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## Russia's position on Korean conceptions of reunification

### Abstract

The article is devoted to analysis of the Russian position on this issue of Korean reunification and how it is conceptualized on the divided peninsula. It uses a comparative analysis of North and South conceptions of the reunification process and posits that the conceptions of both sides are moving closer to each other by step to step. The USSR authorities supported all North Korean ideas on methods for Korean reunification, but did not approve of North Korean plans to escalate tensions in South Korea. In contrast, authorities of the Russian Federation prefer to conduct a pragmatic policy and pursue a policy of supporting peaceful and democratic processes towards Korean reunification. The Russian authorities are also attentive to the steps taken by South Korea regarding the North. Such a policy helps the Russian Federation preserve peace and the status quo on her Far Eastern frontiers.

**Keywords:** Korea, Korean reunification, peaceful process, Russia.

### Introduction

One of the essential factors in maintaining the security of the countries in North-East Asia is a peaceful, constructive development of the inter-Korean dialogue. Considering the central geopolitical position of Korea in North-East Asia, it can be assumed that any changes in the regional balance of power strictly depend on the military and political situation in the Korean peninsula. It's highly likely that close political and economic cooperation between the great powers and a unified Korea would continue and strengthen since the new government could help establish a more stable balance of power in North-East Asia.

The main task of the countries neighboring Korea is to create favorable conditions for continuation of the inter-Korean dialogue, to facilitate a trustworthy atmosphere and to cooperate in prevention of conflict situations on the Korean peninsula. Russia, as a neighboring country, is particularly interested in the peaceful evolution of events on the Korean Peninsula and

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1 Associate Professor at the School of Asian Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow), and Research Fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies of Russian Academy of Sciences.

ensuring thereby the security of its Eastern frontiers, as well as the economic development of the Far Eastern territories.

Therefore, the aim of the article is to make a comparative analysis of North and South Korean conceptions of the reunification of the Motherland and explain the motives behind the Russian position on this issue. Soviet and Russian historiography on the Korean reunification is not large, a problem that interested Soviet party bureaucrats and diplomats, many of whom wrote papers and monographs on the plans for Korea's reunification and gave their recommendations to the Soviet authorities. Prof. Valery Denisov is the author of key research papers. He was formerly a high-ranking Soviet diplomat and ambassador in Pyongyang and was closely involved with Soviet/Russia-North Korean relations. He provides a review of how the Korean unification problem emerged and evolved and remains unresolved to this day.<sup>2</sup> He is fairly optimistic about the prospects of settling this issue.

Prof. Vadim Tkachenko, another Soviet/Russian researcher, was a party bureaucrat and the focus of his research interests lies in the plane of studying Russian-Korean relations. He believes that the problem of Korean reunification remains relevant for all neighbours of Korea, and they should help the Korean people reunite their country.<sup>3</sup> Younger Russian scientists – Igor Gorely, Natalia Kuznetsova, Anatoly Torkunov, et., look at the solution to the issue of Korean reunification as a distant future and suggest making economic ties between North and South Korea more closely.<sup>4</sup> They suggest that only after that will it be possible to unite Korea politically. This article attracted the research works of South Korean historians.<sup>5</sup> Based on concepts from their work it can be concluded that Russian and Korean historians are united by one opinion on the need to return Korea into a single state. The works of Kim Il Sung were also used, in which he expressed his point of view on the issues of the unification of the Motherland.

### **Kim Il Sung's plans for Reunification**

How to unify Korea was among the most urgent issues discussed in relations between Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK), since it was directly related with security issues in North-East Asia. Since the beginning of the 1960s, in all negotiations between the Soviet Union and North Korean leaders, possible routes towards Korean unification were sought and

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2 Denisov 2009; Denisov 1988.

3 Tkachenko 2000.

4 Gorely 1997.

5 Baek 1993; Kan 1999.

the future role of a unified Korea in the international politics of North-East Asia was taken into account. The Soviet Union repeatedly expressed the idea that the process of Korea's unification must be on a socialist basis and the united state must preserve allied relations with the USSR.

