

The Geopolitical Impact on the Human Dimension of Divided Korean Peninsula

: A Retrospect and Prospect

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How Much Important Is Geopolitics?

Geopolitics is the study of the effects of human and physical geography on international relations, focusing on political power in relation to geographic space. Generally speaking, geopolitics has been standing out in the region where interests among states, usually those of power states, clash each other. However, geopolitics itself does not always influence foreign policy direction of states concerned. Rather geopolitical impact is decided depending upon the interaction between states and political context, as well as power states' stance in a given situation.

Korean War and division have been considered the product of power politics in the time of forming Cold War structure in East Asia. The war and division have been described inevitable from the perspective of realist school on the one hand. On the other hand, they have been said violation of international law from the perspective of liberal school. In spite of that, regardless of their perspectives, existing major perspectives of international politics disregard geopolitical impact on the human dimension of international politics. Here, the author tries to review and evaluate geopolitical impact on the human dimension of divided Korean Peninsula and to argue that the influence of geopolitics rely on the inter-relationships among state parties with a political context.

Cold War and Division in the Korean Peninsula

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The Korean War is two-faced, which is consisted of international war and civil war. The Korean War broke out in the process of forming the Cold War structure in Far-Eastern Asia led by the two competing powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, on the one hand. It at the same time had occurred as an extension of class struggle of Korean people since Japanese colonial occupation. The armistice system, Korean version of the Cold War system, is one side of 'division-armistice system' after the war. Then, why does not the Korean War and division end even after global Cold War system ended? Some say the reason is due to the internal aspect of the Korean War, or others argue it is due to the characters of cold war in Northeast Asia. Anyway, it is evident that international vested rights group had been established, which followed the chemical combination of two sides of the Korean War. It might be called as 'the internalization of division-armistice system.'

The situation facing the divided peninsula is probably characterized by face-to-face confrontation between the two Koreas—usually resulting in tensions there—plus an ever escalating development in that direction. A system resulting from the division imposed on the Korean peninsula includes its subsystem settled under the lasting division, and concerns its visible and invisible behaviors. To mention it concretely, the behavior of the division-armistice system appears 1) in three arenas comprising North and South Korean societies, relationship between the two Koreas and international politics around the peninsula, and 2) their sectors including political, economic, cultural and military ones, 3) with mutual relationship between each of the arenas and the sectors, and 4) in hostility or conspiracy between the leaders in the arenas and sectors.

Under these conditions, the inter-Korean relationship gives rise to such developments as a war, a system competition, or reconciliation and cooperation, revealing the nature of that between the same races, between enemies and between quasi-states, and changes in line with differences in their power and the formula of their connection. The division-armistice system has three levels: event, system and consciousness. Disputes between the two Koreas give rise to one's own legal system against the other party, reinforcing it and internalizing one party's consciousness while excluding the other party. Fundamentally, a virtuous cycle of events, systems and consciousness cements the division-armistice system and brings about a vicious cycle to justify confrontation between the two Koreas. Of course, the division-armistice

system does not always surface in the form of dispute and confrontation. But signs of an unsettled division-armistice system can hardly last unless there takes place an institutional change in supporting the system. Moreover, even if there is an institutional change in the division-armistice system, it will take more time for Koreans to see a change in their consciousness as they become accustomed to taking the division for granted and supporting it.

If the division-armistice system as aforementioned is applied, it can be assumed that it will affect directly and indirectly the behavior, system and consciousness of the two Koreas. Therefore, the division-armistice systems must be viewed by examining its initiation and its continuation separately. It started under the influence of various internal and external factors, including class disputes in the Korean Peninsula and the worldwide Cold War. And the division-armistice system secured its own power by itself and affected the living of citizens of the two Koreas and the inter-Korean relationship.

Korean Sacrifice to the Cold War

The Korean War consolidated national division and regional conflicts. During the war, many people were sacrificed. Large part of them was civilian. The war and division still go pains on remaining people around the peninsula and the world. Even though war and division reveal character of geopolitics or power politics, they are against humanitarianism and human rights.

