyangguk 2004, 102). Upon returning from Pyongyang in May 1972, Director Lee had a chance to brief President Park on his journey. As he was making a remark on Pyongyang’s seemingly impressive economic achievements, a disgruntled President Park remarked: “The goal of this trip was to show the North that the South is ahead in terms of absolute national capabilities. Instead, you have seen something strange” (Munhwabangsong Sisagyoyangguk 2004, 24–25). At his New Year’s Press Conference of January 11, 1972, President Park remarked on South Korea’s clear superiority over North Korea in all sectors except the military: “To conclude, we overwhelm the North Korean puppet by far in all areas. It is all right to have such confidence and pride. The exception, however, remains the military sector” (Presidential Secretariat 1973b, 111).

Political scientist Min Jun-ki stated in his article that the opening of inter-Korean dialogue and the conclusion of the July 4 Joint Communiqué of 1972 were made possible by the Park Administration’s newly-obtained

confidence.

President Park switched his formerly uncooperative positions and initiated a proposal for political dialogue to North Korea. As a result, we were able to conclude the historical Joint Communiqué. The change was possible, because he became confident that South Korea would be able to best North Korea in multiple aspects of politics, economy, defense, culture, and society as a consequence of the modernizing efforts made by the government and people alike in the 1960s (Min 1972, 104).

This theme was echoed by two scholars two decades later:

It is difficult to discern exactly what prompted President Park's change of attitude in his 1970 declaration, but his overture did reflect confidence in South Korea's national power following the economic construction of the 1960s. In addition, it may be interpreted as Park's attempt to use inter-Korean relations as political leverage in solidifying his authoritarian power base (Park and Lee 1992, 439).

Political scientist Lee Chae-jin again states that “[d]rawing on South Korea's advantageous position due to its growing economic and technological strength, Park initiated a lessening of tensions with North Korea” (C. Lee 2006, 64–65).

President Park's stance toward North Korea switched dramatically at the beginning of the 1970s. Whereas he had remained passive and distanced himself from the idea of contacting Pyongyang throughout the 1960s, he began contemplating direct inter-Korean contacts as the United States and China were courting each other. A newly shaped balance of power between South Korea and North Korea helped Park Chung-hee ease his tough stance toward Pyongyang and seek ways to develop inter-Korean dialogue.

#### *North Korea's Optimistic Outlook*

Even though Pyongyang sensed that Seoul was bearing fruit with its economic development programs, it had conviction that the DPRK was basically superior to the ROK in political, economic, and military terms. Kim

Il Sung was sanguine about the eventual victory of his regime over Park Chung-hee's. His optimistic outlook gave him some solace in realizing that war was nearly an impossible option so long as US troops were stationed in Korea functioning as a deterrent. However, he reasoned that once the US forces withdrew, the South Korean people would oust the Park government and a road to peaceful unification would be open with a new government.

With Sino-American reconciliation blossoming in the *détente* period, North Korea was betting that the gradual withdrawal of American forces from the Peninsula was possible. During his secret visit to Beijing in July and October 1971, US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger sent a positive signal to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai that incremental US troop withdrawal from Korea to a very small number would be feasible once tensions in the Far East were ameliorated. Once US troops retreated from Korean soil, Kim Il Sung calculated that unification would become possible without resorting to military means (Schaefer 2010, 3–11).

David C. Kang is most vocal about the peaceful effect of the US-ROK combined deterrence on the Korean Peninsula when he notes that, "With a clear division between the North and the South and the deployment of US troops, there is no way that North Korea can judge that it will win a war on the Korean Peninsula" (D. Kang 1995, 260; 2003b, 301–324). During a period of power transition on the Korean Peninsula, Kim Il Sung had to face the strong defensive determination of the United States and the ROK. He was also keenly aware that his sponsors, the Soviets and the Chinese, were deeply concerned about entrapment in an unwanted war initiated by a junior partner. Kim could not be certain of the military support of his patrons if hostilities broke out on the Peninsula. As his conviction of military victory grew dimmer, he opted for a gradual takeover of the enemy that did not involve full-scale military confrontation.<sup>11</sup>

Kim Il Sung's appetite for a full-scale military confrontation grew

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11. Levy (1987, 95–107) argues that the strength of preventive motivation is determined by comparing the costs and benefits of delay versus immediate war. For instance, if the probability of victory is high and the expected costs of war low, preventive military action becomes more likely. In the Korean case, it seems that war costs were calculated to be unusually high due to the great powers' involvement.

weaker as the great powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula deemed the status quo most favorable. Kim Il Sung, in a meeting with Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu in Pyongyang on June 10, 1971, admitted that Korean unification was feasible only “by peaceful means” and that any other solution would “trigger a global-scale war.” He opined to his Romanian friend that both China and the Soviet Union would oppose a military solution because neither would want “to get involved in such a confrontation” (Schaefer 2010, 4). Kim Il Sung believed that the overthrow of Park Chung-hee and the establishment of “genuine democracy” in South Korea were achievable without resorting to war:

In the absence of the Americans in South Korea, or of any other foreign forces [like the Japanese], the South Korean people could install a democratic progressive government through its own force, and the establishment of such a government would draw us very close to each other so that, without fighting, we could unify the country (Quoted in Schaefer 2010, 5).

The North Korean leadership was curious about the attitudes of South Koreans toward it and eager to impress them with the “superiority” of the DPRK. One DPRK Foreign Ministry official briefed his guests that when the Northern Red Cross delegation visited Seoul in September 1972, “one million South Koreans had tears in their eyes.” He went on to argue that “The ROK population reveres our leader Kim Il Sung” and “our delegation unmasked the decay of ROK.” He further postulated that South Korean intellectuals would make energetic supporters of the DPRK (Schaefer 2010, 14).

Kim Il Sung was of the opinion that the future still favored the North. To him, South Korea’s economic recovery was only temporal and North Korea remained superior to its opponent on all accounts. He was optimistic rather than pessimistic in the future. As he believed that future events would unfold in his favor, he was spared from rushing into a desperate military solution, but rather able to take the long perspective and seek to create revolutionary moments in South Korea.



## **Conclusion**

Inter-Korean dialogue in the early 1970s did not last long. After constitutional revisions in both North and South Korea in late 1972 and the strengthening of dictatorial powers, Park Chung-hee and Kim Il Sung alike seemed to have lost interest in advancing dialogue between the two Koreas. Both Koreas started to shy away from direct contact as their leaders came to realize little could be gained from its continuance. They were not achieving what they had originally planned: showcasing their own political and economic strengths and unearthing the other's vulnerabilities. Each side stood its ground firm and steady. Pyongyang's sinister plan to unsettle the Park regime from below through the infusion of propaganda was simply hitting a wall. In late August of 1973, Kim Young Joo declared the termination of inter-Korean dialogue. From early 1974, North Korea started to show more interest in opening direct bilateral conversations with the United States, ignoring the ROK. The inter-Korean relationship chilled between November 1974 and October 1978 when South Korea unearthed five North Korean-made underground tunnels along the DMZ that could have been used for clandestine military infiltration.

The main objective of this article has been to explain how the two Koreas managed to execute dialogue in times of power transition. As Seoul was overtaking Pyongyang, the two rivals believed that a peaceful transition was somehow possible. Park Chung-hee became increasingly confident in his ability to face his North Korean counterpart. Meanwhile, Kim Il Sung still possessed the view that inter-Korean relations would somehow unfold in socialism's favor. The combination of confidence and optimism paved the way for a transient inter-Korean reconciliation during a period of power transition.

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