Identity and security in Korea

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Abstract  The summit meeting between the two Korean heads of state, which took place in Pyongyang in June 2000, constitutes a major turning point in the peninsula’s history. As the effects of the meeting are gradually unfolding, a period of détente no longer seems impossible. But major difficulties remain unsolved and Korea will continue to be one of the world’s most volatile areas. The task of this essay is to identify and analyse some of the entrenched political patterns that will challenge policy-makers in the years ahead. To do so it is necessary to portray the conflict in Korea not only in conventional ideological and geopolitical terms, but also, and primarily, as a question of identity. From such a vantage-point two components are essential in the search for a more peaceful peninsula. Substantial progress has recently been made in the first realm, the need to approach security problems, no matter how volatile they seem, in a cooperative and dialogical, rather than merely a coercive manner. The second less accepted but perhaps more important factor, revolves around the necessity to recognize that dialogue has its limits, that the party on the other side of the DMZ cannot always be accommodated or subsumed into compromise. Needed is an ethics of difference: a willingness to accept that the other’s sense of identity and politics may be inherently incompatible with one’s own.

Keywords  Korea; security; identity; conflict resolution; unification.

Introduction: ‘In Front of Them All!’

The soldiers who serve [in the JSA] are truly on Freedom’s Frontier and stand face-to-face with Communism on a daily basis. . . . Each soldier and officer assigned to the battalion is hand-picked and undergoes a rigorous testing program upon arrival in the JSA. Only after passing this, is he a full member of the battalion and can claim that he is ‘In Front of Them All!’

(Eighth US Army, United Nations Command Security Battalion Joint Security Area (JSA), Panmunjom, Korea
Official Web Site, 13 June 2000)
We are all one people.

(Kim Dae-jung, President, Republic of Korea, Pyongyang, 13 June 2000)

Hey, man, cry your eyes out.

(Ko Un, ‘Blue skies’)

More than a decade after the collapse of global Cold War power structures, the Korean Peninsula remains hermetically divided along the 38th parallel. The presence of weapons of mass destruction, combined with a hostile Cold War rhetoric and the intersection of great-power interests, have created an ever-present danger of military confrontation. Nearly 2 million troops face each other across the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Conventional security approaches based on deterrence have failed to bring lasting security to the region (see Kihl and Hayes 1997; Kim 1996; Mack 1993; Mazarr 1995a; Moon 1996).

In recent times, however, Korea has witnessed a series of historic diplomatic breakthroughs. The inauguration of Kim Dae-jung as South Korea’s president in early 1998 has led to a new, more conciliatory and engaging Nordpolitik. In late 1999, the so-called Perry Report called for a fundamental review of US policy towards Pyongyang, advocating a position that rests not only on military deterrence, but also on a ‘new, comprehensive and integrated approach’ to negotiations with North Korea (Perry 1999: 8). Pyongyang too has softened some of its policies, opening itself up to more business interactions with the outside world and revealing more flexibility in diplomatic negotiations – such that by June 1999 a historic summit meeting between the two heads of state – Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung – became possible. The significance of this meeting cannot be overestimated. It was accompanied by a series of less spectacular but equally important cultural and economic events. Whether or not the planned results of the meeting – which include large-scale family reunions – can be fully implemented remains to be seen.

The task of this essay is to place the recent breakthroughs in the context of the larger political patterns that have dominated the peninsula in the post-war period. Many deeply entrenched difficulties and security risks remain intact. While outright war no longer seems an imminent threat, a sudden escalation of tensions cannot be excluded. A more fundamental rethinking of security and ethics is thus necessary to overcome the current violent-prone political order.

The essay argues that to recognize the existing problems and to identify the tasks that lie ahead, it is necessary to scrutinize the security situation on the Korean Peninsula not only in conventional ideological and geopolitical terms, but also, and primarily, as a question of identity. Much like Gregory Henderson’s classic Korea: The Politics of the Vortex (1968: 3) described the essence of Korean politics as revolving around a 'physics
of centralisation’, one could view identity as the key to understanding security on the peninsula. To be more precise, the present security dilemmas can be seen as emerging from a fundamental but largely ignored tension between the idea of Korean identity and its rather different practical application. A strong, almost mythical vision of homogeneity permeates both parts of Korea. It portrays the division of the peninsula as a temporary disruption of Korean identity and assumes that unification will eventually recover the lost national unity (see Grinker 1998: 8–9). It is in this spirit that the official joint-press communiqué of the June 2000 summit declared unification a key priority (New York Times, 14 June 2000). Enforcing such trends is a strong cultural fear of the notion of outside-ness, of absolute otherness. This is why the other side of the divided peninsula must be seen as part of a whole. Anything else would be too terrible, too evil a notion to contemplate. This is why North Korea ‘is quite literally still family’ (see Alford 1999: 103–6).

In contrast to this mythical homogeneity we find the reality of half a century of political division, during which the two Koreas have developed identities that are not only distinct, but also articulated in direct and stark opposition against each other. Over the years these antagonistic forms of identity have become so deeply entrenched in societal consciousness that the current politics of insecurity appears virtually inevitable. It is the tension between these two contradictory aspects of Korea politics – the strong myth of homogeneity and the actual reality of oppositional identity practices – that contains the key to understanding both the sources of the existing conflict and the potential for a more peaceful peninsula.

To foreground identity is not to deny that security policies in divided Korea have been dominated by strategic and ideological motives. The point, rather, is to acknowledge that the ensuing dilemmas were, and still are, also part of a much deeper entrenched practice of defining security through a stark opposition between self and other. This mind-set, which defines security as a protection of the inside from the threat of a hostile outside, turns into a collective mind-set that greatly increases the risk of instability and violent encounters.

