

**The Cross-Strait and Inter-Korean Relationships  
in a Comparative Perspective:  
Lessons for Conflict Prevention and Management**

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Under what conditions would the antagonistic powers cooperate with each other? This crucial question, which has long puzzled IR scholars and statesmen alike, has taken on a new relevance in the post-Cold War era. For one thing, the absence of the strategic triangular structure in the post-Cold War international system would not only provide more clues for the conditionality of international cooperation but it would also clarify the nexus between domestic and international politics. For another, now that a domestic consensus exists everywhere as to economic primacy as well as to conflict prevention and management—or more broadly tension reduction, it is intellectually interesting and practically important to explore the question of how the new factors would affect state behavior. For still another, would the new patterns of interactions between domestic and external factors offer clues on future cooperation in such divided and antagonistic relationships as the inter-Korean and cross-Strait ties?

This brief essay attempts to shed some light on the above-mentioned set of questions by comparing and contrasting the two sets of the dyadic relationship—one between mainland China (PRC) and Taiwan (ROC) and the other between North Korea (DPRK) and South Korea (ROK). It is trite yet true to note that the two sets of bilateral relationships differ from each other in great many respects. Included in this category are the origins of their division, their political systems, their social values, and their international status. In the case of the cross-Strait ties, moreover, the PRC has adamantly insisted that it be an “internal affair,” not an interstate relationship. These differences, among others, virtually guarantee that their future paths—as well as any measures of conflict prevention and management—would also diverge from each other, making exceedingly difficult any genuine comparison of the two cases.

At the same time, both cases have witnessed a long period of system competition, a *de facto* recognition of the other side, a growing importance of the economic factor, and the continuing influence of the U.S. and other external factors. While there are differing degrees of progress across issue-areas, both cross-Strait and inter-Korean relations can be said to have reached a new *modus vivendi* in living with each other. Additionally, the rising influence of the domestic and other factors (e.g., China)—especially in the post-Cold War era—turns out to be a new feature affecting all cases.

In short, while this essay has advisedly looked into the possible avenues of cooperation, it did not intend to slight or ignore the fundamental differences in mutual perceptions, “issue positions,” and longer-term goals of the powers under examination. Nor does this work support the position of one side against that of the opposing one. For instance and more pointedly, the PRC would not even accept and has not accepted Taiwan’s formal appellation—that is, the ROC, as it denotes the latter’s sovereign status in the international system. The author will do in this essay everything humanly possible to avoid such normative questions. Additionally, while both inter-Korean and cross-Strait relationships cut across several identifiable yet overlapping contexts (e.g., Sino-U.S. relations, U.S.-Japan alliance, and the “rise of China) that will help shape Asian prosperity and security, this essay will focus only on the changing domestic, bilateral, and external contexts of the two cases in a way and to an extent that our theoretical and practical understanding of conflict prevention and management can be enhanced.

## **Changes in the Domestic Context**

### ***The End of Ideological Competition***

When locked in an ideological competition, divided political entities are prone to have extremely strong desire for unification and take radical and confrontational approaches to achieve it. For the sake of personal authority and regime legitimacy, moreover, their leaders often resort to the ammunition of national unity in conducting domestic and foreign policy. The combination of an intense ideological competition and an elite power struggle not only often leads to military tension but also leaves little room for the development of economic and social ties with each other.

During the Cold War both cross-Strait and inter-Korean relations were subject to such an intense ideological and power struggle against their respective enemies. “Liberating Taiwan,” for instance, remained high on Mao Zedong’s political agenda, so did “recovering the mainland” on Chiang Kai-shek’s. In a similar vein, Kim Il Sung and his counterparts in South Korea were preoccupied with unbridled mutual competition and antagonism. It was only after the passing of the revolutionary leaders and the onset of the pragmatic leadership did non-political ties begin to develop. This observation seemed to bear out both in cross-Strait exchanges since the late 1980s and in the high-level inter-Korean talks in the early 1990s.

A corollary argument is that a minimum level of one side’s acceptance of and/or acquiescence on the other’s system and ideology is required for on the part of the leadership. Once such changes in leadership perception are in place, it becomes possible to put pragmatic factors over ideological ones, which in turn make possible new policy mechanism to deal with the changes. Put differently, two factors must be principally considered in understanding changes in external behavior: the level of a political entity’s motivational intensity and the existence of external threats to or opportunities for that entity. From these two factors we can generate useful and testable hypotheses concerning the possibilities of foreign policy changes in each case.

