

Published by the Department of International
Relations and Diplomacy, Afe Babalola
University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD), Nigeria
E-mail: jcirdabuad@gmail.com

ISSN: 2714-3414
E-ISSN: 2971-6470



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External Powers and North Korea-South Korea Diplomatic Relations: Re-Visiting Historical Context of the Koreas Geo-Political Confrontations

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Abstract

The diplomatic landscape between North Korea and South Korea since the cessation of the Korean War in 1953 has been continuously influenced by the interplay of external powers, entrenched in a complex web of geopolitical dynamics and confrontations. The establishment of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the 38th parallel lines marked the beginning of a persistent state of tension and conflict. This is further complicated by the interests of major global powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and Japan. This paper examined the influence exerted by these external actors on the diplomatic security relations between North Korea and South Korea, spanning from the Cold War era to the present time. By integrating the Complex Interdependence Theory as an analytical framework, the research adopted qualitative-descriptive method and content-analysis technique, thereby relying on primary and documentary sources. The findings revealed that the interventions of external actors have played a complex role in shaping the security trajectories of the Korean Peninsula, as well as having significant impact on the diplomatic and trade relations between the Koreas. Consequently, there have been persistent mutual distrust and conflicting national interests which have profoundly exacerbated the ongoing security tensions between the two nations. The study recommended for a renewed and vigorous denuclearization 'back-door' diplomacy, at the instance of the United States and Western Great Powers, as well as enhanced bilateral economic cooperation between the two nations.

Keywords: Diplomatic Relations, External Powers, Cold War, Economic Relations, Koreas Geo-Political Confrontations

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Introduction

The Korean Peninsula has long been a critical axis of global geopolitical interest, characterized by complex historical, political, and cultural complexities. Unified under the Silla dynasty in AD 668, the region endured repeated invasions and foreign interventions, profoundly shaping its socio-political development. The Japanese colonization in 1910, following the Russo-Japanese War, significantly suppressed Korean culture and exploited its resources (Torkunov et al., 2022). This era concluded in 1945, leading directly to the division of Korea into North Korea and South Korea during Cold War era. In Post-World War II, the Korean Peninsula was bifurcated along the 38th parallel by the United States and the Soviet Union, resulting in the establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North in 1948. As Cummings (2010) explains, this division precipitated the Korean War (1950-1953), which claimed lives and ended with an armistice and the creation of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), solidifying the peninsula's division without a formal peace treaty.

In subsequent decades, North Korea and South Korea developed into vastly different entities, with North Korea modelling Russia one-party authoritarian state and South Korea into the United State liberal democratic model. Despite numerous diplomatic efforts, such as the four-party and six-party talks and the "Sunshine Policy" aimed at fostering economic cooperation and peaceful coexistence between the two countries, tensions have persisted for years (Park & Walsh, 2017). These North Korea's nuclear ambitions and missions have exacerbated the tensions, thereby leading to cycles of military provocations and international sanctions (US Department of State, 2018). By and large, external actors, notably the United States, China, Russia, Japan and the United Nations, have played a pivotal role in shaping the diplomatic and security dynamics of the Korean Peninsula. As Park and Kim (2022) noted that these actors have significantly influenced the course of negotiations and the persistence of tensions. High-profile engagements, such as the Panmunjom Declaration of 2018 and subsequent summits, initially suggested potential breakthroughs. However, strategic interests and policy shifts within the Koreas and among external powers often disrupted these efforts.

The cyclical nature of cooperation and confrontation, exemplified by events like North Korea's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics, underscores the fragile nature of inter-Korean diplomatic relations. The British Broadcasting Corporation News (2022) highlights that external actors have maintained a delicate balance between applying pressure and seeking diplomatic engagement, contributing to progress and setbacks. This dynamic interplay has perpetuated mistrust and

heightened military tensions, particularly with North Korea's missile tests in 2017 and 2022 respectively. The scenarios have raised global security alarm. Despite numerous dialogues and economic ventures such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the relationship between North and South Korea remains fraught with mistrust. Attempts at fostering peace are frequently thwarted by military provocations, nuclear crises, and strategic geopolitical interests.