The essay begins by illustrating how the construction of self and other has affected the security of Korean people – security as defined not only in terms of militarily perceived national defence, but also in the wider sense of guaranteeing stability, subsistence, dignity, basic human rights and freedom from fear. The main part of the essay then consists of exploring possibilities for the establishment of a more peaceful political climate on the peninsula. Despite recent progress in negotiations between North and South, the likelihood of a humanitarian catastrophe remains high as long as current North and South Korean notions of identity prevail. An alternative to present insecurity politics would need to be based on a concept of justice that subsumes, at its core, a fundamentally different conception of the relationship between self and other. An articulation of an adequate
security policy must revolve around combining the ongoing and encour-
aging search for dialogue with a new and more radical willingness to accept
that the other’s sense of identity and politics may be inherently incom-
mensurable with one’s own.

Needless to say, it cannot be the task of brief exposé to provide an
exhaustive account of the peninsula’s political intricacies. While the essay
pays particular attention to some of the recent changes in security poli-
cies, its prime task consists not of analysing these developments in detail,
but of placing them into the context of long-term identity patterns that
have come to frame political interactions on the peninsula. What follows
should thus be read as attempts to outline – in a conceptual and neces-
sarily tentative manner – the long-term challenges that have emerged in
the wake of the summit meeting of June 2000.

Identity and (in)security in Cold War Korea: a condensed history

To explore the possibilities of translating recent breakthroughs into a
sustained peace in Korea one must first engage the political discourses
that have given rise to the existing conflict. As a result of Soviet–American
rivalry at the end of the Second World War the Korean Peninsula was
tentatively divided along the 38th parallel. With the creation of two polit-
ically and ideologically separate Korean states in 1948, and their subse-
quent confrontation during the Korean War, this supposedly provisional
division became a permanent feature of Northeast Asia. Much of the
ensuing conflict is based on identity constructs that portray the political
system at the opposite side of the divided peninsula as threatening, perhaps
even inherently evil. This phenomenon is all the more astonishing since
the boundaries of identity in Korea are drawn not along ‘natural’ lines,
such as race, ethnicity, language or religion. They are based above all on
two artificially created and diametrically opposed ideological images of
the world. Korea may have been particularly receptive to the external
imposition of stark identity constructs. Embedded in an unusually homo-
gegeneous cultural tradition, Korea opened relatively late to the world – in
the second half of the nineteenth century – only to be absorbed into the
Japanese Colonial empire, whose ruthless occupation strategy sought to
eradicate Korean identity and assimilate the peninsula.

Ideology, identity and inter-state violence

The political vacuum that had existed after half a century of Japanese
occupation may have provided an environment that facilitated the impos-
sition of dualistic and antagonistic Cold War identity patterns. This does,
of course, not mean that there had been no differences in Korea, or that
ideology has eradicated all other sources of identity. Regional identities
have always played a key role in politics on the peninsula, both before and after the Korean War. Moreover, Koreans derive their identity from a variety of sources. Depending on the situation, a person may, for instance, be identified primarily as a man or a woman, an elder or a youth, a manager or a peasant. These and many other forms of identification are carefully grammaticized in the Korean language, which possesses verb and noun suffixes that structurally force a speaker to identify specific hierarchy relationships in all verbal interactions. The Cold War has not eradicated these aspects of Korean culture and politics. Rather, it has created a situation where one very specific, and largely externally imposed form of identification – an ideological one – has come to prevail over all others. Whereas gender, age, education or regional affiliation continue to be key factors in determining a person’s social status and possibilities, his/her ideological identification has literally turned into a matter of life and death, or at least freedom and imprisonment. It is in this context that the rivalry between the two Koreas has given rise to a highly volatile conflict zone. The Korean War claimed the lives of more than a million people and, almost half a century after the events, an estimated 10 million individuals are still separated from their families. Perhaps even more tragic, as Bruce Cumings (1997: 298) notes, is not even the war itself, but the political tensions that existed in Korea during the 1940s and early 1950s – tensions that were unusually high and linked to such issues as colonial legacies, foreign intervention and national division. The true tragedy, Cumings stresses, was ‘that the war solved nothing’, for all it did was to restore the status quo ante. The stage was now set for a volatile future.

Each of the subsequent attempts to repress the Korean conflict through the conventional logic of military deterrence has turned out to be disastrous. They have, in Moon Chung-in’s words (1996: 9), ‘driven North and South Korea into the trapping structure of a vicious cycle of actions and reactions’. The peninsula, as a result, was sucked into a very costly arms race that elevated levels of tensions to the point that the two divided sides have almost constantly been exposed to the spectre of violence. Examples abound: North Korea has committed what are said to be a dozen major terrorist attacks, from bombings of civilian airliners to tunnel and submarine infiltrations across the DMZ. South Korea stands accused of having violated the Armistice Agreement roughly 500,000 times (Moon 1996: 53). Its yearly joint military exercises with the US Army, entitled Team Spirit, have traditionally revolved around an unnecessarily aggressive northbound military scenario (Moon 1996: 68).

The identity patterns that formed with the division of the peninsula and the subsequent Korean War are important for understanding the challenges that lie ahead. Antagonistic identity constructs, born out of death, fear and longing for revenge, are continuously used to fuel and legitimize aggressive foreign and repressive domestic policies.
Identity in Korea is essentially constructed in negative terms; that is, in direct opposition to the other side of the divided nation. What Cumings (1997: 140) wrote of the immediate post-war period remained valid for all of the post-war period, at least until very recently: not one good thing could be said about the leader on the other side of the dividing line. ‘To do so was to get a jail sentence.’ Look at a few examples of what Moon (1996: 71–2) calls ‘demonising images’. The North Korean press is full of derogative terms that describe the South Korean political system and its leaders. The concepts have changed over the years, but the dynamic remains the same. In the mid-1980s, for instance, the terminology used to describe South Korean presidents included honorific attributes such as ‘human butcher’, ‘rare human rubbish’, ‘chieftain of irregularities and corruption and human scum’ (KCNA, Jan./Feb. 1988). In more recent times, the preferred vocabulary has shifted towards terms like ‘warhawks’, ‘warmongers’, ‘fascists’, ‘imperialists’ and ‘reactionaries’ (KCNA, April/May 2000).

