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## THE MARIANNA MCJIMSEY AWARD

# Sunshine: Bright Over Decades

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This paper analyses three cases over the history of North and South Korea's formal relations to argue that despite Seoul's official changes to its diplomatic policy towards Pyongyang, the core principles of the sunshine policy as articulated by Kim Dae-jung have been present throughout Seoul's actions and rhetoric since the formal initialization of North-South relations in 1971.

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**Keywords:** North Korea; South Korea; Sunshine Policy; Diplomacy; Korean Peninsula; Korea

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## **Introduction**

Inhabiting opposite sides of one of the most militarized borders on earth, both Seoul and Pyongyang hold vested interest in maintaining peaceful diplomatic relations with one another. The Korean North and South have transitioned from refusing to recognize each other as legitimate countries—thereby placing responsibility for improved relations entirely on the other party—to more frequent attempts at diplomatic negotiation and economic sanctions as means of deescalating tensions on the peninsula and working towards the mutually-desired goal of reunification. Onlookers outside of the peninsula may have the impression that the essence of the sunshine policy—essentially Seoul's efforts to engage with Pyongyang in the name of diplomacy—did not begin until the inauguration of Kim Dae-jung, in February 1998, and came to an end with the election of Lee Myung-bak in 2007. I argue here, however, that the core components of the sunshine policy have been present in Seoul's approach to North-South negotiations in some form since the initialization of diplomatic negotiations in 1971, and that this core has endured throughout Seoul's fluctuations in official diplomatic policy towards the North. In fact, I argue that while it has been influenced by the administrations of South Korea's successive presidents as well as by the changing views of the South Korean population itself, the core of the sunshine policy has endured throughout the North and South's diplomatic history. In my examination of the persistent yet adaptable sunshine policy, I will refer to three cases: the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks under the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan; the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit under Kim Dae-jung; and the 2015 Panmunjom talks under Park Geun-hye.

## **The Sunshine Policy**

First officially articulated by Kim Dae-jung, the sunshine policy was Seoul's official foreign policy towards Pyongyang from 1998 to 2007. The policy was aimed at greater engagement with Pyongyang through broader economic commitment and the establishment of regular South-North dialogues and summits aimed at the normalization of relations between Seoul and Pyongyang. For Kim, the sunshine policy was a framework that Seoul could operate under while moving towards the mutually

desired goal of a peaceful resolution to the issues on the peninsula, and eventual reunification. The sunshine policy is and has always been contingent on reciprocation from Pyongyang. Though officially articulated by Kim, the sunshine policy came about as a result of earlier lessons learned from the turbulent history of North-South relations. Among these were the convictions that “deterrence alone is not enough,” that “efforts to engage North Korea should include significant economic and humanitarian components,” and that “a summit is essential” (Levin and Han 2002, 10–11). The core values of the sunshine policy continue to be the separation of economics from politics through the exchange of aid, a belief in the necessity of communication between Seoul and Pyongyang, the requirement of mutual engagement, and a continued desire for peace on the peninsula. It is these core values that characterize the sunshine policy as I see it, rather than the title coined by Kim Dae-jung.

### **The Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks**

The Inter-Korean Red Cross talks marked an official start to the diplomatic relationship between Seoul and Pyongyang, one that would come to be characterized by the core principles of the sunshine policy. Despite the August 15, 1970, speech by South Korea's then-dictator-president Park Chung Hee expressing a willingness to acknowledge the existence of the North, Pyongyang and Seoul faced a rocky start to mutual engagement. Initial negotiations, started in 1971 and facilitated by the Red Cross, came to a deadlock after two years, and negotiation attempts in the decade afterward largely failed. The two countries tried again, from 1979–80, and again under Chun Doo-hwan, from 1981–83, but came to an impasse and found it impossible to maintain negotiations. The 1984 talks also reached a deadlock in 1986, after which contact resumed in 1987 (Kwak 1988, 251). Given two decades of each nation denying the legitimacy of the governmental body residing over the other half of the peninsula, the fact that North and South Korea persist in diplomatic talks is symbolic of their mutual desire to engage with each other and work together to find a peaceful solution to the multilayered issues on the peninsula.