Despite this, it seems studies have glossed over the influence of external forces on the on-going diplomatic face-off between the two countries, which has implications on virtually every facet of their relations. This study seeks to provide a historical analysis of the influence of external actors on diplomatic security relations between North Korea and South Korea. This study adopted descriptive methods to provide a comprehensive and accurate description of the diplomatic relations between North Korea and South Korea. Data were gathered from primary sources, such as interviews with experts, and secondary sources, including media articles on inter-Korean summits and academic publications on inter-Korean relations.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Complex Interdependence Theory. This theory was articulated by Keohane and Nye (1977), who presents a multifaceted view of global politics that, diverges from the traditional realist perspective. The theory is characterized by three distinct features: multiple channels of contact, the absence of hierarchy among issues, and a diminished role of military force. The theory suggests that states are embedded in a dense network of reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships encompassing political, economic, and social domains. The complex interplay of these actors such as the United States, China, Russia, and Japan demonstrates the multiple channels of contact emphasized by the theory. These nations engage with the Koreas through diplomatic negotiations, economic sanctions, military alliances, and cultural exchanges, showcasing the diverse and interconnected nature of their relationships. For instance, Cha (2012) explains that the United States has maintained a significant military presence in South Korea while also engaging in diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions aimed at North Korea. This reflects the theory's principle of multiple channels of contact and the varied nature of interactions beyond mere military engagements. Kim and Lee (2019) highlight that China's economic assistance to North Korea and its involvement in multilateral talks illustrate the absence of a clear hierarchy among issues, as it balances economic interests with security concerns. Similarly, Westad (2005) notes that Russia and Japan's diplomatic and economic interactions with both Koreas underscore the interconnectedness and interdependence that define

regional politics. The diminished role of military force, a fundamental aspect of Complex Interdependence, is evident in the shared understanding that outright conflict would be counterproductive due to the deep economic and geopolitical interconnections influenced by these external actors.

In summary, Complex Interdependence Theory provides a robust framework for analysing the multifaceted influences of external actors on the diplomatic security relations between North and South Korea. By considering the varied channels of interaction, the non-hierarchical importance of issues, and the reduced role of military force, this theory captures the intricate and interconnected nature of these relations from the Cold War era to the present time.

A Brief Review of Historical Context of North Korea and South Korea

The Korean Peninsula, located in East Asia, has a turbulent history marked by foreign interventions and geopolitical rivalries. North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), shares borders with China and Russia to the north and is separated from South Korea by the heavily militarized Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) (Bernal, 2021). South Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK), also shares the DMZ with the North and has a population of approximately 51.8 million people (Kim, 2018).

According to Oberdorfer and Carlin (2014), the division of Korea into two states was a direct consequence of post-World War II geopolitical rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union. This division led to the establishment of separate governments in Seoul and Pyongyang in 1948, each claiming legitimacy over the entire peninsula. The Korean War (1950-1953) entrenched this division further, resulting in the establishment of the DMZ as the de facto border. This conflict sparked a series of military and diplomatic crises, including the Pueblo incident and the Yeonpyeong shelling.

North and South Korea have taken divergent paths in development, leading to significant differences in their economic, social, and political systems. Despite these differences, both Koreas have engaged in various forms of collaboration and dialogue, such as Red Cross discussions, inter-Korean summits, and the Panmunjom Declaration. Additionally, both nations have participated independently in international events like the United Nations and the Olympics (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2014).

The Cold War era significantly shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Korean Peninsula. As noted by Gaddis (2005), the ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, along with their respective allies, deepened the rift between North and South Korea. The Soviet Union's support for North Korea and

the United States' backing of South Korea created a volatile environment that hindered peace and cooperation. Westad (2005) further observes that the Soviet Union and China viewed North Korea as a strategic asset in challenging the US-led order in Asia. In the decades that followed, North Korea developed into a one-party totalitarian state while South Korea evolved into a democratic liberal state. The divergent development paths have resulted in significant differences in their economic, social, and political systems. However, despite on-going tensions, both Koreas have engaged in various forms of collaboration and dialogue, including inter-Korean summits and economic projects such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2014).

Cyclical Patterns of Relations

The relations between North and South Korea have exhibited cyclical patterns of cooperation and confrontation. Historical analysis reveals that periods of diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation are often followed by phases of heightened tensions and military provocations. Jun (2013) attributes these cycles to internal political dynamics, external pressures, and strategic interests. For instance, the early 2000s saw increased cooperation under the Sunshine Policy, but this was followed by heightened tensions due to North Korea's nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 (Kim, 2019). Similarly, the thaw in relations during the 2018 Winter Olympics and subsequent summits was disrupted by North Korea's resumption of missile tests and military exercises in 2019. External actors, particularly the United States and China, have played a significant role in these cycles, with their policies influencing North Korea's behaviour and the overall security dynamics on the peninsula (Yoon, 2011).