The Soviet leaders paid great attention to the Korean unification issue because they had concerns about a possible escalation of the process, which could turn into a new bloody war on the Korean peninsula. On the other hand, the unification process seemed doubtful because the North Korean leaders, presenting the program for the unification of the country, were focused on organizing a revolutionary situation in the South and the forceful overthrow of the "anti-people's government in Seoul".<sup>6</sup> In February 1965, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung in a conversation with Soviet Prime Minister A. N. Kosygin outlined his plan to create a revolutionary situation in the South. In this plan, it was particularly noted that there was a need for the "accumulation of revolutionary forces, nominations for official positions... of politicians, able to come to power and declare the neutrality of South Korea".<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Kim Il Sung didn't exclude a conflict situation, which could turn into guerrilla warfare in case of the break out of war situation in Korea or World War III.

Along with the intention to intervene in the internal affairs of the Republic of Korea, North Korean leaders attempted unsuccessfully to form a Communist Party in the country. Such plans from the North to intervene into the internal political situation of the Republic of Korea (the ROK) challenged the military regime of President Park Chung-hee and triggered a wave of repression against pro-democratic politicians of the South. It was obvious that such tactics didn't lead to a revolutionary situation in the South, as hoped for in Pyongyang.

However, Kim Il Sung sought to convince the Soviet leaders, insisting on the need to form a "People's Revolutionary Party" in South Korea, which could actively take part in "unanimous anti-American activities". In Pyongyang it was believed that a war on the Korean peninsula "could break out at any time, regardless of the desires of the North".<sup>8</sup> In December 6, 1969, during a conversation with the top Soviet leaders, the DPRK Foreign Minister Park Seun Chul said: „We would like to achieve reunification through peaceful means... but this can't be achieved as long as the Americans are present in South Korea and continue their provocations... War can break out if revolution takes place in South Korea. The Americans, of course, will seek to suppress it forcefully. The South Korean people will turn to us for support, and we, as

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6 Tkachenko 2000: 76.

7 Tkachenko 2000: 76.

8 Tkachenko 2000: 78.

a nation, will not be able to refuse such assistance. The war in Korea would not be such as in Vietnam, it will outgrow the scope of a local war, it can spillover rapidly on the Soviet Union and China, which we have treaties of alliance with”.<sup>9</sup> In other words, North Korean leaders relied on escalating tensions in South Korea and this was not approved by the USSR.

Additionally, the North Korean leaders viewed the presence of U.S. forces in the South of the Korean peninsula as a major obstacle to unification of the country. Kim Il Sung described US policy as „double-dealing.” In his opinion, the United States, on the one hand, was „talking about peaceful unification,” and on the other, it was inciting the South Korean military to „confront in dialogue, compete in dialogue and insidiously try to perpetuate a split in the country”.<sup>10</sup> In 1985, in an interview with Japanese correspondents, Kim Il Sung explained his vision of US policy: „The Americans maintain a split in Korea in order to rule over it... The United States does not want South Korea to get rid of their dominance and go their own way”.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently, Pyongyang had a clear understanding of the main tasks of Soviet policy towards the Korean Peninsula as a way of preventing a new war. That’s why the North deliberately placed emphasis on the “inevitability of repetition of war” in order to obtain additional Soviet military and economic aid, political support in the international arena and, of course, the approval of Moscow in fulfilling the North’s unification plans of the North and the South. However, the Soviet leaders were cautious about this issue, and didn’t openly criticize Kim Il Sung’s program about the unification of the Motherland by pointing out that the unified Korea should remain a socialist state.