The Korean War led to establishing both a Cold War system in East Asia and a divided system in the Korean Peninsula. From the beginning of the war in June 1950 until the end in July 1953, there are an estimated two million casualties, millions injured, and hundreds of thousands orphaned and widowed. In South Korea, the number of people who died and are missing is approximately 852,000 (approximately 574,000 civilians) and those injured 1,115,000 (approximately 230,000 civilians). The human loss amounted to almost five percent of the South Korean population at that time. During the Korean War, the damage in North Korea was far more significant than South Korea, as 1,200,000 losses out of 9,600,000 were North Koreans, which was from the indiscriminate bombing by the United States. The U.S.-

led coalition had about 150,000 casualties including 37,000 fallen soldiers and the Chinese military had 900,000 loss of life. As a result of the war and division of the Korean Peninsula, a significant amount of separated families emerged. In addition to, abductees to North Korea, defectors to North Korea, defectors to South Korea, prisoners of war (POW), North Korean political prisoners, and foreign diaspora. For eight years, from Japanese colonial rule liberation in 1945 to the Korean War, separated families were estimated to be from 4,500,000 to 6,000,000 and to multiply by three or four because of the 1,500,000 defectors to South and North Korea. This is as much as 15 to 20 percent of the total 30,000,000 North and South Koreans at that time in the year 1950. Also 80,000 prisoners of war and their families who were not returned to North Korea and 19,000 prisoners of war who were not returned to South Korea are included in this broadly defined separated family category.

After 30 years since the cease-fire of the Korean War, a trial reunion of the separated families was to take place in September 1985. Over 400 separated families met in private sectors in the 1990s. Over a course of ten years since the inter-Korea summit was held on June 2000, over 25,000 separated families had reunions. However, this only amounts to less than 0.5 percent of the total number of separated families. The separated family issues have long since been used as a political card in negotiations between the North and South Korea. The reality is that within 20 years, those survivors of separated families will soon be deceased.

The Lost 10 Years for Dismantling Cold War

It has been 70 years since the division, and the Korean Peninsula has yet to break away from its ideological and military conflict situation. There is a close relationship between mutual understanding and tension relief when it comes to reconciliation between the North and South. As a result of the series of high-level talks that began in the late 1980s, the North and South put into effect on February 19, 1992 the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between South and North Korea. In the first clause of the basic agreement, it indicates the meaning of reconciliation within the context of a divided peninsula. It states that the North and South is to mutually recognize two systems, prohibit slander, interference in domestic affairs, refrain from actions of destruction of the other, work towards the stability of peace, and work on international

cooperation. Especially the stability of peace stated in clause 5² exquisitely combined the different positions between the North and South showing the mutual dependence between reconciliation and peace. However, reconciliation in the Korean Peninsula means placing a halt on the fighting, hating, and killing of own countrymen based on ideological conflict that came from the outside as well as placing a stop in living separately. It means reconciliation is a line of one nation and brotherhood. Simply put, reconciliation between the North and South has the characteristics of relief through the reclaiming the homogeneity of an ethnicity and peace.

However, inter-Korean reconciliation process in the late 1980s and the early 1990s stopped due to the increasing anxiety of North Korean nuclear development. The Inter-Korean Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in December 1991 became just a mere scrap of paper. While South Korea's 'Northern Diplomacy' toward transitioning communist countries was successful, North Korea's Southern diplomacy toward South Korea, the United States, and Japan turned to be failed. Facing the result combined the US pressure, North Korea began to develop nuclear program in terms of dual usage in order to escape from the international pressure in general and to gain diplomatic leverage for normalizing with its primary enemy, the United States. The first North Korea's nuclear crisis from the early 1993, which was combined the North's crisis diplomacy and the US military and economic pressure, took Mr. Jimmy Carter to quiet between them in the summer 1994. Based on the DPRK-US Basic Framework in Geneva, signed on October 21, 1994, they were to freeze and replace North Korea's indigenous nuclear power plant program with more nuclear proliferation resistant light water reactor power plants. During the process, Kim Jong-il government and Clinton government tried to pave a way for normalizing their relationships by visiting their counterpart's top leader respectively only to fail. The first opportunity for denuclearizing Korean peninsula and building peace in 1990s was lost, rather that opened the door of the second nuclear crisis. The new US government was critical of implementing the Basic Framework and announcing nuclear preemptive strike against DPRK, which was followed by North Korea's strong ambition of developing nuclear program. Although the Six-

² Clause 5: South and North Korea shall together endeavor to transform the present state of armistice into a firm state of peace between the two sides and shall abide by the present Military Armistice Agreement until such a state of peace is realized.