Implications for Long-Term Security

The long-term security implications of the diplomatic efforts and cyclical relations between North and South Korea are multifaceted. Sustained diplomatic engagement has the potential to reduce the risk of conflict and promote stability in the region. Efforts like the Panmunjom Declaration and inter-Korean economic projects demonstrate that cooperation can yield tangible benefits (Wertz & Yeo, 2023). However, the persistent threat of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs poses significant challenges to regional security. The inability to achieve denuclearization through diplomatic means increases the risk of military confrontation, which could have devastating consequences not only for the Korean Peninsula but for the broader East Asian region. The involvement of external actors adds another layer of complexity, as their strategic interests and policies can either facilitate or hinder progress towards long-term security (Kim, 2024).

The Role of External Actors

China

China has played a crucial role in shaping North and South Korean relations. As Tan (2018) explains, China has been North Korea's main ally, providing economic and military support, as well as diplomatic protection. China's involvement in the six-party talks underscores its commitment to regional stability. However, Oatley (2019) notes that China's support for North Korea is driven by pragmatic interests, including the prevention of regional instability and a refugee crisis. Despite its alliance, China has shown frustration with North Korea's nuclear tests, leading to cooperation with international sanctions.

In its relations with South Korea, China has acted both as a collaborator and a competitor. Since establishing diplomatic ties in 1992, China has become South Korea's largest trading partner, fostering economic interdependence (Tan, 2018). However, tensions have arisen over issues like the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system, which China views as a security threat. Furthermore, China has pressured South Korea regarding regional alliances, adding complexity to their relationship. China's economic coercion has sometimes led to animosity within South Korea, pushing it closer to the US and its allies. Relations between China and the two Koreas remain dynamic, reflecting both historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical strategies.

United States

The United States has significantly influenced relations between North and South Korea. Lee and Kim (2019) explain that the U.S. was instrumental in dividing the Korean Peninsula after World War II, agreeing with the Soviet Union to divide Korea along the 38th parallel. This division led to separate governments in Pyongyang and Seoul and a mutual defence treaty with South Korea.

Lee (2018) asserts that U.S. foreign policy has profoundly impacted Korea's security, economic, and political situations. The U.S. hard-line approach, involving sanctions and military deterrence, often escalates tensions by provoking North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. Conversely, the soft-line approach, which includes dialogue and economic incentives, aims to de-escalate tensions and increase mutual understanding. Lee and Kim (2021) note that Donald Trump's 2019 visit to North Korea did not significantly advance inter-Korean ties, which had already begun improving in 2018 under South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Trump's approach, based on personal connection and economic incentives, was ultimately unsuccessful in persuading Kim Jong-un to denuclearize.

The United States has been a key player in diplomatic relations between North and South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The U.S. has maintained a strong alliance with South Korea and a hostile stance toward North Korea, imposing sanctions and leading negotiations to curb North Korea's nuclear program.

Japan

Japan's historical and contemporary influence on the Korean Peninsula is significant. Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 had a profound impact on Korea's sovereignty, economy, culture, and society. According to Lee (2019), Japan's colonial rule was one of the most brutal and oppressive in modern history, exploiting Korea's natural resources and suppressing its national identity. The end of World War II and Japan's subsequent withdrawal from Korea created a power vacuum that led to the peninsula's partition.

The relations between Japan and the two Koreas have been marked by both conflict and cooperation. The colonial legacy has left historical grievances, nationalist sentiments, and territorial disputes. One of the most contentious issues is the treatment of "comfort women" by the Japanese imperial military. The two Koreas have demanded apologies and compensation, but Japan argues that the issue was settled by the 1965 treaty and a 2015 agreement providing funds for survivors (Lee, 2018). This issue has strained diplomatic relations, with North Korea accusing Japan of avoiding responsibility and using the issue to justify military expansion. Kimura (2017) highlights that Japan is a major economic partner of South Korea and an ally of the United States in the region. Japan's economic and security ties with South Korea have contributed to inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation, promoting mutual trust and regional stability. However, Hughes (2019) argues that Japan's policy toward North Korea is driven by a strategy of hedging and autonomy-seeking, due to the complex security situation in East Asia. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs pose a direct threat to Japan's security, prompting Japan to balance between different options and pursue self-reliance.

Russia

Russia has significantly influenced the division and on-going dynamics between North and South Korea. Toloraya (2018) notes that during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a key supporter of North Korea, providing economic, military, and diplomatic aid. However, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in

1991, Russia reduced its support for North Korea and established diplomatic relations with South Korea. Russia has also backed United Nations sanctions against North Korea for its nuclear and missile programs, viewing the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as essential for regional security.