In South Korea too, negative identity constructs became entrenched in societal consciousness to the point that ‘for more than two decades after national partition, South Korean schoolchildren visually depicted North Koreans literally to be red-bodied demons with horns and long fingernails on their hairy, grabbing hands, as represented in anti-Communist posters’ (Choi 1993: 81). One does not need to be a trained psychologist to realize that children who grow up with such images and educational leitmotifs contribute to the dissemination of a societal self-awareness that is articulated through a stark opposition between inside and outside. Efforts have recently been made to dismantle at least some of these antagonistic images. Officers of the South Korean Armed Forces, for instance, are encouraged to introduce and employ military jargon that allows soldiers to distinguish between the evil North Korean system (the ‘main enemy’) and their innocent brothers and sisters in the north (the ‘anti-enemy’) (Defence White Paper 1998: 83). But deeply entrenched antagonistic identity constructs cannot be changed overnight. They persist in virtually all aspects of life. ‘In front of them all’ proclaims the much-heralded motto of the US and South Korean troops stationed in the Joint Security Area (Eighth US Army 2000). Perhaps even more telling is the fact that President Kim Dae-jung created a major political storm when he described Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader, not in the usual negative terms (as a brutal, insane, licentious and impetuous drunk and playboy), but as ‘a pragmatic leader with good judgement and knowledge’ (see Korea Herald, 8 May 2000). The vehemence of the public reaction demonstrates that the construction of an antagonistic ‘other’ is so pronounced and deeply embedded in the collective consciousness that, as several Korean commentators now admit, it is virtually impossible to advance objective assessments of the security situation on the peninsula (Choi 1998: 26).
Ideology, identity and domestic repression

While one can easily recognize how Korea’s politics of insecurity has triggered high military tensions in Northeast Asia, it is important to note that antagonistic identity constructs have also shaped the course of domestic politics. As in many other parts of the world, a perceived external threat is used to consolidate domestic power structures. It is not by accident that North and South Korea have one of the world’s worst human rights records. Various analysts do, indeed, detect a direct relationship between the creation of enemy images and efforts to suppress domestic dissent. Stephen Noerper (1998: 167–74), for instance, demonstrates how the production of military tension has been an essential component of Pyongyang’s ability to sustain itself externally and internally. In the South too, various military regimes have used the perception of a hostile North as a strategy to repress dissent and consolidate domestic power structures. The situation has improved with South Korea’s gradual transition to democracy, but the government still employs the notorious National Security Law to crack down on dissidents who show sympathy for the arch enemy in the North.

Little does it matter, of course, that in the almost total absence of interactions between North and South, the construction of enemy images is based far more on fiction than on facts. Indeed, the practice of constructing a threatening other is greatly facilitated by the unusually hermetic militarized zone that separates the two Koreas. There is no communication across the 38th parallel and neither North nor South Korean people have a realistic idea of how everyday life looks in the vilified other half. For decades the two regimes have shielded their populations from ‘subversive’ influences stemming from the other side. The consequences are manifold. The absence of cross-national knowledge and interaction, for instance, makes it possible for South Koreans to hate an abstract notion of an evil communist state without having to specify how they feel about the actual people who live on the other side of the 38th parallel (Grinker 1998: x).

Cultures of insecurity, and the dualistic and antagonistic thinking patterns that sustain them, are, of course, not unique to Korea. They are part of a much deeper embedded practice of defining security in repressive ways. The Cold War was only one manifestation of such practices. A variety of theorists have drawn attention to what R. B. J. Walker (1986: 497) has identified as a key component of contemporary thinking about international politics: namely, a sharply dichotomized account of the relationship between the principle of identity and unity and the principle of difference or pluralism. Questions of identity, these scholars stress, are crucial to understand this dualistic construction of security, for ‘security cannot be severed from the claims of group and collective structures within which individuals find their identity and through which they undertake collective projects’.3
One would think that things have substantially changed with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union. But in Korea strikingly much has remained the same, at least until very recently. It was only with the first summit meeting between Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung that substantial change appeared possible even at the level of rhetoric. The fact that the two heads of state publicly embraced, held hands and used a complimentary vocabulary to describe each other constitutes a major divergence from deeply entrenched patterns. The day after the summit meeting, and in response to a similar move by the North, South Korea stopped its anti-Communist propaganda broadcasts that had been transmitted for decades from giant loudspeakers across the DMZ. It remains to be seen whether or not more of these and other symbolic gestures will lead towards a sustained rapprochement. That task ahead is not easy. Deeply entrenched identity constructions cannot be changed overnight. The symbolic breakthroughs of June 2000 have not yet led to an equally radical reorientation of security politics and societal consciousness in general. As in other parts of the world, strategic discourses in and towards Korea continue to revolve around the need to define safety in relation to the existence of an external threat that lends coherence to one’s own sense of politics and identity.\(^4\) ‘We must not let our guard down and should strengthen our defense posture,’ declared Kim Dae-jung in the wake of the summit meeting. ‘Only those who are well prepared for war can enjoy peace’ (Korea Herald, 20 June 2000). The essay now moves towards examining the interaction and tensions between some of the spectacular recent rapprochements and the more entrenched long-term patterns of identity and security that need to be challenged if peace is to become a sustainable feature of Northeast Asian politics.

**Unification and security**

Identity and security in Korea are intrinsically linked. They are linked not only with each other, but also with the question of unification, which has dominated virtually all aspects of politics on the peninsula. It is an omnipresent but very particular vision of unification – one that largely ignores the reality of existing antagonistic identity practices and thus renders them even more prone to cause conflict than they already are.

