

Relations Between South and North Korea

The peace and continued prosperity of Northeast Asia depend upon a reduction of tensions between South and North Korea.

Since the 1950-53 Korean War, rivalry between South Korea (the Republic of Korea) and North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) has been the focal point of tension in Northeast Asia. The republics maintain hundreds of thousands of troops facing each other across the demilitarized zone, leaving the prospect for stability on the Korean peninsula plagued by uncertainty.

The South has achieved diplomatic triumphs by hosting the 1988 Olympic Games and by establishing diplomatic relations with almost every country in Eastern Europe and with 141 countries worldwide. These triumphs culminated in 1990 when the South established diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. and working relations with China.

The capitalist economy of the South continues to grow at a record pace, while the centrally planned economy of the North remains stagnant. Furthermore, prosperity in the South has permitted it to narrow the North's military advantage.

Although the U.S.S.R. and China have been North Korea's major military and economic benefactors, their new rapprochement with South Korea and their own economic problems have increasingly left North Korea in isolation.

South and North Korea are technically still in a state of war, with no peace agreement to formally end hostilities. The two Koreas remain almost totally sealed off from each other, dividing more than 10 million Korean families. No cross-border travel is permitted; the two sides have no telephone or mail connections; and there is no exposure to each other's television, radio or print media.

However, trade between the North and the South has recently been sanctioned by the two governments. (The South recently proclaimed a law to facilitate inter-Korean trade.) Trade volume remains limited – only \$22 million in 1989.

Although little has been achieved in various sporadic talks between North and South, there is some recent reason for hope. Since September 1990, the prime ministers of both republics have met three times. There has been no such senior-level contact between the two Koreas since before the Korean War. The meetings, however, have not produced breakthroughs as yet.

The South has maintained its position that the first step in improving relations should be modest confidence-building measures. The South believes that a basic agreement, incorporating specific measures such as an exchange of family visits, free correspondence, and mutual access to radio and television broadcasts must be reached before the political and military issues in a non-aggression pact can be taken up.

The North continues to insist on signing a sweeping non-aggression declaration before moving to discuss specific confidence-building measures. The North's traditional approach to discussions has been to focus on the continued presence of U.S. military forces in the South as the primary impediment to better relations.

In the absence of any major agreement on strategic issues, the two sides continue to exploit sports diplomacy. They struck an unprecedented agreement in February 1991 when they agreed to send unified sports teams to two international athletic events. And, recently, the two sides agreed to seek membership in the UN this year, ending decades of confrontation on this issue.