Gabuev and Petrov (2020) observed that Russia has maintained economic and political ties with both Koreas and advocated for inter-Korean diplomacy as a means of conflict resolution. However, Ballbach (2022) argues that Russia has acted as a spoiler by pursuing its interests and undermining international sanctions on North Korea. Russia has resisted or diluted some UN resolutions and provided North Korea with economic or military assistance, including employing North Korean workers, supplying oil or coal, and selling arms. These activities support the North Korean regime's nuclear and missile programs. Ramani (2019) explains that Russia's alliance with North Korea is driven by strategic interests, such as opposing U.S. hegemony, curtailing U.S. military presence, and promoting a multipolar world order. Russia views North Korea as a buffer state preventing U.S. military expansion near its borders and as a partner in balancing U.S. influence in East Asia.

United Nations

The United Nations has been a key actor in influencing diplomatic relations and negotiations between North and South Korea. The United Nations Special Commission on Korea established in 1975, investigated human rights violations in North Korea and promoted human rights dialogue and cooperation between the two Koreas. The commission issued several reports and resolutions condemning North Korea's human rights abuses and urging it to respect international norms (Kim, 2019). The United Nations Command, a multinational military force established during the Korean War, still exists today as a peacekeeping and security organization on the Korean Peninsula. It is responsible for maintaining the armistice agreement, supervising the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), facilitating inter-Korean dialogue, and providing humanitarian assistance (Kim, 2019). The UN has used its authority to mediate and host initiatives involving both Koreas, such as the Armistice Agreement and the Geneva Conference.

Ku et al. (2017) examined the UN's role as a monitor, using its mechanisms to verify and enforce compliance with international norms by both North and South Korea. The UN has imposed sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear and missile activities and has urged South Korea to implement these measures. Various UN bodies, such as the UN Panel of Experts, the UN Human Rights Council, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), monitor the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

According to Park (2020), the UN also acts as a provider, delivering humanitarian and developmental assistance to both Koreas. The United Nations mobilizes resources through agencies such as the World Food Programme, the UN Children's Fund, and the World Health Organization to provide aid and support. The United Nations has played different roles, such as a mediator, monitor, and provider, depending on the situation and needs of both Koreas. Its efforts have been crucial in influencing diplomatic relations and promoting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Contemporary Diplomatic Efforts and Challenges

The diplomatic efforts between North and South Korea have undergone significant developments and faced numerous challenges in recent years. The "Sunshine Policy," initiated by South Korea in the late 1990s, aimed to foster reconciliation and cooperation through economic aid and engagement. This policy led to landmark inter-Korean summits and the establishment of joint economic projects, such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex (Kim & Lee, 2019). However, these efforts encountered setbacks due to North Korea's persistent nuclear tests and military provocations, which heightened tensions and led to international sanctions. The six-party talks, involving North and South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia, were another significant diplomatic effort aimed at denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. Despite initial progress, these talks stalled in 2009 when North Korea withdrew, citing hostile policies from the United States (Cha, 2012). The diplomatic efforts have also been challenged by the shifting foreign policies of key external actors. For example, the Trump administration's direct engagement with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un resulted in historic summits but ultimately failed to achieve denuclearization (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Data presentation and Analysis

Table 1: North Korea-South Korea Diplomatic Relations and Promotion of Free Trade

Interview Questions 1	Has there been any free trade between North Korea and South Korea?
Interviewee A	There have been occasional attempts at economic cooperation and trade agreements, such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex
Interviewee B	There have been some attempts on free trade, the Kaesong industrial complex, an industrial park located in North Korea and operated jointly by both countries
Interviewee C	There have been trade attempts to ensure diplomatic trade interactions.
Interviewee D	There have been attempts to foster trade between the two countries

Interview Questions 2	What is your opinion on their diplomatic relations in the area on free trade?
Interviewee A	The diplomatic relations and free trade between North Korea and South Korea have been extremely strained due to the ongoing conflict and lack of trust between the two nations.
Interviewee B	Free trade cooperation between North and South Korea have been challenging due to geopolitical issues, including concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons program and human rights abuses.
Interviewee C	There have been trade attempts to ensure diplomatic interactions. ideological differences have made the trade zones not to last
Interviewee D	There have been attempts to foster trade between North Korea and South Korea such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex but it has not been able to deescalate the tension.

Field Interview, 2025

Free trade and diplomatic relations between North Korea and South Korea have received a lot of attention in the literature due to its economic and social benefits on the two countries, which refer to the potential gains and impacts of increasing trade and cooperation. There have been various attempts such as for economic and social integration such as; the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in the border city of Kaesong in 2004 which South Korea and North Korea collaborated to create the proposed Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) Park; a proposed project that aims to transform the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between South Korea and North Korea into a trans boundary peace park that can enhance environmental protection, peace-building, and cultural exchange between the two Koreas.