Party Talks tried to engage the second nuclear crisis, the situation has been deteriorated until now. Inter-Korean relationship also has been degenerated since December 2007, just after the second inter-Korean Summit.

Rising Nuclear Division-Armistice System

The division in the Korean peninsula has split the nation through the existence of ideological confrontation from the beginning and North and South Korea continue to have a hostile relationship. As the division has lasted for almost seventy years following the end of the global Cold War, North and South Korea appear to be two different countries. The division resulted in taking different characters. While reflecting the change of the international order, the division-armistice system is said to reflect the dynamics of the interface relationship between hostility and dependence by the two divided governments. As the main criteria of a division-armistice system, North and South Korea relations have been widely known as hostile interdependent relations.

It is an obstacle to reduce the division-armistice system into North and South Korea relations as well as viewing the main actors as only existing within two divided regimes. There is also a problem with only considering unification as overcoming a divided nation. In this limited discussion, the dynamics of international politics, which had formed and have been developing the division-armistice system, are dealt with as external variables or policy environment because it is possible to ignore the aspects of infiltration and internalization into the Korean Peninsula. Interest in the peace issue seems relatively weak in such an existing discussion. In considering the indivisibility of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia, unification of the Korean peninsula should be parallel to regional peace building. Also, North and South Korea relations' theory is based on the state power of North and South Korea because it is easy to neglect the state-society relationship as well as the role of surrounding countries.

There have been several attempts to overcome the limitations of the division-armistice system theory. One of them is the 'Division Violence' theory. Figuring out the violent character of the division-armistice system, the IPUS clarified division violence as a series of violence of life, exploitation, and mental oppression in any divided situation or in the name of

division.” In the triangular violence model by Johan Galtung, the IPUS tried to clarify that division violence has the aspects of physical, structural, and cultural violence. The three areas where division violence is used do not relate to only relations between North and South Korea but also the nations of the international system surrounding the Korean peninsula and within the division society. In their discussion, it is impressive that the IPUS links division violence to division peace. It is possible to define division peace as the exercising of rightful power to maintain a division. However, it is stated that it is not easy to separate it from division violence. Rather, division violence is a concept of reflection which reveals the fiction of division peace.

The division-armistice system has not only adjusted to Détente in the beginning of 1970s, but also lasted the lull in the Cold War in the early 1990s. Surely, since the 2000s, the division-armistice system at times has not been stable, but the existing ‘division system’ discourse did not pay attention to the effects that the root of the system has been reproducing. Rather, the division-armistice system had assumed totally new characteristics by the 2010s. It reflected the emergence of the nuclear division-armistice system.

The nuclear division-armistice system has slowly emerged after missing the two chances of denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula in the late 1990s and in the mid-2000s. The nuclear division-armistice system is a result of not reverting to the continuous mutual distrust between North and South Korea and the United States, and the synergism of the arms race and the armistice system. In this context the third nuclear test by North Korea in February 12, 2013, the hereditary succession of three generations in the North, and increased military tensions in Northeast Asia explain many political reasons why the division-armistice system will evolve in new ways.

Meanwhile, the North Korean nuclear issue or denuclearization of the Korean peninsula has been recognized solely as a security issue, and it was not discussed in the sense of the division-armistice system. By conducting three nuclear tests, advancing military technology and declaring itself as a nuclear weapon state, DPRK insists upon nuclear disarmament talks with the United States. North Korea strongly explains that their nuclear armament is an inevitable defensive action against “the U.S. hostile policy toward the Republic,” and it ultimately helps keep peace in Northeast Asia. Also, the regime of the current North Korean

leader, Kim Jong-Un, has been attempting to recover from a weakened economic situation and develop a deterrence capability by adopting a new strategic line of “parallel economic construction and nuclear arms development.” Kim asserted the primacy of national sovereignty—which he called “self-reliant defense”—in a speech in March 2013 at a plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Korea Workers’ Party: “The constant strengthening of our self-reliant defense capacity, with nuclear force at the core, constitutes a firm guarantee for protecting our right to sovereignty and national existence as well as achieving national prosperity.” In accordance to the stated priorities by Kim Jong-Un, unification discourses in North Korea has reduced and his leadership propaganda and criticism of South Korea increased. The main factors to this can be seen to be North Korea’s nuclear capability reinforcement, continuous U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises, and the intensified hostile relationship between North and South Korea.