This turbulent history only serves to emphasize the importance of the outcome of these talks. The Inter-Korean Red Cross talks consistently demonstrated a concrete

mutual desire to “reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula, build mutual trust, and eventually achieve the peaceful unification of a Korea” (Kwak, 25). Despite these good intentions, however, tensions between the two countries proved difficult to overcome, as Seoul and Pyongyang repeatedly met with several obstacles in achieving normalization of relations and fulfillment of these mutual goals. Firstly, Seoul and Pyongyang did not resolve their conflicting official approaches to the reunification of the peninsula. Secondly, Seoul and Pyongyang unsurprisingly had different conditions for the continuation of diplomatic negotiations, with neither side willing to concede in the name of cooperation between nations. Third, North Korea remained unwilling to open its society to both the South and to the global system at large. And finally, the presence and role of the United States remained a contested issue between the two capitols (Kwak, 251–252). However, Seoul’s willingness under Chun to shift to a more open negotiating position symbolized a departure from the past and the beginning of an evolving position that would later be known as the sunshine policy.

Though not yet given the name “sunshine policy,” the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks saw the initial stages of what would later be given this name in Seoul’s gradual approach to the issues of the peninsula despite an aggressive “political-military-revolutionary” policy from Pyongyang (Kwak, 251). These negotiations saw Chun urge “that the ‘unnatural relations’ between the two Koreas be brought to an end and replaced with ‘normal contacts that promote the national well being’ ... based on fully ‘normalised relations,’” and pushed to “promote a broad range of North-South exchanges and cooperation, including in trade, transportation, communications, and many other areas” (Chun quoted in Levin and Han, 7). The Inter-Korean Red Cross talks under Chun showcased an administration that had learnt from the ineffectiveness of a hardline approach where any shift was contingent on concessions from Pyongyang. Though Seoul continued to take a hardline position in the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks through an insistence on the presence of U.S. troops and maintenance of the Korean Armistice Agreement (Kwak, 251), the 1984 exchange of material aid demonstrated Seoul’s growing willingness to engage Pyongyang with sunshine.

## The Inter-Korean Summit

The Inter-Korean Summit under Kim Dae-jung appeared to many outside the peninsula to be the culmination of Kim's articulated "sunshine policy." The summit ushered in a new age of optimism regarding the prospect of peace and reunification on the peninsula. On June 13, 2000, in Pyongyang, the leaders of South and North Korea met in person for the first time. "It appeared that Kim's 'sunshine policy' of engagement with North Korea was working: for the first time Koreans were determining their own fate without interference from the major powers" (Lee 2002, 166). Many observers viewed this historic first meeting between the leaders of hostile nations as encouraging hope for the peninsula, brought about by Kim Dae-jung's willingness to engage with North Korea as a body separate from its politics. As I have pointed out, however, such interaction was not a new phenomenon, but rather a culmination of the initial engagement of Pyongyang in the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks under Chun, and the developments made by subsequent leaders, such as Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam.

What was notable about the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit, however, besides the historical nature of the meeting, was Seoul's arrangement with Pyongyang through the framework of five "tasks for lasting peace on the Korean peninsula" (Lee Chang-sup quoted in O'Neil 2001, 56). These included the "implementation of the 1991 inter-Korean Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation" and "increased inter-action between Seoul and Pyongyang" (O'Neil, 56). The summit also resulted in the joint signing of an agreement committing both sides to "promoting reconciliation, cooperation, and reunification on the Korean peninsula" and containing articles such as an "agreement to resolve the issue of reunification independently from external influence," an "agreement to develop closer economic links and strengthen mutual confidence by cooperation and exchanges 'in all fields'; and [an] agreement to 'hold dialogues as soon as possible' to implement the preceding... points" (O'Neil, 59). Finally, the summit resulted in the establishment of a direct military hotline to facilitate de-escalation of potential crises at the DMZ.