However, table 4.1 above shows that even though all the interviewees agreed there had been some form of trade, yet they expressed their opinions and perspectives on the trade relations between North Korea and South Korea. Some respondents emphasized the positive aspects of trade, such as the potential for cooperation, reconciliation and development, while others highlighted the negative aspects of trade, such as the difficulties and dangers. Interviewee A opined ‘the potential for free trade between North and South Korea is a complex and sensitive issue that would require significant diplomatic efforts and trust-building measures to overcome the deep-seated animosity and mistrust that exists between the two nations’. In the same vein Interviewee B corroborated the above statement thus, concerns ‘The diplomatic relations between North Korea and South Korea, especially in free trade, have been limited and complex, for example, the Kaesong industrial complex, an industrial park located in North Korea and operated jointly by both North and South Korea, was one such initiative which was shut down in

2016 amid political tensions. Efforts to improve diplomatic relations and foster economic cooperation continue, but progress is slow and depends on political developments and security concerns. However, an interviewee gave reason for the challenges experience both countries in the area of free trade. Interviewee C stated that Free trade agreements or substantial economic cooperation between North and South Korea have been challenging to establish due to geopolitical issues, including concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons program and human rights abuses. The international sanctions imposed on North Korea in response to its nuclear activities also limit economic interactions.

Haggard and Noland (2007) present a pessimistic view of trade as a challenge and obstacle to cooperation and reconciliation between North and South Korea. Examining the patterns and trends of North Korea's external economic relations, and finding that the country is largely isolated from the global economy, and dependent on aid and illicit activities to finance its imports. It is asserted that the impact of the nuclear crisis and the United Nations sanctions on North Korea's trade and investment have a limited effect on the regime's behaviour and survival. some economic initiatives that could have potential for cooperation, such as the Mount Kumgang tourist zone, which is a joint venture between South Korea's Hyundai Asan and North Korea's Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, and the Rason-Sonbong economic zone, which is a special economic zone in North Korea that offers preferential policies and incentives for foreign investors.

However, the above assertion was corroborated in literature by Kim. S. (2017) who examines the potential impacts of inter-Korean economic cooperation on the economic growth, employment, income distribution, and social welfare of both Koreas, using a computable general equilibrium model. The study simulates various scenarios of cooperation, such as trade liberalization, infrastructure investment, labor mobility, and fiscal transfers, and compares them with a baseline scenario of no cooperation. The results show that inter-Korean economic cooperation can generate significant benefits for both countries, especially for North Korea, by increasing its GDP, employment, and social welfare and can improve the income distribution and reduce the poverty rate in the countries, by increasing the income. However, the study notes that the benefits depend on the degree and speed of cooperation, as well as the policy responses of both governments. According to the study, inter-Korean economic cooperation should be pursued gradually and flexibly, while taking into account the political and security implications.

On the other hand, Chung (2017) asserts that the economic interactions between the two Koreas are heavily influenced by the political climate, which often leads to

a pessimistic outlook on long-term trade relations. Chung argues that the lack of trust and on-going military tensions contribute to a volatile trade environment, making any economic cooperation fragile and subject to the whims of political developments. Haggard and Noland (2007), present a pessimistic view of trade as a challenge and obstacle to cooperation and reconciliation between North and South Korea. Examining the patterns and trends of North Korea's external economic relations, and finding that the country is largely isolated from the global economy, and dependent on aid and illicit activities to finance its imports. It was shown that the difficulties and dangers of trade, such as the political and military provocations and conflicts, the international sanctions and pressure, and the risks of violating laws and norms. They argue that trade is unlikely to induce reform or openness in North Korea, and that the prospects for economic integration are bleak.

To this end, the researcher noted that the North Korean economy has been characterized by a high degree of centralization, state ownership, and bureaucratic control while South Korea adopted a market economy, where the private sector played a dominant role in economic activities, and the state intervened only to promote exports and industrialization. This is in agreement with Lee. J (2016, p 298) who opined that the economic policies and strategies of North Korea and South Korea in different and contrasting ways, reflecting their alignment with either the communist or the capitalist bloc. The North Korean economy was characterized by a high degree of centralization, state ownership, and bureaucratic control. South Korea adopted a market economy, where the private sector played a dominant role in economic activities, and the state intervened only to promote exports and industrialization.