At the beginning of the 1970s, North Korean leaders, under the influence of international détente, revised their plans for the reunification of Korea, bringing them almost closer with the position of South Korean opposition politicians. In July 4, 1972, Kim Il Sung put forward three principles of national reunification, which presumed for a “peaceful, democratic, without external interference,” unification of the country. Simultaneously with this, North and South Korea issued a joint statement in which, both agreed to take steps to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula, and expressed the need to adhere to the following policy principles in relation to each other:

- to stop military incidents;
- to undertake an extensive exchange in many areas;

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9 Tkachenko 2000: 78–79.

10 Kim Il Sung 1973: 6.

11 Kim Il Sung 1987: 18-19.

- to cooperate with each other under the Red Cross;
- to set a telephone hotline between Pyongyang and Seoul;
- to establish the Coordinating Committee of the North and South to address bilateral issues.<sup>12</sup>

A new constructive approach of the North Korean leaders to the complex unification issue of the country and the beginning of the inter-Korean dialogue was approved by the Moscow.

In the same period, the North and the South began negotiations through the Coordinating Committee and the Red Cross. During the meetings of the Coordinating Committee the two sides discussed ways of communication, exchange of information such as mail correspondence between members of separated families and organising meetings with relatives. The Soviet government appreciated the development of peaceful dialogue between the two Koreas, envisioning the prospects for reconciliation of the both sides and establishment of mutual trust.

The most complete North Korean plans for reunification of the country were presented in October 1980, in the agenda of the VI Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), in which a ten-point program of creating a Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo (the DCRK) was presented and adopted. It was assumed that the North and the South would form part of a unified state – the DCRK, retaining over a long period time parallel state regimes, ideologies and social systems. Unified in this way, Korea could have a single government and parliament, which would engage in political, military, foreign policy and other issues, including first of all, the interests of the Korean nation. In the North Korean program of creating a unified state, it was stated that the DCRK would become a non-aligned, neutral nation-state, “it will not threaten its neighbors, ... will not participate in military actions, prevent allocation or deployment of foreign troops and bases on its territory, prohibit the manufacture, import and storage of nuclear weapons, turn the Korean peninsula into a nuclear-free zone”.<sup>13</sup> It was also pointed out that the DCRK could become a member of the United Nations (UN) on the basis of a single nation state.

The neutrality of a unified Korean state was explicit in the North Korean project of unification, which was justified by the need for conducting a policy of non-alliance with any military political blocs, and the unification process on the basis of the national idea and the principles of independence, based

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12 Gorely 1997: 23.

13 Denisov 1988: 118; Tkachenko 2000: 80–81.

on the slogan of “recognition and respect for the ideas, ideologies and the systems of each other”.<sup>14</sup> As one can see, the North Korean leaders listened to the recommendations from the Soviet authorities and officially declared the neutrality of a united Korea. However, it was not mentioned that a united Korea would become a socialist country.

The contents of the North Korean program for reunification of the country through the establishment of the DCRK meant that the DPRK would need to be ready to abandon attempts for a radical change in the internal political situation in the Republic of Korea and quit the policy of creating a revolutionary situation for the furtherance of the unification of the country. Nevertheless, the Soviet leaders were reluctant to fully accept and approve the North’s such new plans for the reunification of Korea, seeing them as a threat to socialist gains in the North and believing that the unification process of Korea should occur on a socialist basis, and not on the basis of a consolidating national idea. Later, however, Soviet leaders adopted the North Korean plans for reunification of Korea.<sup>15</sup> This happened because Soviet leaders feared China would support North Korean plans, and so Sino-North Korean relations would improve significantly. In this event, the USSR would remain in isolation.

In the early 1990s, due to the change in the international situation in North-East Asia, and the fact that the South Korean leaders perceived the North’s proposal of creating a confederative republic of Korea as an act of propaganda, which was meant to push the withdrawal of U.S military troops from the South and a significant reduction of the South Korean armed forces, the North attempted to change its plans for reunification of the two countries. On the 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1993, Kim Il Sung put forward the “Program for the Great Consolidation of the Whole Nation for the Reunification of Korea”, which also consisted of ten points, widely covering the issues of reunification of the Korean nation and the creation of a single nation state. In this new plan for unification, it was stated that the united Korean nation-state would have a neutral position and it specified the need for no alliances with any military and political blocs, unifying the Korean people on the basis of national ideas and the principle of self-reliance, and pronounced the slogan of “the recognition and respect for the ideas, ideologies and the systems of the two countries”.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, in this draft of unification program, the principle of tolerance with the political structure of the other country was proclaimed and it was suggested political struggles, slander and insinuation be halted (part 4), as well

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14 Tkachenko 2000: 84.