In the face of domestic pressure, Kim made sure to emphasize that military deterrence would still be utilized if necessary. However, the summit provided concrete evidence for Kim to justify the now-articulated sunshine policy. Despite persistent criticism, Seoul's official era of a defined sunshine policy did produce concrete results, like the leaders' meeting, the direct hotline, and the establishment of the joint five principles. The talks reflected a continuation and development of the core principles established in the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks, such as a willingness to separate economics from politics and the projection of an officially announced desire to engage in productive talks to peacefully reunite the peninsula. Like the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks two decades earlier, the Inter-Korean Summit did not actually produce an outcome vastly different from any that had come from earlier diplomatic engagement. However, the summit remains important in its symbolic significance to both Seoul and Pyongyang, as well as to the international community.

### **The Panmunjom Talks**

The Panmunjom talks occurred in quite a different context from either the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks or the Inter-Korean Summit. These high-level talks took place August 22–25, 2015. In the wake of exchanged artillery fire along the DMZ and the declaration of a semi-war state from Pyongyang, the atmosphere was tense. The Panmunjom talks, unlike the two cases outlined above, show Seoul's actions under Park in a crisis situation during which Pyongyang had deployed the majority of its submarines while talks were underway (Choe 2015). Despite these significant challenges, the talks managed to produce concrete positive results. Both parties “agreed to hold meetings between government authorities at an early date, arrange reunions of separated families... , hold working-level Red Cross meetings in early September, [and] boost non-governmental exchanges in a wide range of fields” (Ministry of Unification 2015). The talks also saw concessions from both the North and the South, as Pyongyang expressed a “regret” over the artillery fire and Seoul agreed to cease the projection of propaganda from loudspeakers at the DMZ, at least for the time being (Panda 2015).

It may be difficult to see how the sunshine policy could be present in the crisis negotiations of Park's administration—an administration that officially continued

Lee Myung-bak's renouncement of Kim's sunshine policy. However, in the joint agreement produced at Panmunjom there is a level of continuity that can be clearly observed in the peaceful conclusion of the talks. The harkening back to the importance of North-South meetings, the desire for "non-governmental exchanges" through the separation of politics and economics, and the importance of family reunions echo the outcomes of both the Inter-Korea Red Cross talks and the Inter-Korean Summit. Furthermore, the significance of the concessions of both Seoul and Pyongyang recall Seoul's willingness to compromise in order to advance relations with Pyongyang that began in the 70s with the Inter-Korean Red Cross talks. At first glance these aspects may appear unaffiliated with the sunshine policy, but it is important to remember that this policy itself deserves much of the credit for the creation of an atmosphere and context within which Seoul and Pyongyang could meet and begin to come to a peaceful resolution in this crisis situation.

### **Changing Light: Differences in the Sunshine Core**

I have argued throughout this paper that the core principles of the sunshine policy have remained in Seoul's negotiation strategies with Pyongyang since the initialization of diplomatic relations in 1971. This does not mean, however, that the external manifestation of this core has remained consistent. Here I will focus on two factors that hint at the shifting external manifestations of the sunshine policy—firstly, the goals of different South Korean administrations and presidents, and secondly the changing views of the South Korean population in respect to North Korea.

It is clear that despite the consistent expression of its core, the sunshine policy was most clearly and publicly promoted after its articulation and propagation by Kim Dae-jung. As I have argued above, this is not because the principles of the policy were only present during Kim's administration, nor is it because Kim had only thought of the policy after he became president. As a political figure, Kim was sentenced to death and almost assassinated by more than one of South Korea's military dictators. Though he was a known figure before his own administration, the sunshine policy itself was only articulated and propagated to the level of international recognition once Kim came into office. It is fair to conclude then that Kim's personal convictions



and ambitions for his administration and the South Korean nation were the cause of the proliferation of the sunshine policy. From 1971, South Korean dictators initiated and then continued to operate loosely following the core values of what would later become known as the sunshine policy, out of a recognition that peaceful engagement with North Korea was the only viable alternative to high tensions and conflict on the peninsula. However, it was Kim's own insistence on making the "reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea a top priority of his administration" (Levin and Han, 23) that propelled the sunshine policy to its stature during his time as president, ushering in what many across the globe saw as a new era in North-South relations.