In both North and South Korea, unification is one of the most central political leitmotifs, and in both parts a unified peninsula is perceived in homogeneous terms. A recent monograph by Roy Grinker has persuasively drawn attention to this phenomenon. Focusing in particular on South Korean identity practices, Grinker (1998: 4) detects a dangerous myth of unity, a ‘master narrative of homogeneity’, so to speak. This myth, he stresses (1998: 8–9), holds that the bifurcation of the peninsula disrupted Korean identity and that unification will eventually recover the lost national unity.
While the vision of a homogeneous nation remains strong, Grinker convincingly shows how an actual process of unification may well amount to a major threat to South Korean identity because, as he argues, this identity is constructed around and fundamentally dependent upon the existence of its opposite, its enemy: North Korea. Grinker examines images of North Korea across a wide range of South Korean sources, including children’s television shows, school textbooks, folk tales, novels, poetry, plays, movies, art exhibits, illegal border crossings and extensive interviews with, for instance, defectors and student protesters. Among the many problems that Grinker identifies is the inability to mourn the loss of a homogeneous nation (Grinker 1998: 73–98; see also Paik 1993: 73). The quest for unification, as it is defined today, is thus presented as a desire to return home, a search for some ‘real’ or ‘true’ Korea. This search cannot but fail, and not only because for most Koreans today the only reality they have ever known is division. The homogeneity, if it ever existed, ceased long before the Korean War.

Towards a more conciliatory North Korea policy: the soft-landing scenario

The tensions between oppositional identity practices and the myth of homogeneity become apparent if one observes South Korean approaches to unification, which can roughly be divided into two strategies. One advocates a hard-line policy towards the North, which is aimed at undermining the authoritarian regime as fast as possible, leading to a quick collapse and subsequent absorption. The second and more widely accepted approach is based on a gradual rapprochement between the two sides. This so-called soft-landing strategy aims at preventing a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime and the enormous problems it would engender on the peninsula, such as a refugee crisis or even a potential civil war (see Kim 1996; Harrison 1997; Snyder 1998a).

The soft-landing scenario has become influential enough to be adopted as the preferred policy option of all great powers concerned with Korea. Indeed, some commentators speak of a significant policy shift, one that interprets the North Korean threat as stemming no longer solely from a conventional military attack, but also from the potentially disastrous consequences of an uncontrolled regime collapse (see Oberdorfer 1998: 369–411; Hughes 1998: 395). Washington, Moscow, Beijing and Tokyo all assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that a step-by-step approach would, for both financial and geopolitical reasons, be a far more stable way of achieving Korean unity. To avoid the highly volatile situation that would emerge from a sudden collapse of North Korea, policies are now directed towards assisting Pyongyang enough to ensure some sort of controlled transition. This is the basic thinking behind the so-called Agreed Framework, signed in October 1994, according to which Pyongyang agreed to freeze its
nuclear programme in return for a number of US promises, including the construction of two nuclear reactors that would provide North Korea with energy sources. The most central institutional element of the Agreed Framework was the establishment of KEDO (the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization), which commits the US (as well as South Korea and Japan) to provide the know-how and the financial means (US$5 billion) for the construction of the respective reactors by 2003 (see Snyder 1998b: 8–10; Hughes 1998: 390–1). While the ultimate results of this politics of appeasement remain to be seen, the Agreed Framework was clearly able to move Korea out of a very tense stand-off into a more conciliatory phase.

A second major step forward occurred with the election of Kim Dae-jung as South Korea’s president in late 1997. Starting with his inaugural speech in February 1998, Kim called for a new approach towards North Korea. Initially termed ‘sunshine policy’, Kim’s initiative revolves around moving from a deeply entrenched politics of containment towards a more active engagement that promotes ‘reconciliation and cooperation between the South and North’ (Kim, cited in Kihl 1998: 23). Kim’s new approach has received widespread support by South Korea’s allies – a trend that is exemplified by the report of former US Defense Secretary William Perry. Asked by President Clinton to conduct an extensive review of US policy towards North Korea, Perry and his collaborators concluded, in October 1999, that ‘a fundamental review of US policy was indeed needed’ (Perry 1999: 3). The trust of Perry’s recommendations lie in retaining existing defence postures while, at the same time, moving towards a more sustained diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang.

The most spectacular result of these new and more tolerant US and South Korean approaches undoubtedly occurred between 13 and 15 June, when President Kim Dae-jung visited Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong-il, the General Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea. There are, of course, a variety of factors that had led to the summit meeting, not least North Korea’s desperate need for economic assistance after five years of devastating famine that are said to have resulted in the death of about 2 million people, or roughly 10 per cent of the population. But independently of its causes, the diplomatic events that have taken place in Korea over the last two years are of historic importance and signify a major step towards the reduction of military tension in this perennially volatile part of the world. A successful initiation of the soft-landing scenario has undoubtedly contributed to these breakthroughs.

The conceptual and political limits of the soft-landing scenario

Highly desirable as it may be, and successful as it has been in its initial phases, the soft-landing scenario is not without difficulties. Two particular challenges stand out. First, the policy of rapprochement has not addressed
– yet alone overcome – the antagonistic identity constructs that have given rise to the conflict in the first place. Despite openings at various fronts, the underlying assumption, especially among South Korean and American policy-makers, remains that the North will gradually move towards a market-oriented economy, which will then facilitate a peaceful reintegration of the peninsula. It is a scenario of a ‘contained collapse’, whose prime objective remains winning the war; that is, a way of conquering the North by means other than weapons. The tactical elements may seem more tolerant than that of the hard-line approach, but the fundamental strategic goal remains strikingly similar: to annihilate the arch enemy and its sense of identity (see Grinker 1998). Given the spectacular success of the recent summit meeting such an assessment seems harsh, perhaps even polemic. And yet, underneath the new politics of engagement linger more deeply entrenched residues of Cold War thinking patterns. The subsequent sections of this essay will substantiate in more detail how these patterns persist and why an engagement with them is necessary for the promotion of long-term peace and reconciliation on the peninsula.