15 Tkachenko 2000: 83–84.

16 Tkachenko 2000: 84.

as the prevention of inadmissible threats of attack, suppression or imposition of one's political system on the other side, pointing out the necessity of building strong mutual trust (part 5). Additionally, rather than dissent, the principle of reconciliation and the need for "rehabilitation of political differences" were strongly promoted (part 6).

The new approach to the reunification process was remarkable as it presumed the provision of protections not only for state and cooperative property, but also "private property, preservation of social status and the merit of the individual's contribution in society" (part 7).<sup>17</sup> The unification program was comprehensive in that it did not only promote consolidation of the Korean people of North and South, but also overseas Koreans (part 9), which made it look more universal and covering the national interests of the DPRK and the ROK.

That the North Korean reunification program demonstrated the evolution of views in Pyongyang on foreign policy, it could become a platform for searching for a ground point for common understanding between the North and the South. It is noteworthy that there was no mention of the timing of the stages of the unification process or sequence of periods for certain progress level, which prompted the conclusion that the document was declarative and thus raised doubts about the real success of unification once put into practice.

The Russian government responded positively to Kim Il Sung's proposed path towards Korea's reunification. In contrast to Soviet leaders, who were strictly of the view that the re-unified Korea would remain a socialist commonwealth, a declaration of neutrality didn't cause any trouble for the Russian Federation. On the contrary, Russia was interested in maintaining peace in North-East Asia, and a neutral, peacefully unified Korea, which would not ally to any military-political blocs, would be an essential guarantor of maintaining the regional balance of power. The declaration of neutrality would allow a unified Korea to take advantage of a neutral state in the event of hostilities by other parties. The status of a neutral state would contribute to its avoiding being drawn into military conflicts.<sup>18</sup> A future unified Korea conducting a neutral, non-aligned policy could be an important backbone in establishing a system of collective security in North-East Asia.

In the second half of the 1990s, Kim Jong Il, becoming the de facto head of the state after the death of his father, did not address the problem of unification of the country, and focused on inter-Korean trade, economic and humanitarian

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<sup>17</sup> Torkunov, Denisov, Lee: 337.

<sup>18</sup> Lee 1998: 10–11.

issues. In turn, his son and heir Kim Jong Un focused on strengthening the security of his country and did not touch on the question of the unification. Nevertheless, in his New Year message (January 2018) he proclaimed his willingness to improve relations with the ROK. Then, North and South Korean athletes marched together behind the Unified Peninsula Flag at the opening ceremony to the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics Games. This can be regarded as the first positive step in changing relations between the North and the South.

During the process of holding three inter-Korean summits in 2018, the parties limited themselves to discussing the issues of denuclearising the Korean peninsula and creating trust between the two parts of Korea. The Pyongyang Joint Declaration of 2018 proclaimed an end to the hostilities between North and South Korea. It was the first step in the settlement of permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The South Korean projects for Reunification of Korea**

Looking from the position of the South, it is obvious that South Korean leaders put forward their own programs for reunification of Korea, which tended to be rather pragmatic and not as detailed as those from the North a step-by-step, gradual process of inter-Korean rapprochement as well as pointing out the difficulties of reconciliation of the divided nation and creation of mutual trust and harmony between the two states.