Kim and Lee (2021) present a rather optimistic view, the inter-Korean economic cooperation has the potential to foster mutual economic benefits and contribute to regional stability. They argue that despite the political and military tensions, the economic engagement, particularly in joint ventures like the Kaesong Industrial Complex, can serve as a foundation for building trust and improving relations. The authors maintain that such economic initiatives can lead to a gradual normalization of relations and are essential for peace-building on the Korean Peninsula.

However, this researcher is agreeing with the opinion of interviewee A who pointed out that there has been trade attempts between North Korea and South Korea but these attempts have been strained and the potential for trade between North Korea and South Korea is a complex and sensitive issue that would require significant diplomatic efforts and trust-building measures to overcome the deep-seated animosity and mistrust that exists between the two nations. Hence,

diplomatic free trade between North Korea and South Korea when sustained can improve the income distribution and reduce the poverty rate thereby increasing the economic cooperation in both countries.

Table 2: External Forces and Security Relations between North Korea and South Korea

Interview Question 1	Do external factors influence diplomatic security relations between North Korea and South Korea?
Interviewee A	External actors have affected the diplomatic and security relations between North and South Korea. The most significant external actors are the United States, China, and Japan.
Interviewee B	External actors play significant roles in influencing diplomatic and security relations between North and South Korea.
Interviewee C	The external actors also played a major factor in the separation of the two Koreas.
Interviewee D	The external actors also played a major factor in the separation of the two North Korea and South Korea.
Interview Questions 2	In what way have external actors affected diplomatic security relations between North Korea and South Korea?
Interviewee A	External actors that have affected the diplomatic and security relations between North and South Korea.
Interviewee B	The involvement and positions of these external actors often shape the diplomatic landscape and influence the security dynamics between North and South Korea.
Interviewee C	Provision military assistance to South Korea by the United States has been cited as the reason North Korea is further motivated to build nuclear power.
Interviewee D	Major powers in the international system such as the United States, China, and Russia are aligned between North Korea and South Korea and sort to protect their sphere of influence.

Field Interview, 2025

The analysis of the interview responses and relevant literature underscores the pivotal role the external actors play in shaping the diplomatic and security relations between North and South Korea. All interviewees unanimously agreed that external actors are vital in influencing these dynamics. This view is consistent with Kim and Cohen (2017), who highlight the significant impact of external powers on security cooperation between the two Koreas. The research emphasizes that external actors, particularly the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the United Nations, shape the diplomatic landscape and security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula.

Interviewee A pointed out that the United States, China, and Japan is the most significant external actors. The United States has a strong military presence in

South Korea, China is a key ally and trading partner of North Korea and Japan has vested interests in the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula. Interviewee B added that the United Nations, especially the Security Council, plays a crucial role in addressing security concerns related to North Korea's nuclear program through sanctions aimed at pressuring North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Sharma (2023) notes that the realignment between China, North Korea, and Russia has serious implications for global politics, affecting South Korea, which is at the centre of these geopolitical shifts. Interviewee C mentioned that the military relationship between South Korea and the United States motivates North Korea to build nuclear power, leading to suspicion and mistrust. This is corroborated by Kim (2011), who states that external actors have significant impacts on inter-Korean relations, both positively and negatively.

The interests and strategies of major external actors like the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the United Nations influence the security, economic, and humanitarian aspects of inter-Korean relations. For example, the United States has been a key ally and security guarantor for South Korea but also a source of tension for North Korea. China has been a major economic partner and political supporter of North Korea while acting as a potential mediator for the Korean Peninsula. Russia and Japan have participated in multilateral dialogue and cooperation mechanisms, such as the Six-Party Talks, but also have their interests that may not align with inter-Korean reconciliation.

Yeo (2019) argues that the United States-South Korea military alliance is a source of contention and mistrust between the two Koreas, motivating North Korea's nuclear development. One of the main challenges to security cooperation between North and South Korea is North Korea's nuclear weapons program, which poses a serious threat to South Korea and its allies and hampers the prospects for denuclearization and peace on the peninsula. Kim and Cohen (2017) argue that while agreements and declarations have contributed to easing military tension and building mutual trust, they face challenges in implementation due to external factors such as sanctions, pressure, and uncertainty. The analysis reveals that the role of external actors in inter-Korean relations is complex and dynamic, requiring careful analysis and coordination. External actors significantly shape the diplomatic and security landscape, influencing both positive and negative outcomes in inter-Korean relations.