The second shortcoming of the soft-landing approach has to do not with its implementation, but with doubts about its practical applicability. We know from the German precedent that once the Iron Curtain was gone it became virtually impossible to retain two politically and economically distinct national entities. The push west was simply too strong to hold back what Jürgen Habermas (1991) called ‘D-Mark Nationalisms’. There is, of course, no way to predict a possible collapse of North Korea, but neither can this possibility be excluded. Scholars usually acknowledge the extent to which the consolidation of power in Pyongyang accounts for considerable regime stability, but not without noting that the social and economic situation in North Korea also ‘shows explicit signs of impeding implosion’ (Moon 1998: 12; see also Suh and Lee 1988). Some, however, predicted more dramatic events. Adian Foster-Carter (1993: 159–75; 1998: 27–38) has been particularly keen to draw attention to the possibility of an imminent collapse of the North Korean regime. This, of course, has not happened. Despite widespread famine and increasingly disastrous economic performances, the government in Pyongyang is as stable as ever. But this does not necessarily mean that a collapse can be excluded. Nicholas Eberstadt convincingly identifies the dangers of putting too much trust in the soft-landing scenario. ‘The North,’ he says (1997: 79), ‘is more likely to implode than to be integrated gradually.’ Paradoxically, the recent rapprochement and North Korea’s related efforts to open up may well increase the chances of a collapse. The feasibility of gradualism hinges on a number of unlikely scenarios, such as the assumption that ‘the North Korean government will someday embrace a program of economic liberalization and somehow survive to complete the decade of transformation the program would entail’ (Eberstadt 1997: 81). How, indeed, would it ethically be possible for Korea to keep an ideologically united country
divided into two political parts, one rich, the other poor? Even the best-case scenario, one that revolves around an optimal economic approach to unification, suggests that ‘after a decade of adjustment the level of North Korean per capita income would still be less than 40% that of the South’s’ (Noland et al., 1998: 814).

**Rethinking identity and difference**

To take recent progressive initiatives a step further and to deal adequately with present and future security threats in Korea, including a possible collapse of the North, a fundamental rethinking of identity and difference is required. This, in turn, precipitates an equally fundamental reassessment of what is and is not essential to understand the conflict on the Korean Peninsula. A focus on identity will de-emphasize some political issues hitherto perceived as central while moving other, more marginal, concerns to a prominent position. Among the issues that move to the background are diplomatic negotiations or debates about the ‘bomb’, which have so far preoccupied analysts of Korean security. This is not to say that they are not important, or that a possible military escalation should not be of the utmost concern. The point, rather, is that these dangers must be seen as symptoms, rather than causes. The nuclear threat, for instance, does not exist primarily because of proliferating weapons potential. It has emerged and persists only because the underlying political discourse has led the two Korean states into a situation in which conflict has become the *modus operandi* of political interactions.

A rethinking of security must tap into and challenge this more fundamental domain of politics. It must address issues of perception and identity. It must confront the political discourses that have objectivized and legitimized the current culture of violence. From such a perspective, the principal ethical challenge in divided Korea consists of how to deal with the other and, once national unification has occurred, with the residues of deeply embedded identity constructs that are based on an antagonistic interaction between inside and outside. The ability to meet this challenge determines to a great extent the level of violence that will accompany intra-national relations and a possible unification process.

By foregrounding issues of identity and difference, the essay now draws attention to two aspects that are crucial for the establishment of a more peaceful security situation in Korea. One has to do with the search for dialogue, with the need to develop commonalities across difference. The other revolves around accepting the incompatibilities that will always remain. Expressed in other words, the search for a proper solution to the problem of divided Korea must be based on a process that not only promotes dialogical interactions, but also recognizes the inevitable existence of difference and alterity as an essential aspect of preventing violent encounters.
Towards an ethics of dialogue

Dialogue is undoubtedly one of the most needed and, at least until recently, the least practised features of politics in Korea. It is essential for diffusing tension and preventing the risk of violence. Dialogue should be based not only on sympathy – a projection of the self unto the other – but also, and primarily, on empathy. Ideally, it is a ‘process of positional slippage that occurs when one listens seriously to the concerns, fears, and agendas of those one is unaccustomed to heeding’ (Sylvester 1994: 317).

Korea: a history of absent dialogue

For most of the time since the division of Korea there has been no inter-action between the two parts that could be characterized as empathetic and dialogical. Little can be seen of what is often characterized as the ‘Asian way’ of solving problems; namely, a process that proceeds ‘by consensus and [seeks] to build confidence and trust between participants’ (Cheeseman 1999: 349; Trood and Booth 1999: 339–62). Meetings of the Military Armistice Commission in Panmunjom, for instance, have never amounted to more than an exchange of pre-prepared statements through which each side accused the other of violating the Armistice Agreement. Diplomatic meetings, held in Beijing, Geneva or other third-country cities, have been less antagonistic, but they too were caught in the spiral of antagonistic identity constructs. Moon Chung-in (1996: 250), for instance, has demonstrated in detail how ‘perception and knowledge remain as formidable barriers to effective [confidence-building measures] and arms control talks’.