In her administration, Park Geun-hye has emphasized her policy of "trustpolitik" as a way to engage with North Korea as well as a domestic policy. This policy is viewed internally and internationally as being tougher on Pyongyang than Kim's sunshine policy, but I would argue that in fact Park's trustpolitik contains the core of the sunshine policy within it. Park's trustpolitik emphasizes a "greater focus on ordinary people and civil society" and an insistence that "South Korea will not let the actions of North Korea's leaders impact Seoul's humanitarian policies towards ordinary citizens" (Keck 2013). This emphasis on engagement of the people instead of the political leaders of the North can be easily reworded into the sunshine policy's core principle of separating politics and economics. Furthermore, Park's emphasis on trust between nations can be equated to the sunshine policy's requirement of reciprocation from Pyongyang. It is true that Park's trustpolitik also stresses punishment for provocation, but so does the sunshine policy in its statement that hardline action will be taken in a situation that requires it. Park's trustpolitik is a reiteration of the core principles of the sunshine policy under a new and more authoritative name than Kim's (an allusion to Aesop's Fables), and thus trustpolitik is free of the negative connotations that Kim's sunshine policy now holds with people both in South Korea and abroad.

The South Korean people did not always have the ability to influence Seoul's policy towards Pyongyang. During the military dictatorships of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan, during which the Inter-Korea Red Cross talks occurred, national security was equated with the "militarization of South Korea's politics, economy, society, and

culture" (Levin and Han, 17). For Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan, it did not matter what the people believed, and public debates tended to focus more on issues of democratization rather than the reunification of the peninsula (Levin and Han, 17). After the Inter-Korean Summit, however, observers marked a "substantial reduction in South Koreans' explicit and implicit national attitudes" (Kim, 167) towards a democratic South Korea. This decrease in interest, though not observable in 2002, is very expressive of the constant shifts in North-South relations, and is heavily influenced by this fluctuation. When the sunshine policy was popular with the South Korean people it contributed substantially to Kim's election, but the subsequent decline in public favor assured the abandonment of the official policy by Lee Myung-bak.

Data compiled in 2015 by the Asian Institute for Policy Studies shows that South Koreans rate the Park administration's policy towards the North as more hardline than previous administrations' (save for Lee's), and that the majority of South Koreans prefer a hardline policy towards the North. In the view of the South Korean population, Kim's articulated sunshine policy does not fit this description (Kim, Friedhoff, Chungku, Euicheol 2015, 20–22). The data, however, also show that South Koreans believe in the necessity of a South-North summit and, further, that the majority of the population desires the resumption of Mt. Geumgang tours, in itself a form of economic engagement initiated through Kim's articulation of the sunshine policy. The South Koreans also express a hope for the continued reunion of separated families (Kim, Friedhoff, Chungku, Euicheol, 25–29). In other words, there is a dichotomy between the perceived and actual core principles of the sunshine policy. Though in 2015 the South Korean public was not in favor of Kim's sunshine policy, they proved in fact to be quite amenable to the independent aspects that make up its practical essence.

## **Sunshine Continued**

In conclusion, the core of the sunshine policy has been present in some form since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Pyongyang. Though this core has remained a consistent part of negotiations, the manifestation of this framework has changed over time due to factors such as changes in South Korean

administrations and public opinion of the South Koreans themselves. Through the consistent expression of the core of the sunshine policy, the same desires and diplomatic resolutions have been expressed in different ways over the past five decades. However, as was true in the Inter-Korean Summit, the repetitive nature of the rhetoric used in North-South diplomatic negotiations does not mean that significant progress has not been made. The relationship between Seoul and Pyongyang has improved greatly since 1971. Furthermore, such reiteration is necessary in the context of North-South relations simply because this relationship is not stagnant. On the contrary, despite the turbulent shifts and frequent escalation of tensions between these two bordering nations that have yet to sign a peace treaty, North and South Korea have always successfully returned to a point of peace and a reiteration of mutual desires thanks in large part to the South's adherence to the core of the sunshine policy. I predict that North-South relations and negotiations will continue as they have in the past, with reiteration of mutual desires and willingness to compromise to small but increasingly larger degrees. As history has shown, Seoul is unlikely to depart drastically from the core of the sunshine policy any time soon.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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