South Korea has stayed under the nuclear umbrella of the United States and maintained military confrontation with North Korea. By the 2000s, the alliance between the United States and South Korea had expanded globally and an alliance between the United States, South Korea, and Japan began to form to contain rising China. Not only the information, communication and armament systems, but also the troops of the South Korean army are more involved in the U.S. security system toward the Asia-Pacific. South Korea and the United States decided to organize a coalition division by 2015, and it is known for their missions such as operating civil affairs and eliminating the weapons of mass destruction in the region of North Korea. This coalition division means mixed forces that the brigade-level troops of the Korean army consist of the U.S. second division. With the reason of preparing for possible North Korean missile attacks and the growing Chinese military threat, South Korea has begun participating in the U.S. missile defense system and attempted to exchange military information with Japan using the framework of the triangular military cooperation. As compensation for its cooperation, South Korea continues to be under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Officials in Seoul and Washington took the deferral of the operational command authority of the South Korean army for granted. George W. Bush who had designated North Korea as part of the “Axis of Evil” and was willing to execute a nuclear preemptive attack, indicated that he could dance with Kim Jong-Il in his final term. With the inauguration of the Obama administration, however, the United States changed its policy toward North Korea

into the “strategic patience”, which entailed dealing with the hostile country by not dealing with it. As a result, denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula has drifted farther away from achieving success, going toward consolidating new nuclear division-armistice system.

Protracted Problems of Humanitarianism

Division in itself has infringed the human rights of the Korean people. After the armistice of the Korean War, the first reunion of separated families took place 30 years later, in 1985. In reality, that is a very long time. Family reunions of separated families that are not affiliated with the government did not start until 1990. Since then, verification if family members were dead or alive, letter communication, and reunions among the public continued. However, the exchange between separated families requires more attention and efforts by the two governments but has been influenced by the political relationship between the North and South. When the basic agreement was signed and amidst the environment of dialogue, the road for the resolution of separated families was set. However, in reality the government level family reunions did not start until the 2000s. (See Table 1) The reason why the agreement was not implemented immediately was because of the mistrust between the South and North resulting from the war and enduring division.

Table 1. Separated Family Exchange (December 31, 2014 Present)

Type	Government Level										Non-Government Level				
	Verification of life		Letter Exchange		Reunion in the South		Reunion in the North		Reunion through Video		Verification of Life		Letter Communication	Reunion	
	Cases	People	Cases	People	Cases	People	Cases	People	Cases	People	Cases	People	Cases	People	
1985	65	157			30	81	35	76							
1990											35		44		6
1991											127		193		11
1992											132		462		19
1993											221		948		12
1994											135		584		11
1995											104		571		17

1996											96		473	18	
1997											164		772	61	
1998											377		469	109	2
1999											481		637	200	18
2000	792	7543	39	39	201	1,720	202	674			447		984	152	392
2001	744	2670	623	623	100	899	100	343			208		579	170	493
2002	261	1,635	9	9			398	1,724			198		935	208	616
2003	963	7,091	8	8			598	2,691			388		961	283	677
2004	681	5,007					400	1,926			209		776	188	470
2005	962	6,957					397	1,811	199	1,323	276		843	95	261
2006	1,069	8,314					594	2,683	80	553	69		449	54	105
2007	1,196	9,121					388	1,741	278	1,872	74		413	55	167
2008											50		228	36	97
2009	302	2,399					195	888			35		61	23	51
2010	302	2,176					191	886			16	40	15	7	18
2011											3	5	21	4	14
2012											6	10	16	3	6
2013	316	2,342									9	15	22	3	5
2014							170	813			6	18	11	5	10
Total	7,653	55,412	679	679	331	2,700	3,668	16,256	557	3,748	3,866	88	11,467	1,750	3,402