A significant monograph by Leon Sigal (1998) draws attention to the importance of dialogue and, respectively, to the deplorable fact that for most of the post-war period the key actors in Korea, including the US, have not given true dialogue a chance. Sigal may at times be too undifferentiated in his analysis, overlooking some nuances and the occasional diplomatic initiative, such as Roh Tae Woo’s (short-lived) Nordpolitik and certain overtures of the Reagan administration. And yet, Sigal’s counter-reading of US nuclear diplomacy towards North Korea between 1988 and 1995 is convincing, for it identifies a general trend that needs to be scrutinized. He documents in detail why coercive diplomacy failed and how it brought Korea to the brink of war in early 1994. He speaks of a US foreign policy pattern that discouraged cooperation and, instead, promoted a ‘crime-and-punishment approach’ which constituted North Korea as a ‘rogue’ state, a threatening outlaw. While acknowledging the numerous instances that would, indeed, give rise to such an image, Sigal also deals with the complexities, the multiplicities and the interactive nature of the conflict in question. In a crucial passage (1998: 13) he asks why, if North Korea was allegedly so keen on developing nuclear weapons and had numerous opportunities to do so, did it not simply go ahead and build bombs?
Sigal’s answers (1998: 125) spotlight Washington’s inability to recognize North Korea was playing ‘tit-for-tat in nuclear diplomacy’. He empirically reveals the existence of a recurring pattern: each time the US resorted to an aggressive policy (and he correctly reminds the reader that ‘no country has been the target of more American nuclear threats than North Korea’) Pyongyang became more recalcitrant (Sigal 1998: 21). By contrast, a more cooperative attitude was generally rewarded with North Korean concessions. Tension on the Korean Peninsula thus only decreased once the US adopted a ‘give-and-take’ diplomacy that recognized how Pyongyang’s recalcitrance can, and should, be read as a bargaining tactic to get something in return for giving up the nuclear option.

Towards a more dialogical security environment

Sigal backs up his preference for dialogical over coercive diplomacy with a detailed analysis of Jimmy Carter’s private visit to North Korea in June 1994. At the height of tension the former US president insisted on giving cooperation a chance. His historic meeting with Kim II-sung and the subsequent ‘Track II’ diplomacy brought North Korea ‘away from the brink and back to the negotiation table’ (Sigal 1998: 168). It was a turning point in nuclear diplomacy and laid the foundation for the signing, on 21 October, of the Agreed Framework. It remains to be seen whether long-term patterns on the Korean Peninsula will strengthen or weaken Sigal’s arguments. At this stage a variety of events seem to strongly confirm his analysis. Equally convincing are Sigal’s arguments that signs of compromise emanating from Pyongyang were often not heard in the US, because the prevalent storyline about North Korea – the one that revolves around an image of an aggressive communist state incapable of compromising – was simply too strong and too deeply entrenched. North Korea’s own views and policy statements, he stresses, were rarely reported in the Western press. As a result, key parts of the ‘story’ did not actually appear in the news, and could thus never enter the realm of dialogue (Sigal 1998: 207–28).

This discursive blocking-out technique seems all the more anachronistic today, when the North Korean threat is being scrutinized more critically. Eberstadt (1995: 51) points out that the widespread, and until recently uncritically accepted, image of ‘a steady and massive build-up of North Korean military strength continues to be challenged... in a variety of quarters and on a variety of grounds’. A recently launched private spy satellite, for instance, has revealed what US intelligence has kept secret for years: that North Korea’s only operational (and highly notorious) missile test centre, in Nodong, consist of little more than ‘a shed, a dirt road, a launch pad and a rice paddy’, in short, by far not enough to constitute a comprehensive testing facility or, for that matter, a serious threat to US security (Evans 2000: 7). But even before these revelations, the
picture of North Korea contained far more grey shades than the black-and-white image that Western decision-makers wanted us to see and accept as truth. What we did not see, as a result, was the fact that Pyongyang has, at various stages, shown significant signs of compromise. Moon (1996: 97) even argues that North Korea has been, at least at the level of rhetoric, ‘much more assertive than the South’ in calling for a variety of tension-easing measures, including the elimination of military manoeuvres, the peaceful use of the DMZ, and the declaration of a nuclear-free zone on the peninsula.

From state-controlled negotiations to a broader dialogical engagement

Earlier sections of this essay have already drawn attention to the recent breakthroughs that have occurred in the wake of President Kim Dae-jung’s sunshine policy. A more conciliatory South Korean stance, coupled with the new negotiational policy advocated by the Perry Report in late 1999, created the conditions for a series of historic events, culminating in the summit meeting between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il in June 2000. This meeting undoubtedly constitutes the most significant dialogical breakthrough since the Korean War. Follow-up dialogues are planned at a variety of levels, and so is a return visit by Kim Jong-il to Seoul. These moves have already eased many of the tensions that have haunted the peninsula for decades.

Less spectacular, but equally significant are a variety of more daily events that preceded and accompanied the summit meeting. In June 2000 a dance group of North Korean children performed in Seoul, and so did the Pyongyang circus. For the first time ever, South Korean cinemas screened a North Korean movie. More and more South Korean business companies are establishing a presence in the North, contributing to the possibility of face-to-face interactions that can dismantle threat-images more successfully than big media events. This evolution is a direct result of Kim Dae-jung’s sunshine policy, which seeks to separate politics from economics. The new, more tolerant approach towards the North no longer insists that the State should be the only actor allowed to deal with the arch enemy. Despite obstacles of various kinds, not least the highly unpredictable investment climate in the North, there have been a series of bold business ventures since the inauguration of Kim Dae-jung in February 1998. The most spectacular events occurred in June and November 1998, when Chung Ju-yung, founder of the Hyundai conglomerate, crossed into North Korea, via Panmunjom, and with several hundred heads of cattle, to be donated to the North. The South Korean business tycoon was not only personally received by the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, but also secured a variety of historic joint-business ventures, including an opening up of the Kumgang mountains for South Korean
tourists. Additional projects include a possible North–South oil pipeline and a computer-making plant near Pyongyang (Kang 1998: 1). Other companies followed Hyundai’s pioneering efforts: the Samsung group, for instance, started to produce TV sets and stereos in a joint-venture plant near Pyongyang, and LG Electronics has plans for a similar project (Korea Herald, 11 April 2000). These bold business initiatives had in many ways paved the way for the summit meeting that took place the following year.