Unlike North Korea, where there was a common approach to unification of the country, the Republic of Korea presented different views on how to conduct inter-Korean dialogue and methods of Korean unification. Furthermore, both conservative and liberal circles of South Korean society were unanimously in favor of the need for cooperative dialogue with North Korea, especially developing bilateral trade, exchange of information, organizing visits to the relatives of divided families from both countries, etc. The South's views on tactical issues such as political concessions to Pyongyang, the volume and frequency of providing humanitarian aid, forms and methods of inter-Korean consultations on current politics and economics, were significantly different. Concerning the matter of reunification of Korea by strengthening either conservative or liberal views was dependent on what type of elite was at the head of South Korean political system.

In the 1980s, the conservatives were in power in South Korea, whose plans for unification were quite restrained. In the same period, liberal opposition figures offered a more ambitious program. For example, in the 1980s, Kim Dae-jung

proposed a three-stage plan for the unification of North and South, advocated the development of a broad dialogue with the DPRK and the formation of a “federation of two independent republics”, their peaceful coexistence, creating diverse two-side exchanges and, finally, a peaceful reunification<sup>19</sup>, which was close to the concept of Kim Il Sung. In the same period, another opposition leader, Kim Young-sam, proposed a program of “five steps” which included bringing about “democratic reforms” in the territory of North and South, extensive exchange and cooperation in non-political spheres as well as joint actions in foreign policy.<sup>20</sup>

The common matching points in the programs of reunification of Korea suggested from both sides were calls for frequent, preferably annual, meetings between the leaders of the South and the North to address the current issues of inter-Korean dialogue. For example, the South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan, who was the first to propose a meeting of the top leaders of the South and North and adopting a constitution for a unified Korea, pointed out the Korean nation's desire for unification and peaceful development.<sup>21</sup> In addition, it was proposed to establish a programme of liaison offices in Pyongyang and Seoul, and to delegate the functions of diplomatic missions, which was critically viewed by North Korean authorities because it was perceived by the North as further fixating the position of the South in their territory. For the same reason, official Pyongyang was against a separate participation of the two Korean states in the United Nations (UN). The Soviet leaders fully supported the DPRK in this regard, believing that a separate UN membership would complicate the process of peaceful reunification of Korea.<sup>22</sup>

In July 7, 1988, shortly before the Seoul Olympic Games, the South Korean president Roh Tae-woo developed the most prominent and conceptually clear program. The program of reunification was presented in the form of a special declaration and was called “*National Pride, Reunification and Prosperity*”. It was composed of several basic elements of a new approach to the problem of South Korean ideas for Korea's unification. The program of president Roh Tae-woo emphasized the freedom of mutual visits between people from the North and the South as well as on the politics of “open doors” in trade with the North, carrying out joint actions in international forums.<sup>23</sup> Such a special declaration of president Roh Tae-woo was intended to pursue the goal of attracting the DPRK to participate in the Seoul Olympic Games, which was

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19 Denisov 1988: 105, 108.

20 Denisov 1988: 109.

21 Denisov 1988: 109.

22 Denisov 1988: 115.

23 Baek 1993: 127.

assumed to initiate a national understanding and rapprochement, and a path out of confrontation in inter-Korean relations and the development of “cooperation and common prosperity”.

Along with the extension of its program to conduct a dialogue with North Korea, South Korean authorities made a number of conciliatory measures. For example, in early 1988 the abolition of prohibiting South Koreans to read periodicals and other publications published in the DPRK and other socialist countries was announced. In subsequent years, the government of the ROK increased the range of materials about the life in North Korea available to South Korean citizens. In May 1989, the Government Centre of Documentation of the DPRK was established in Seoul. Simultaneously, the South Korean authorities lifted the ban on the publication of works by authors who moved from South to North or turned out to have been left behind on North Korean territory during the Korean War.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, in August 1990, the South Korean government passed a law to establish a “Fund for Cooperation between North and South”, which was directed at promoting inter-Korean exchange and rapprochement. In 1991, the fund stood at 25 billion won; by 1992, it had risen to 40 billion won and in subsequent years increased to 1 trillion won.<sup>25</sup> The South Korean authorities were considering undertaking the above measures as a prerequisite for constructive dialogue between North and South Korea, and counting on the support of its population, as it was believed that true information about the daily lives of North Koreans would play a positive role in building trust between the divided nation.