When the Kim Dae Jung administration took office in 1998, the long time hostile relations with North Korea were overturned into a relationship of reconciliation and cooperation. After going through inquiry between the South and North, in June 2000 the first ever after the division, the first North and South Korea Summit was held. The June 15th North and South Joint Declaration presented by both leaders contains five articles. Among them, article three mentions the situation of separated families. It states, “The South and North have agreed to promptly resolve humanitarian issues such as exchange visits by separated family members and relatives on occasions such as August 15 National Liberation Day and the question of unconverted long-term political prisoners³ in South Korea.” Since then, the

3. Unconverted long-term political prisoners refer to the prisoners that have been in prison for a long period of time for their pro-North spy activities. A portion of this group has revealed their intention to go back to North

verification of whether family members are alive, letter communication exchange, and reunion of separated families of the government and public developed. Up to date (December 31, 2014), there has been 11,519 cases of verification of living of family members, 12,146 cases of letter exchanges, and 26,106 people (including video meetings) have reunited with family. There were more cases of letter exchanges among the public and more cases of verification of whether the family member is alive by the government. Currently, the reality is that most of the survivors of the separated families are rapidly aging and dying. The South Korean government has verified that in 2014, of the 129,616 applicants of 61,352 have died and 68,264 are still living. Over 11 years from 2004-2014, 41,903 applicants of family reunion applicants have died, that is approximately 3,800 people per year. Currently, over 82% of those surviving separated family members are over 70 years old.

On the other hand, looking closely chronologically into the family reunions of the separated families the fluctuations can be seen. Especially the fluctuations of the exchange among the government level are more serious. It means that there are restrictions to the humanitarian question influenced by the circumstances of the security of the Korean Peninsula and North and South Korean relations. When looking at Table 1, the time period where separated family reunions were the most active was from 2000 until 2007. Before and after that time it can be seen that it was greatly withered. This disparity coincides with the overall situation of North and South. From the South Korean position there are direct relations to the disparity in South Korea's North Korea Policy. Of course, rhetorically all past administrations have stated that North-South reconciliation and resolution to the humanitarian problem is priority. The result of this can only be seen in the differences in the orientation of the North Korea Policy.

After the Summit held in June 2000, humanitarian cooperation was greatly expanded. From 2000 until 2007, there were 16 cases of separated family reunions, 7 cases of video reunions, and 1 case of letter communication. Through this exchange process 48,338 people of separated families in between South and North Korea have been verified alive and 679 cases of letter exchange were completed. Thereafter, the government supported the verification of

Korea. The repatriation of this group has been included in the agenda of the discussions between North and South Korea. On March 19, 1993, Mr. In-mo Lee was the first long-term prisoner to be repatriated to North Korea. After the June 15 Joint Declaration on September 2, 2000 there were 63 prisoners that were repatriated.

whether family members were alive or not, family reunions, and communication exchange for the public. On the public level, between the start of family reunions from 1990 until 2007 there were 3,756 cases of family members verified to be alive or dead, 11,093 cases of communication exchange, and 1,638 cases of family reunions that took place in a third country. With the increase of government level reunions there were instances of public level separated family reunions that have decreased. In 2002 at the 4th Inter-Korean Red Cross Meetings, it was agreed that a separated families meeting place would be built at Mount Geumgang. The facility was started in December 2007 and completed in July of 2008. In October 2007 at the 2nd Inter-Korean Red Cross Meeting, taking the construction of the meeting facility as an opportunity the “continuous reunion” was agreed. At the 9th Inter-Korean Red Cross Meeting held in November 2007, it was agreed that the reunion festivities would be regular.

With the Lee Myungbak administration taking office in 2008, the North Korea Policy of the previous government turned into one of placing pressure on North Korea. The Lee administration had the basic idea that without a resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue that there will be no progress on any other issues in regards to North Korea. Thereafter, with the sinking of the navel ship the, Cheonan in 2010, sanctions towards North Korea placed a halt on the efforts of reconciliation. Of course, in 2009, 2010, and 2013 a one time separated family reunion took place respectively. From 2008 until May 2015, the sense of reconciliation has diminished and is slowly being replaced with that of confrontation. With the conflict between the governments of North and South Korea, there have been negative impacts on the activities of exchange between separated families on the public level. During the Kim Dae Jung, Roh Moo Hyun, and Lee Myungbak administration the cases of families that were able to verify whether their loved ones were dead or live were 3,508 cases, 5,887 cases, 714 cases, letter exchange were 4,275 cases, 3,450 cases, and 341 cases, for family reunions 5,881 cases, 16,280 cases and 1,960 cases respectively. What was an active separated families reunion until 2007, it can be clearly concluded why there was a sharp decline in family reunions and the halt in regular family meetings.