Historians of tomorrow may well identify the turning point in Northeast Asian politics with these low-key economic events, rather than the diplomatic summits that attract global media attention. Indeed, some commentators even go as far as calling the Hyundai group the ‘leading inter-Korean mediator’ (Choi 1999). It is not so much, as some commentators suggest, that these non-state actors are able to ‘speak with one or both parties to the dispute without prejudice to either’ (Chung 1999: 104). The Korean situation is far too entrenched and too emotionally and rhetorically charged to allow for any assessment or action that is free of prejudice. But non-state actors can, indeed, be highly effective and perhaps even revolutionary ‘negotiators’. They are bound by fewer restrictions than state actors and can thus pursue agendas that governments cannot. They may also help to ‘update the world’s psychological map of North Korea’ by replacing stereotypes with a more differentiated understanding (Chung 1999: 125). This is the case because face-to-face encounters offer perhaps the best opportunity to create dialogical spaces and to dismantle threat images. Compromise needs confidence, and the building of confidence requires personal encounters that can build trust over time.

These daily and informal interactions offer promising possibilities to achieve something that resembles true dialogue and sustainable peace. Indeed, informal contacts, which often involve various non-state actors, are among the most important factors in future relations between the two Koreas. They highlight what R. B. J. Walker (1997: 62) identified as a key component of creative security arrangement; namely, ‘a certain scepticism about the claim that the modern state and state system offer the only plausible way of responding to questions about the political’.

As spectacular as some of these breakthroughs appear, much needs to be done until dialogue becomes a normal feature of Korean politics. At least two major obstacles need to be faced in the future.

First, it is necessary to recognize that promoting dialogical interactions is a long-term process. So far, breakthroughs in contacts between the North and South are the exception rather than the rule in intra-Korean politics. In the North the state is so omnipresent that there are no viable non-state actors that could participate in open intra-national exchanges. And the South, despite its more open policy of engagement, is still insisting on maintaining a state-controlled unification policy that constitutes any unauthorized private contact with the North as a criminal act. Of course, it is
no easy task to establish a dialogical process in a political environment whose contours have emerged out of national division, violence and death. The situation is particularly delicate in North Korea. The promotion of direct cross-national interactions can amount to a direct threat to the government in Pyongyang. Years of devastating famines, and the resulting need to accommodate Western humanitarian agencies (which now have access to over two-thirds of the North Korean territory), have already led to ‘a significant de facto opening of the country to the outsized world’ (Smith 1999: 454). But the survival not only of Kim Jong-il, but also of the political order in general, may well be contingent on the regime’s ability to shield the population from subversive outside influence. This is as much the case today (see Eberstadt 1999) as it was when the Soviet-led alliance system started to crumble in the late 1980s. These constraints are likely to influence the efforts towards rapprochement that are scheduled to take place in the wake of the summit meeting. North Korea will inevitably be torn between, on the one hand, having to open up in order to attract badly needed economic assistance and, on the other hand, trying to stay in power by retaining as much control as possible over the flow of information. More is thus needed to deal with Pyongyang’s fear of the outside world. More is needed to anticipate and minimize the spectre of violence that inevitably accompanies this fear.

A second major challenge that lies ahead has less to do not with the dangerous unpredictability resulting from North Korea’s fears, but with the more deeply entrenched politics of identity that has given rise to a politics of insecurity in the first place. The remaining sections of this paper now offer a few tentative suggestions about how to address this challenge.

Towards an ethics of difference

Dialogue alone cannot solve the problem of divided nations. No matter how successful dialogical interactions between the opposing sides are, they will always have to deal with the remainder, with positions that cannot be subsumed into compromise or, perhaps, not even be apprehended from the vantage point of those who do not live and represent them. If current dialogical breakthroughs are not followed up by a more tolerant approach towards the fundamental values espoused by the other side, then progress will either stall or be accompanied by the constant spectre of a possible relapse into violence.

Another form of ethics is necessary to deal with this problematic remainder – not an ethics of dialogue, but an ethics of accepting the other as other, of not subsuming her/him/it into one’s own positionality. The writings of Emmanuel Levinas can provide some guidance here. Much of the ethics of responsibility that he developed revolves around a refusal to encompass difference into the same. Responsibility is then a question of accepting alterity as that which it is, a position that may, by virtue of
its unique underlying values, be incompatible with one’s own. Ethics becomes a matter of engaging the other in a way that avoids reliance on a totalizing view of the world. A central element of this strategy thus consists of developing a relationship to alterity that displays understanding of and respect for the other’s different identity performances.\textsuperscript{7}

Even an eventual redrawing of political boundaries cannot simply erase the antagonistic identity constructs that have emerged and evolved during the five decades of Korean division. Differences between the two Koreas are too deeply rooted to be merged into one common form of identity, at least in the near future. One of the most symbolic manifestations of this factor is the fact that most North Korean defectors, despite being offered generous financial aid, job training and other assistance in the South, find it extremely hard to adapt to life in an environment that espouses very different values from the one in which they grew up. Many commentators now recognize that hostile identity practices are so deeply entrenched that Korea is simply not ready for unification. ‘We are not prepared to receive [our northern brethren], and they are not prepared for what they will find on the other side’ (Lee Sang Man, cited in \textit{Korea Herald}, 24 April 2000). The consequences of this phenomenon are far-reaching, and can be seen in virtually all aspects of Korean security politics.

\textbf{Contradictions in North and South Korean unification policies}

An examination of North and South Korean unification policies soon reveals a number of contradictions that demonstrate how the promotion of dialogue has not yet been accompanied by a willingness to embrace difference. Both governments still consider themselves the only legitimate political entity on the peninsula, treating the other side in essence as an illegal occupation force. A few illustrative examples follow.

Pyongyang has heralded the summit meeting of June 2000 as a major breakthrough in Korean politics, emphasizing that it has created ‘a great stir among the international community’. But at the same time as announcing the historic breakthrough in mediation, the North Korean media promoted an aggressive ‘army-first politics’ and warned of the ‘sinister moves’ of the US and South Korean ‘warmongers’, who ‘crack a smile of reconciliation at [the] negotiation table and sharpen [their] knife against [the] dialogue partner behind it’ (\textit{KCNA}, 20 April 2000; 5 May 2000). This position not only reflects lacking trust in the actions of the arch enemy, but also the fact that Pyongyang embraces dialogue while continuing to insist on its constitutionally entrenched objective of ‘communizing’ the South. In the wake of the summit meeting Pyongyang has indicated that it may eliminate this contentious constitutional feature, but there are few signs that point towards a more fundamental willingness to accept identity practices that diverge from those officially promoted by
the Communist regime. One may thus interpret North Korea’s more open policy not as a gesture of diplomatic goodwill, but as resulting from the desperate need to attract economic assistance.

