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## FRENCH INSIGHT ON THE SUNSHINE POLICY DECADE

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*Critique Internationale*, the quarterly review of international affairs of Sciences Po (Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris), recently dedicated a series of articles to a period in Korean history known as the Sunshine Policy decade (1998-2007). This project, published by one of the most renowned institutes for political science in France, gathers innovative articles written or translated into French by contributors of French, Korean, Australian and New Zealander background. Although the division of the Korean peninsula is often considered one of the last remnants of the Cold War, the writers chose to analyze and assess the complex dynamics of rapprochement and confrontation during the period of relative openness and cooperation between North and South Korea. This period began with President Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy in 1998 and was continued by his successor Roh Moo Hyun until 2007. By examining interesting cases such as the Korean diaspora in Central Asia and the depiction of North Korea in South Korean pop culture and using international relations theories, sociological and anthropological tools as well as fieldwork results, the authors give a unique overview of contemporary Korean politics amongst the French-speaking academic world.

In the introductory article, project editor Valérie Gelézeau, a geographer and specialist on Korea, acknowledges the complexities of the power relationship between North and South Korea that became apparent during the Sunshine Policy decade, which allowed a substantial rise in inter-Korean flows

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of all sorts, including transportation, trade and human contacts. Gelézeau also outlines the main issues that will be addressed in the articles which make up the project: the failure of the confrontation strategy in inter-Korean negotiations, the hopes that were raised by the engagement policy during the Sunshine Policy decade and the importance of people's perceptions and mutual understanding for this process. Roland Bleiker compares the respective advantages and flaws of confrontation and engagement strategies in the negotiations between North and South Korea in order to establish a favorable and sustainable environment for peace and stability in a peninsula that still suffers from the consequences of a fratricidal war and 60 years of hostility and misunderstanding. Danielle Chubb describes the political role of North Korean human rights activists based in South Korea and South Korean society's attitude towards the breach of human rights on the other side of the border. Chubb finds that North Korean activist associations often fail to meet the neutrality requirement needed to be considered reliable interlocutors in South Korean society. The groups studied in Chubb's article took advantage of issues such as human rights in order to radicalize the debate, which consequently prevented dialogue and rapprochement. Eunsil Yim, a PhD candidate at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) chooses the case of the Korean diasporic community in Kazakhstan to depict the competition between North and South Korea in Korean language and culture studies, both aimed at enlarging their respective influence on Korean minorities in Central Asia. Stephen Epstein analyzes several depictions of North Korea in South Korean popular music, movies and novels, showing that the engagement policy launched during the Sunshine Policy decade also contributed to a change in people's perceptions and created a more favorable climate for reconciliation. Finally, Leonid Petrov unveils the political reasons that lay behind inter-Korean economic cooperation and the jointly managed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as well as what it was that put an end to this cooperation in 2008. Petrov identifies the cause as the return of the conservatives to power through Lee Myung Bak's administration and Pyongyang's defiance towards the political risks of deep and prolonged contact in the SEZs.

Overall, the project's articles demonstrate the failure of the confrontation strategy during past negotiations between the two Koreas. Bleiker observes that the confrontation strategy fails to accelerate the collapse of the North Korean regime and that economic sanctions have been overall counterproductive, as was shown in Iran or Iraq, weakening the people and preventing them from revolting. The strategy strengthens dictatorial regimes and reveals itself to be a

self-fulfilling prophecy. Other authors also note the misuse of the human rights issue during the negotiations, leading to a dead end. According to Danielle Chubb, most of the human rights activist organizations led by North Korean defectors are politically motivated, demanding the overthrow of the North Korean regime and thus radicalizing the debate. Leonid Petrov adds that the current South Korean conservatives, back in charge since 2008, also instrumentalized the abuses of human rights in the North in order to prevent unconditional cooperation, thereby blocking cooperation. Since the conservatives are back in power on both sides, Petrov asserts that political leaders are only concerned about ideology and the survival of the regime in the North and short-term "cheap populism" in the South (p. 109).

The project emphasizes the benefits brought by the engagement policy during the Sunshine Policy decade. It was launched by the Kim Dae Jung administration with the belief that "a policy aiming to integrate of North Korea into the international community is the best way to prevent a military escalation and to create a more favorable environment for peace (p. 27)." It was also based on the continuation of humanitarian help and ODA to support the general population. By giving security assurances and reducing North Korea's feeling of strategic vulnerability, South Korean leaders hoped to give the North an incentive to denuclearize. This led to genuine dialogue and several promises by North Korea on stopping its military nuclear program. The Sunshine Policy allowed human exchanges with the organization of tourist trips and separated families' meetings as well as an increase of trade flows and unique trans-border economic activities symbolized by the SEZs. The Kaesong industrial complex, created in 2003 and consisting of 350 hectares, 83 South Korean factories employing 32,000 North Korean workers and 1,600 South Korean executives (p. 97) is one example.