On August 15, 1988, in a speech on the celebration day of the liberation of Korea, President Roh Tae-woo again addressed the topic of unification of the country and proposed a meeting of the leaders of the DPRK and the ROK to discuss the terms of reunification. He noted that the inter-Korean summit would help to accelerate the process of rapprochement between the two sides. However, this proposal was rejected by Pyongyang.

Later, on September 11, 1989, President Roh Tae-woo presented an expanded version of his program of reunification of Korea at a meeting of the South Korean parliament, stating his “fundamentally new approach, a formula of reunification of the Korean nation”.<sup>26</sup> Roh’s plan called for an intermediate stage in the process of reunification of North and South, which

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24 Baek 1993: 129.

25 Baek 1993: 131.

26 Baek 1993: 129–131.

was necessary because of deep-seated mistrust, confrontation and antagonism between the two parts of Korea. The transitional phase would allow the parties to recognise each other, despite the differences of political systems, and continue to seek opportunities of peaceful coexistence, and then the creation of a “Korean national community, its development based on the principles of self-determination, peace and democracy”.<sup>27</sup>

It was strongly reaffirmed again in president Roh's program that there was a need for regular meetings and summits in order to develop the “Charter of Korean National Community”, the creation of the Council of Presidents, ministers and parliamentarians, the establishment of a general secretariat, and then adopting a constitution and organizing general elections, followed by the declaration of the Unified Democratic Republic of Korea – a democratic state, which would guarantee freedom, equality and prosperity for all its citizens. Unlike the program of Kim Il Sung, in president Roh's program, the nature of the foreign policy of unified Korea was not mentioned.

Modern South Korean researchers appreciate president Roh's policy efforts of „northern diplomacy”, which resulted in the ROK's establishment of diplomatic relations with the USSR, China, Korea, and opening the possibility of becoming a member of the UN. They believe that this policy became the „momentum behind resuming inter-Korean dialogue and the development of trade and economic relations between North and South Korea”.<sup>28</sup>

In turn, the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the USSR and the ROK had, in their opinion, a positive impact on the foreign policy of North Korea, which reflected the North's assurance of perceiving a change in the balance of power in North-East Asia, and the recognition of its inability to address the issues of Korean reunification on its own terms” which led North Korea to sign with the South two important documents: “Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation between North and South Korea from December 13, 1991”, and the “Declaration on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula from December 31, 1991”.<sup>29</sup> It was the first formal agreement between North and South Korea after the separation, and it marked the beginning of the process of deideologisation between the two parts of the divided country. Both sides considered them as a guarantor of peaceful coexistence and cooperation during the long process of the reunification of the Korean nation. Such important documents, which were signed between the DPRK and the ROK, were treated with approval in

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27 Baek 1993: 130.

28 Baek 1993: 148.

29 Baek 1993: 138–139.

Moscow, since the new Russian government was interested in the peaceful development of inter-Korean relations and reduction of military aggression and political tension on the Korean peninsula.<sup>30</sup>

Since the beginning of the 1990s, amid improved relations between the DPRK and the ROK, the military and political views of the latter have changed, which has resulted in a paradigm shift from seeing the North as its “main enemy” to a partner in the negotiation process. In this context, the representatives of Russia, China and the U.S. have begun to speak out for the creation of a multilateral mechanism for consultations on security in North-East Asia that would help unleash the military-political “nodes”, remaining after the Cold War, thereby reducing military tension and strengthening cooperation in various fields of politics and economics. In turn, the formation of multilateral talks on security issues in Northeast Asia could help create favorable conditions for further development of inter-Korean dialogue and prevent an uncontrollable arms race in the region.