Table 3: Inter-State movement of North Korea’s and South Korea’s citizens

Interview Question 5	What is your opinion on inter-state movement of the citizens of North Korea and South Korea?
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Interviewee A	Movement between the two countries remains heavily regulated, and significant barriers still exist for ordinary citizens wishing to travel between North and South Korea.
Interviewee B	Movement of citizens is influenced by defections. North Korea defectors often seek asylum in South Korea
Interviewee C	The efforts have been commendable; Families have been greatly affected psychologically affected
Interviewee D	The efforts on interstate movement were commendable during the period of Sunshine policy;
Interview Questions 6	Do you think the diplomatic relations between North and South Korea has affected the inter-state movement of the citizens of both countries?
Interviewee A	Diplomatic relations between North and South Korea have had a direct impact on the inter-state movement of their citizens, with periods of improved relations leading to greater opportunities for interaction and cooperation, while periods of tension resulted in stricter controls and limited movement between the two countries
Interviewee B	Diplomatic relations between North and South Korea have affected the inter-state movement of the citizens of both countries as their relationship has been marked by tension, relative calm and occasional diplomatic relative breakthroughs.
Interviewee C	Due to deep-rooted mistrust between the two Koreas, the demilitarized zone is heavily guarded
Interviewee D	North Korea is a heavily security conscious country and disregards civil liberties, which has distorted these Nobel initiatives of cross border interactions

Field Interview, 2025

One of the key issues in the inter-Korean dialogue is the movement of people across the border, which reflects the humanitarian, social, and cultural aspects of the division. The inter-state movement of citizens between North and South Korea has been subject to various restrictions and regulations, depending on the level of trust and tension between the two sides.

The table 4.3 above examined interviewee's opinions on how diplomatic relations between North Korea and South Korea have affected the inter-state movement of the citizens of both countries, focusing on the following aspects: the family reunion programs, the defection and repatriation of North Korean refugees, and the tourism and cultural exchanges. Interviewee A asserted that *"The strict control of movement has resulted in limited opportunities for family reunions, cultural exchanges, and economic cooperation between the two Koreas.* However, there have been periods of improved diplomatic relations between North and South Korea, such as the Sunshine Policy in the early 2000s, which led to increased inter-Korean cooperation and eased restrictions on travel and communication. During these times, citizens from both

countries were able to participate in joint economic projects, cultural exchanges, and even temporary reunions for separated families in recent years, there have been efforts to improve diplomatic relations between North and South Korea, including the historic summits between their leaders in 2018. These efforts have led to some relaxation of restrictions on inter-state movement, such as the reopening of a cross-border communication channel and the establishment of a joint liaison office. However, movement between the two countries remains heavily regulated, and significant barriers still exist for ordinary citizens wishing to travel between North and South Korea. Overall, the diplomatic relations between North and South Korea have had a direct impact on the inter-state movement of their citizens, with periods of improved relations leading to greater opportunities for interaction and cooperation, while periods of tension have resulted in stricter controls and limited movement between the two countries (Lee, 2016).

In the same vein, Interviewee D opined that:

“The efforts have been commendable; Families have been greatly affected psychologically affected. Due to the fact that North Korea is a heavily security conscious country and disregards civil liberties, which has distorted these Nobel initiatives of cross border interactions”

Park, J. (2018) evaluates the program from a human rights perspective, and argues that it is a fundamental right of the separated families to meet their relatives across the border and concludes that the inter-Korean family reunion program is not only a humanitarian issue, but also a key factor for building trust and peace on the Korean peninsula. Park, J. (2018) agreed that the inter-Korean family reunion program is not only a humanitarian issue, but also a key factor for building trust and peace on the Korean peninsula.

Mendee (2012) argues that the inter-state movement efforts between North and South Korea, such as the family reunions and the cultural exchanges, have been commendable, as they have alleviated some of the psychological suffering and the humanitarian crisis caused by the division of the peninsula. North Korean regime is a one-man dictatorship and a one-party state that controls all aspects of life in the country, including the military. The military serves as a loyal instrument of the ruling party and the leader, who have absolute authority over the defence policy and the nuclear program. The regime also uses the external threats from the neighbouring countries, especially South Korea and the United States, to justify its military-first policy and to suppress any dissent or opposition from the population. However, the inter-state movement efforts between North and South Korea, such as the family reunions and the cultural exchanges, have been commendable, as

they have alleviated some of the psychological suffering and the humanitarian crisis caused by the division of the peninsula. Mendee (2012) suggests that these initiatives could also have a positive impact on the civil–military relations in North Korea, by exposing the military to the realities of the outside world and by creating more opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. However, Interviewee B argued that *Due to deep-rooted mistrust between the two Koreas, the demilitarized zone is heavily guarded.*

However, the researcher is of the view that inter- state movement between both countries had been severed over the years due to deep mistrust and hostility. However, family reunions which is a form of inter- state movement are not only a humanitarian gesture, but also a strategic tool for improving inter-Korean relations and building trust and cooperation. They suggested that family reunions can facilitate other forms of diplomatic engagement, such as humanitarian aid, cultural exchange, or human rights dialogue.