As an illustration of this point, it can be argued that China’s motivational systems among the lines of ideology, security, and economy (mostly in the Cold War era) did make dramatic shifts with the onset of the reform and open-door policy in the 1980s. At the risk of oversimplification, China had upheld its policy priorities in the descending order of economy, stability, and security throughout the reform era—with the glaring exception of the Tiananmen period. A similar line of logic can be applied to Taiwan, South Korea, and to a lesser extent North Korea, as all of them have also undergone extraordinary changes in their domestic and external contexts. In particular, now that such paramount leaders as Deng Xiaoping (February 1997) and Kim Il Sung (July 1994) have passed away, both China and North Korea have entered a period of great and sustained uncertainty, with various but important implications for regional stability.

### ***Separation of Political and Non-Political Dimensions as well as of the Governmental and Non-Governmental Levels***

While a *de facto* recognition of the other system has served as the beginning of a new relationship in cross-Strait and inter-Korean ties, it is often insufficient to crack the long-running inertia ridden with suspicion and insecurity. Thus, the separation of politics from other dimensions as well as of governmental- from civilian-level contacts prove to be a useful momentum that can move forward a new dynamics into a fuller scope of mutual exchanges. Similarly, working on non-political and non-governmental dimensions remain significant measures of conflict prevention and management at a later stage, as long as they are able to detour or avoid a host of sensitive issues (i.e., sovereignty, legitimacy, and territory) which could put the burgeoning ties in jeopardy.

In terms of non-political and non-governmental contacts, it is well known that the cross-Strait ties have not only preceded the inter-Korean exchanges, but the former has also achieved a far greater outcome than the latter. It is equally well known that one of the most fundamental paradoxes in cross-Strait relations has been their growing economic and social interactions, even if mainland China continues to be Taiwan's foremost source of threat to its national security and international status. Beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing in the 1990s, Taiwan businessmen have responded to the changing economic realities in Taiwan and the mainland to such an extent that mainland China has now become Taiwan's largest export market, the number one trading partner, and the top recipient of Taiwan's outbound capital flow.

The expansive nature of their economic and social ties is quite remarkable in light of the occasional tensions, the suspension of official and semi-official contacts, and mutual denigration of the other side's ruling authority. The rapid unfolding of the action-reaction, or "overaction-overreaction" pattern, was caused by a variety of factors. They include the so-called "economic convergence and political divergence" in cross-Strait relations, the leadership transition in mainland China, Taiwan's democratization, fluctuating Sino-U.S. relations, and the challenges and opportunities created by the end of the Cold War. While it is conceivable that all or most of these variables have influenced the events in a complex and interactive manner, it is doubtless that Taiwan's democratization has had a lingering impact on the course of events across the Taiwan Strait.

Compared with the cross-Strait ties, the inter-Korean relationship has maintained a much longer period of official contacts, resulting in formal agreements, exchange of official delegations, and a formal MCBM mechanism. The Agreement between North and South Korea on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchange and Cooperation, which became effective in February 1992, is one example. The well-publicized North-South Korean summit in June 2000 is another. Both of them can be considered as additional CBMs which reaffirm the existence of the other system.

While the effectiveness of such formalities remain disputed within South Korean society, non-political and non-governmental contacts between the two Korea are of recent origin and, compared with the cross-Strait ties, have been modest in terms of its scope and depth. Furthermore, it is an open secret that the "unofficial and non-political contacts" between the two Korea have been heavily controlled by their respective government unlike those of the cross-Strait relationship.

### ***Democratization, Indigenization, and Pluralization***

Most analysts agree that the ongoing process of Taiwan's democratic pluralization has had a direct bearing on the cross-Strait dynamics. Since the last years of Chiang Ching-kuo, the mainlander-dominated KMT leadership has allowed Taiwan businessmen to conduct indirect trade with the mainland; tolerated the formation of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP); and lifted martial law and a ban on travel to the mainland. The process of Taiwan's democratization and/or Taiwanization, however, began in earnest in the first four years of Lee Teng-hui's presidency, 1988-1992.

In a similar vein, the South Korean economy achieved the world's fastest growth; and its annual average GDP growth in 1980-1991 was 9.4 percent. Its economic success not only bolstered its confidence in dealing with North Korea, but aided the rapid expansion of political liberty and democracy since the late 1980s. The inauguration of the Kim Young Sam administration in February 1993, the first civilian president since 1961, is widely believed to be the beginning of a new political era. It is also no coincidence that the above-mentioned Agreement between the two Koreas was made in this period.

In particular, a combination of several major but unrelated events in South Korea changed the political atmosphere in the early 2000s. They are the June 2000 North-South Korean summit, the 2002 World Cup Football Games, and the accidental killing of two young school girls by U.S. military vehicle in the same year. During South Korea's rapid transition to democracy, indigenization, and pluralization (in terms of society and ideology), the U.S. was exactly the focus of such a debate among several quarters of South Korean society. The selection of candidate Roh Moo-hyun as president, the accompanying debate between "national coordination" (between North and South Korea) and "security alliance (between the U.S. and South Korea), as well as the new yet continuing social cleavages along the wider ideological spectrum are manifestations of expanded democracy as well as of indigenization.