After the presidential elections in December 1992, a new president, Kim Young-sam, became the head of the state of the ROK. He put forward his own program, which provided for a three-stage plan for the unification of Korea by creating a community, then a federation, and finally, a Unified Korea. According to South Korean scientists, Kim Young-sam’s program was aimed at “mitigating possible uncontrollable developments and increasing tension during the process of the reunification of Korea.<sup>31</sup> In president Kim Young Sam’s program, the significant differences in economic potential and the life standard of the population of the North and South were taken into consideration, and the purpose underlined in this program was not a “radical reunification but a wise re-creation of unity of the Korean nation as well as the surmounting of political and economic contradictions”.<sup>32</sup>

It was also highlighted in the Russian research literature that the program of president Kim Young Sam was a response to the “Program of the Great Consolidation of the Whole Nation for National Reunification” put forward by Kim Il Sung on April 6, 1993, and the personal meeting of the leaders of the North and the South.<sup>33</sup> The program of Kim Young-sam testified about Seoul’s cessation of the utilization of military pressure on the DPRK and desire to develop a mutually beneficial relationship between the two parts of the divided states.

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30 Denisov 1988: 12.

31 Baek 1993: 132.

32 Baek 1993: 133.

33 Torkunov, Denisov, Lee 2008: 338.

The administration of the ROK was aware at this time of political will to force ahead the process of unification. In 1998, President Kim Dae-jung announced a “Sunshine policy” which was the direct policy of South Korea towards North Korea until Lee Myung-bak’s election to presidency in 2007. The three major points of the “Sunshine policy” stated that “the South was not going to suppress the North and was planning relations on the principles of politics separated from economics” in a manner and would fully promote inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation.<sup>34</sup>

During the periods of the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak, the South pragmatically approached the formation of relations with the DPRK with an emphasis on the development of trade and economic ties. The situation began to change during the presidency of Moon Jae-in. On June 12, 2019 he explained the peace process on the Korean Peninsula during the Oslo Forum, and said: “Real peace is one that is mutually beneficial”.<sup>35</sup> Besides, President Moon Jae-in emphasised his opinion in German newspaper “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”: “From now on, the North-South issue should not be misused for ideological or political purposes; rather, it must be expanded into an issue of life and existence for ordinary people. The North and South represent a community of life in which coexistence is a must”.<sup>36</sup> At present, the South Korean president does not see the need to discuss ways to unite Korea. North Korean leaders also stopped discussing this issue.

In general, the approaches of North and South politicians towards the reunification of the country have much in common and could serve as a platform for further negotiations on this crucial issue for both sides. At present, when there are still mutual grievance, it is highly possible that the North and the South, if strong economic interests in each other were absent, could opt for an arms race and militarisation, and that would be dangerous to enforce the process of unification, could lead to the escalation of conflict and destroy the existing balance of power in North-East Asia. The long-term peaceful coexistence of the two states could lead to confrontation and bringing all types of military armaments to the Korean peninsula.

## **The Russian Position**

After the Cold War was over, international tension reduced and a more favorable atmosphere arose for seeking solutions to the long-standing regional conflicts in a peaceful way. In this regard, the inter-Korean dialogue received

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34 Lee 1998: 25; Tkachenko 2000: 87.

35 President Moon 2019.

36 The Greatness of the Ordinary 2019.

a new impetus, which resulted in the holding of two Korean summits (in 2000 and 2007) and the leaders of North and South Korea signed the political declarations. In these circumstances, Russia had a particular interest in the unification of Korea, which would allow it to acquire an economically strong partner in North-East Asia and expand business contacts in the region, since it expected that a unified Korea would have economic potential of global importance.<sup>37</sup>

The Russian point of view on the unification of Korea is more pragmatic and discreet compared to the Soviet era. Russia's position is reflected in the joint Russian-South Korean statement, issued in November 1992, after President Boris Yeltsin visited Seoul. The statement mentioned that the "National Reunification of Korea should take place peacefully through dialogue between North and South Korea".<sup>38</sup>

In February 2001, the Russian president V. Putin made a speech in the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, and emphasized that Russia's interest is in "the positive changes of situations on the Korean peninsula". Pointing out the position of Russia on the Korean Reunification problem, he drew attention to the following important aspects of this process:

"First: Peaceful process and cooperation between North and South Korea should be developed on the principles agreed by the Korean nations themselves and Korean leaders, without external interference.