The Family Reunion Program, a humanitarian program that allows some of the millions of Koreans who were separated by the Korean War to meet their relatives across the border for a few days. It started in 1985, but has been irregular and infrequent due to political and logistical difficulties. The most recent reunion was in August 2018, when about 200 families from both sides met at Mount Kumgang. The program is organized by the Red Cross societies of both Koreas, with the cooperation of the governments and the military. The participants are selected by a lottery system, based on their age, health, and family background. They have to undergo medical check-ups, background checks, and orientation sessions before the reunion. The reunion usually lasts for three days, during which the participants can meet their relatives in group or private settings, exchange gifts, and take photos. The reunion is supervised by officials and staff from both sides, who also provide interpretation and transportation services. Lee (2019). This program faces many challenges and limitations, such as the limited number of participants, the short duration of the reunion, the lack of follow-up contact, and the uncertainty of future reunions. The program also depends on the political and diplomatic situation between the two Koreas and other countries, especially the United States and China. The program has been suspended or canceled several times due to tensions or conflicts over nuclear weapons, missile tests, military exercises, or human rights issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has also hampered communication and exchange between the two Koreas.

The program has many benefits and impacts for the participants and their families, as well as for the inter-Korean relations and reconciliation. The program provides an opportunity for the participants to fulfil their long-held wishes to see their loved

ones, to share their stories and emotions, to express their gratitude and forgiveness, and to restore their family bonds. The program also helps to raise awareness and empathy among the public and the media about the humanitarian issues and the realities of the divided families. The program also contributes to building trust and goodwill between the two Koreas, as well as to creating a momentum for dialogue and cooperation on other issues. Lee (2019) argues that the program is important for healing the wounds of division and fostering a sense of national identity among Koreans.

From the foregoing, it is clear that there are divergent opinions on diplomatic relations between North Korea and South Korea since the post- cold war era as much is yet to be desired from both countries in the areas of free trade, security and inter- state movement. This is because the diplomatic relations between North and South Korea has a significant impact on the global community. The tension and conflict between the two countries have been a source of concern for the international community, particularly in terms of nuclear proliferation and regional stability. Efforts to improve diplomatic relations and reduce tensions between North and South Korea are seen as positive developments by the global community, as they have the potential to contribute to peace and security in the region. Additionally, improved relations between North and South Korea could also have economic implications for the global community, as it could lead to increased trade and investment opportunities in the region.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role the external actors play in shaping the diplomatic security relations between North and South Korea. All interviewees unanimously agreed on the influence of major powers such as the United States, China, Japan, and the United Nations. This agreement among experts reflects a broader consensus in the field of international relations about the influence of external actors in the Korean Peninsula's geopolitical dynamics. These external actors impact various aspects of inter-Korean relations, including security, economic cooperation, and diplomatic negotiations.

These results align closely with the work of Kim and Cohen (2017), who emphasize that external powers significantly shape security cooperation between the two Koreas. The interviewees' insights about the motivations behind North Korea's nuclear ambitions are consistent with Yeo's (2019) analysis, which highlights the U.S.-South Korea military alliance as a key factor driving North Korea's nuclear development. Similarly, Kwak and Joo (2014) argue that the

nuclear issue is influenced by both domestic considerations in North and South Korea and the strategic interests of external actors.

Recommendations

Enhanced Multilateral Engagement: By fostering inclusive and balanced discussions, these dialogues can help create a more stable geopolitical environment on the Korean Peninsula, addressing both security and diplomatic concerns effectively.

Focus on Humanitarian Issues: Strengthen efforts to address humanitarian issues, such as the treatment of "comfort women" and human rights in North Korea. Integrating these efforts into broader diplomatic strategies can build trust and cooperation between North and South Korea.

Economic Cooperation Initiatives: Promote economic cooperation projects similar to the Kaesong Industrial Complex. By creating shared economic interests, both Koreas can benefit from mutual prosperity, which can serve as a deterrent to military provocations and enhance stability.

Long-term Security Frameworks: Develop comprehensive security frameworks that address both nuclear and conventional threats. These frameworks should include confidence-building measures and transparent communication channels to prevent misunderstandings and escalations. Establishing clear protocols and communication mechanisms can reduce the risk of accidental conflicts and build a more predictable and secure environment.

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