There are also structural constraints owing to the nature of their political system. North Korea's perceptions of external threat, its will to reform its economy, and its actual policies toward South are indicative of its leadership's ambivalence, apprehension, and angst on the unbounded expansion of North-South exchanges and cooperation. In contrast, a confident China has been far more open to expansion of social/economic contacts across the Strait and has offered a host of privileges to Taiwanese investors. As a weaker party in the dyadic relationship, the Taiwan government has long tried to control the cross-Strait exchanges and investment—without much apparent success. It points, among others, to the need to enhance confidence that a greater exchange would not jeopardize the other's political, economic, and social system.

### **The Continuity and Change in External Factors**

#### ***The Continuing Importance of International Status and External Strategies***

The continuing importance of the external factors comes from several sources. For one, their respective divisions and its future resolution, if ever, have something to do with external factors. For another, their ongoing exchanges and cooperation in non-political

and nongovernmental fields have touched upon and will inevitably raise the sensitive issues of political legitimacy and sovereign status—in the international context. For still another and not the least important source is that the distinction between the domestic and external dimensions are increasingly blurred in the post-Cold War era.

The question of international status also distinguishes the cross-Strait ties from the inter-Korean relations. Put simply, China still regard Taiwan as “its own province” and its ties with the latter as an “internal affair,” whereas both North and South Korea take the other as a *de facto* sovereign state in their bilateral ties and are formal member-states of the UN. It is in this context of sovereign status in the eyes of the international community, against which the disputed “one-China” principle tops the political agenda in the cross-Strait relationship.

In spite of the towering international barriers imposed by Beijing, on the other hand, Taiwan for its part has an impressive array of diplomatic assets to employ in its international competition with mainland China, including its democratic political system, “pragmatic diplomacy,” economic might, unofficial but extensive ties with the West, and talented human resources. Being well aware of mainland China’s strategic advantages, Taiwan has pursued a multi-front, multi-level strategy aimed at greater international recognition, a wider participation in international and regional organizations, and a more extended interpretation of unofficial ties.

Most disturbing to the Beijing leadership, however, has been Taiwan’s strides in promoting ties with the West, particularly the United States. Bounded by the unofficiality of relations in the Western countries, Taiwan has made extensive contacts with their non-executive branches at the national level or government offices at the subnational levels, and cultivated ties with opinion-makers in the media, socio-economic groups and academia. The effectiveness of Taiwan’s subtle but substantive diplomacy was further amplified when compared with Beijing’s heavy-handed approach, limited nonofficial contacts, and inadequate diplomatic sophistication, let alone its controversial human-rights records. Viewed in this perspective, one major root cause of the cross-Strait tensions has been the continuing struggle between Taiwan and mainland China for legitimacy and status in the international arena.

### *The Ubiquitous America Across the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula*

### *The Influence of Sino-U.S Relations and the “Rise of China”*

## **Looking Ahead**

Both cases had experienced a long period of mutual hostility and system competition with each other until the new pragmatic leaderships foresaw the benefits of expanding economic and other non-political ties with each other. Coupled with the changing international trend-line, both sets of relationships have tried to decrease the transaction costs incurred because of the continuing suspicion and confrontation with each other. While such unresolved issues as Taiwan’s international status and North Korea’s nuclear

gambit remain essential to the future ties with their ethnic brethren, both cases also share similar constraints and challenges in the years ahead.

In particular, a “Taiwanized” Taiwan and a “Koreanized” South Korea have both faced with an unprecedented level of social cleavages and ideological/policy confrontation in pursuing its mainland policy and its North Korea policy, respectively. For Taiwan and South Korea it seems imperative that they come up with a political consensus in their respective policies so as to secure their effectiveness and stability. It is well known that their respective policies toward the mainland and North Korea have long ceased to be the domain for a handful of political leaders and strategies. In fact, they are now commonly reviewed and scrutinized by the National Assembly/Legislative Yuan and the inquisitive media.

While the unification-independence divide within Taiwan society has been a deep-seated one, South Korea’s cleavages in the political, social, and even academic communities are definitely of recent origin, harkening back to the North-South Korean summit in June 2000. In a sense, the summit seemed to have generated seeds of South-South division at a time when the U.S-South Korean security ties were in transition. In other words, both experiences in Taiwan and South Korea indicate the hazardous roads to reconciliation and exchanges, especially when a domestic consensus is absent. The end results of such policy turnaround have been the politicization and even polarization of policy debate that have nothing do to with the issues at hand. In the years ahead, this will constitute the most challenging tasks not only for their respective leaderships but also for conflict prevention and management.

Note: All references used in the manuscript can be obtained from the author.