Through the two North-South Korea Summits in 2000 and 2007, it clearly indicates that improvement in relations between the South and North brings mutual cooperation for reconciliation and peace. Especially, as a result of the October 4 Inter-Korean Summit held in

2007 a peace declaration called the “Declaration for the Progress in North and South relations and Peace Prosperity” was released placing a new framework for the improvement of relations between the two sides. The declaration is an eight-point agreement, reflecting on the reconciliation content stated in 1992. Also, specifically in point seven it expands and regularizes reunions of separated families adding on to the efforts for reconciliation cooperation such as establishing cooperation to overcome natural disasters. However, with the “Anything But Roh” mindset of the Lee administration ignoring the North Korea Policy established by his predecessors, relations with North Korea became strained and naturally efforts for reconciliation came to a halt. With the success of the conservative party reclaiming the Blue House with the presidential win of Park Geun Hye in late 2012, there was a revitalization of the unification discourse however, it can be seen that the Park government has taken a one sided approach of mistrust. The Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun government implemented the engagement policy towards North Korea to resolve in parallel security and humanitarian issues, improving relations with the North. As a result, North Korea cooperated in finding a resolution to reunite the separated families. North Korea agreed to expand the scope and cooperation approach in tackling the issue with separated families. They also agreed to the installation of the meeting facility. Thereafter, when the conservative government took office pushed the security and humanitarian issue to the backburner and took a unilateral position bringing retrogressive results to the North-South reconciliation efforts. The separated family reunions stopped at one time occasions and many of the separated family members have since passed.

Geopolitics Important, Inter-Relationship More Important

Although geopolitics is crucial for understanding and explaining international politics, it is basically based on the power politics. Instead, as a marginal part of geopolitics, critical geopolitics deconstructs classical geopolitical theories by showing their political/ideological functions for great powers. Geopolitics has not been interested in human dimension such as human rights, human security, and humanitarian issues. Besides it cannot always explain state’s foreign policy under the given international order.

In case of Korean peninsula, we see the irregular relations of geopolitics and human

dimension. In time of Cold War, when geopolitics was combined with ideological competition, human rights issues across the peninsula were sacrifice to the altar of regime competition at both inter-Korean and global level. Even in the early 1970s of D tente, this trend continued with strong geopolitical impact. During the time of Cold War dismantlement, its impact appeared to be strong with different direction, which opened the window of reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. With a few years of dialogue passing, however, animosity and tension became influential again. The lost 10 years in the Post-Cold War era resulted from the deep animosity among the parties concerned and newly rising security concern rather than from geopolitical variable itself in Northeast Asia. Falsification of geopolitics theory can be seen also in the time of Post-Post-Cold War since 2001. The US President George W. Bush's war against terror with unilateral security policy following September 11 attacks might limit the process of inter-Korean reconciliation since the first North-South Korea Summit in June 15, 2000. However, as the Table 1 shows, in the process of reconciliation during 2000-2007 geopolitical impact on human dimension had been weakened. The two Koreas' effort to improve their relationship contributed to resolving many aspects of humanitarian issues, although incurring cost of South Korea's domestic conflicts and involving Iraq War.

The 20th reunion of North-South Korean separated families was held at a Mt. Geumgang resort, at the border. The reunion of 187 families was comprised of two times of meeting over one week in the late October in 2015. Although regular and consistent reunion of separated families is the most important issue in terms of humanitarianism, that is linked to another issues such as reduction of military tension and confidence building by resuming inter-governmental talks and Mt. Geumgang tour. Humanitarian issue will be a key issue whenever inter-Korean dialogue is held under the situation made by geopolitics and power politics. The issue, however, will be resolved by the positive inter-relationship of two Koreas as seen in the early of the New Millennium.