Second: All problems should be resolved peacefully through diplomatic means in the spirit of the Joint Declaration of South and North, dated in June 15, 2000.

Third: We will welcome the process of creating a peaceful unified Korean nation-state, friendly to Russia and other countries. We are convinced that reliable security can be achieved by non-military means, through the development of relevant international legal rights.

Fourth: Reduction of tension is impossible for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the world in general, and the region in particular, and on the Korean peninsula even more so. Russia is ready to contribute to these processes. We will support the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula...".<sup>39</sup> Russia's support for peaceful solution of the problem remains unchanged over the last two decades and is particularly relevant in relation to the events on

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37 Kuznetsova 2005: 25.

38 Kan 1999: 42.

39 Rech' V.V. Putina... 2001.

the Korean peninsula, such as the sinking of a South Korean corvette (marine guard ship) “Cheonan”, which led to aggravation of inter-Korean relations.

Remarkably, during the expansion of inter-Korean dialogue and the transition stage from ideological confrontation to cooperation, Russia – unlike the Soviet Union – ceased unilateral support of North Korea’s program of Reunification of Korea, and pursued a balanced policy towards the two Koreas, maintaining good neighborly relations with both of them, developing mutually beneficial cooperation ties, and participating in international actions to reduce the military and political tensions on the Korean peninsula.

On May 29, 2019 South Korean National Assembly Speaker Moon Hee-sang gave a speech at the Russian Federation Council in Moscow. He praised the policy of Russia on the Korean Peninsula and said: “Russia understands North Korea’s policy and situation and can have deep talks with the North... Russia will build a positive diplomatic environment to resolve North Korea’s nuclear issues... Mutual cooperation between (South) Korea and Russia will be a full-fledged flare that will signal trilateral cooperation among the two Koreas and Russia”.<sup>40</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The lengthy division of Korea into two states has complicated the problem of reunifying the country. In the 1970-1980s, the leaders of the two countries set and specified their conditions for reunification of the country, and in subsequent decades the leaders of the two states refused to declare reunification programs and took the path of small steps. They have sought to establish a permanent peace regime and trust to allow the two countries to coexist peacefully and gradually move closer, first economically and then politically. In this case, the best approach is that of President Moon Jae-in, who suggested, “to start with what is easy” and go to the reunification of the country in small steps.<sup>41</sup>

The opening of a liaison office in Kaesong means establishing a venue for regular dialogue between North and South Korea. During the last two years both Korean states have stopped all hostile military acts, removed the nearby the Demilitarised Zone guard posts for preventing armed conflict and eased military tension. Thanks to deals reached by Korean leaders, inter-Korean relations have improved to a de facto “end-of-war” level. The year 2018, which saw three inter-Korean summits held, has revived hope that the long-standing deadlock can finally be broken.

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40 Parliamentary speaker stress... 2019.

41 The Greatness of the Ordinary 2019.

Russia took an active part in reducing military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. For Russia, it is important to provide a “soft” and gradual process regarding reunification and avoid “collapsing” the path with negative implications for regional security. The constructive and balanced policy of Russia towards the Korean peninsula could become an important part in the overall regional system of inter-relations. After unification, Russia would not have to maneuver between Pyongyang and Seoul. The military-political situation would improve and the threat to the Far Eastern regions of Russia would disappear. Therefore, the unification of Korea is in the interests of Russia. Hence, the Russian government on its policy agenda towards the Korean peninsula should put Russian national interests first, namely maintaining regional security and ensuring the peaceful development of the Far Eastern territories of the Russian Federation.

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