All of the authors insist on the importance of mutual perceptions and understanding – which were the true goals of the Sunshine Policy – and going beyond economic and political exchanges. The failure of the confrontation approach seems to stem from the failure of the South to understand the North's point of view on its nuclear military program, which is aimed at protecting itself from the superior military capabilities of the US, according to North Korea. Roland Bleiker insists on the need to promote dialogue through everyday life. He cites reconciliation poems transcending the violence of war written by South Korean poet Ko Un as well as some Korean history textbooks which are beginning to mention the role of the communist guerillas in the resistance against Japan during the colonial period. Mutual understanding was of course

improved by flows of tourists, family reunions and contact between North and South Korean workers in the Kaesong complex. Those contacts were so deep that Leonid Petrov assumes that it was considered by North Korean leaders as dangerous for the ideological loyalty of North Korean workers and urges both sides to stop cooperating.

These advances were also visible through the depiction of North Korea in South Korean pop culture. Stephen Epstein shows how North Korean stereotypes in movies evolved from demonization, as seen in the James Bond movie *Die Another Day*, to humanization, largely illustrated beforehand with movies like *Joint Security Area* and *Swiri*. Most importantly, Epstein unveils the latent longing for reunification which has recently appeared in South Korean cultural life. For instance, Tallae Umaktan, a girl band composed of five North Korean refugees, is an example of mediation and fusion between North and South cultures, which could evoke a certain homogeneity between both. Talla Umaktan is considered a K-pop group but uses the *shinminyo* (North Korean new fold ballad) style and North Korean-style accordions. The group also wears *hanbok* (Korean traditional dress), a rare occurrence in ordinary K-pop. The music video of their song *Motchaengi* is a parody of *JSA* and *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, two representative examples of emotional and brotherly stories between North and South Korean characters. The North Korean dictatorial regime appears as more 'burlesque' and grotesque than dangerous, whereas the South is depicted less indulgently, showing South Korean society's darker side as well. Similar music videos, romantic comedy movies and advertisements contributed to giving a more human image of the North to South Korean society, although they continue to emphasize the many cultural differences between North and South Korea. Another work that is mentioned is South Korean author Young Ha Kim's novel *Your Republic is Calling You*, which was written in 2006 and emphasizes the fact that most of the Western penetration into South Korean culture and lifestyle makes things difficult for reunification. The novel also shows that the process of impacting people's perception is flawed by a certain rivalry between the North and South, and by the tendency of each side to insist on a monopoly on genuine Koreanness inside and outside the peninsula. According to Eunsil Yim, the competition of Korean language and culture classes aimed at the Korean minority in Kazakhstan is a reflection of this phenomenon. Each Korea tries to impose its own language standard (*choson mal* for the North and *han'guk mal* for the South) and thereby extend its influence, bringing the logic of confrontation beyond the peninsula.

This project indeed gives an interesting insight into the interactions

of North and South Korea during the Sunshine Policy Decade. However, the strictly Korean viewpoint taken by the authors somehow neglects the influence of the international community, especially the United States and China, two countries whose influence remains highly salient during negotiations. Economic and social cooperation ultimately aimed at reunification is indeed a worthy goal, but some Asian neighbors might be reluctant to see a unified and powerful Korea emerge. For North Korea, China is a partner as important as its Southern counterpart, and Beijing surely does not share the view of Seoul concerning reunification. Another expert from the Center for Education Research and Innovation pointed to the fact that China is still unwilling to upset North Korea as a buffer state between itself and "the South of the Peninsula where 28,000 US soldiers are still stationed."<sup>2</sup> Also, if the reader is to understand the undeniable advantages of the Sunshine Policy, there needs to be more detail about its actual impact on public opinion and its role in people's perception and decision-making processes. For instance, it would have been interesting to have some explanations about the conservative party's victory during the 2007 presidential elections. Perhaps this was somehow related to a possible weariness of Koreans towards all the efforts at providing aid to North Korea.

Furthermore, the analysis on rapprochement provided in the articles does not provide the key to understand the current upsurge of tensions between the North and South (although this began after this issue was published). At the end of his article, Leonid Petrov expresses hope that the power transition in the North would bring new leaders open to reform. But the transition has recently brought the attack on Yonpyeong Island and seems to have led to a radicalization of South Korean public opinion, as if the beneficial effects of the Sunshine Policy decade had never existed. Experts point out that the renewal of tensions makes it more difficult for the South Korean government and citizens to willingly provide food aid to the North.<sup>3</sup> From the North Korean point of view, the aim of the attacks is supposedly to bring the US and South Korea back to the negotiation table, but the outcome of this crisis remains uncertain. **PEAR**

2 Justine Guichard, *Corée, la montée des périls*, [http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/archive/2011/janvier/chro\\_jg.pdf](http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/archive/2011/janvier/chro_jg.pdf). (accessed March 17, 2011).

3 Christopher Hill, "Food for Thought in North Korea," <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hill2/English> (accessed February 24, 2011).