South Korean positions are less polemical, but far from unproblematic. While there is no direct talk of ‘capitalizing’ the North, contradictions are omnipresent. Consider two examples among many. President Kim announced that he was ‘ready to hold dialogue and cooperate with the North’ by adopting a policy of engagement that called for a ‘give-and-take approach’ (Korea Herald, 15 September 1999). On the very same day, however, government authorities indicted three political activists for violating the National Security Law. Their crime consisted of nothing other than the act of travelling to Beijing in order to talk to North Koreans during a seminar (Korea Herald, 15 September 1999). Here too, the contradictions reveal a more general incapability (or unwillingness) to accept identity practices that differ from the ones advocated by the government. Example two: in his inaugural address, Kim Dae-jung officially stated that ‘we do not have any intention to undermine or absorb North Korea’ (cited in Kihl 1998: 23). This move constituted one of the most significant rhetorical steps towards an ethics of difference in Korea. But much needs to be done until political practice follows suit. At this stage there are few signs that South Korea is willing to accept the North on its own terms. Countless government policies and documents underline this phenomenon. Consider the most recent version of the Defence White Paper, which already incorporates Kim Dae-jung’s sunshine policy. It calls for a peaceful construction of a unified nation, but one that is carried out on South Korean terms. The communist identity that has permeated the North for over half a century is to be eradicated, for ‘an environment should be created in which the North can transform into an open society with a free market economy’ (Defence White Paper 1999: 94). Desirable as this objective may appear to many people, it does not rest upon a willingness to contemplate and discuss different models of social, political and economic interactions.

It remains to be seen whether or not the summit meeting of June 2000 will fundamentally alter these perceptions of identity. The joint declaration in Pyongyang already made significant progress by acknowledging that the North and South favour different formulae for reunification. But the long-term sustainability of these and other diplomatic declarations awaits practical application.

Contradictions in US security policies towards Korea

While North and South Korea were keen to declare themselves ‘masters of national unification’ during the summit meeting, politics on the peninsula remains intrinsically linked to the interactions among great powers. Among them is, of course, the United States, which Moon (1996: 280)
calls ‘the most important actor in the drama’ of Korean security. Clearly, US foreign policy has made historic openings towards the North, exemplified, for instance, in the easing of restrictions on trade, investment and travel (New York Times, 17 September 1999) and in the Perry Report, which calls for a more comprehensive approach towards negotiations. But at the same time as advocating a more tolerant policy, the Perry Report is unwilling to compromise on the military dimensions of security policy. Much like the establishment of ‘a perfect defense posture ... tops the agenda’ in the South (Defence White Paper 1999: 4), the Perry Report states that ‘no changes are recommended in our strong deterrent posture towards the Korean Peninsula’ (Perry 1999: 10). A withdrawal of the 37,000 US troops stationed in South Korea is out of the question.

The Perry Report is particularly concerned that the ‘relative stability of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula’ would be threatened if North Korea were to possess nuclear weapons and/or continue developing, testing and deploying long-range missiles. ‘The United States must, therefore, have as its objective ending these activities’, the report emphasizes (Perry 1999: 6). This call for disarmament appears slightly puzzling, to express it mildly, if placed in the context of recent US efforts to step up its military ‘engagement’ with the North. Examples abound: given that a planned national ballistic missile defence system in the western-most tip of Alaska is located far closer to Pyongyang than to the west coast of the US, the military pressure on North Korea will clearly increase, especially if one is to recall that the US is planning to augment the overall number of missiles it deploys around the globe (Kettle 2000: 6). These recent developments must be seen in the context of a more long-term US military engagement in Korea, which included, as an essential part of American hegemony in the Pacific, the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea (see Hayes 1988: 353–4). It can be argued whether the withdrawal of these weapons in the autumn of 1991 was a matter of offering positive inducements to the North (see Mazarr 1995b: 95) or more linked to the post-Gulf War recognition that high-quality conventional weapons might be more effective than nuclear warheads in a complex and uncontrollable battlefield (see Cumings 1997: 482–3). The fact remains that the US is clearly implicated in the construction of the security dilemmas that continue to haunt the peninsula. Even moderate South Korean politicians and diplomats now start to contemplate the possibility that ‘the presence of US forces in South Korea is a sheer threat to the North’s security’ (Lee 1999: 2).

Recall, just for a moment, that the US is the only country ever to have dropped nuclear weapons on a civilian population. Recall that US nuclear weapons were stationed close to the DMZ, and at Osan Air Base just south of Seoul (Hayes 1988: 356). Recall that a major part of the US and South Korean troops have been amassed between Seoul and the DMZ, facing North (some estimates speak of 90 per cent; see Cumings 1997:
469). Now imagine, just for a moment, how this ‘defence posture’ would appear to a country that neither possesses nuclear weapons nor has accommodated, at any moment of its post-war existence, a significant number of foreign troops on its territory. Perhaps the picture becomes clearer if one imagines, again, just for a minute, and purely hypothetically, how 37,000 Cuban or Russian troops, massed along the northern side of the DMZ, facing south and equipped with the latest tactical nuclear weapons, would have appeared to a South Korea that lacked both US military/economic support and a nuclear arsenal of its own. Seen from such a hypothetical perspective, the North Korean desire to acquire nuclear weapons no longer appears as a desperate and irrational act of a dangerous ‘rogue state’, but, as Michael Mazarr (1995b: 100) credibly stresses, as a perfectly rational behaviour that is in many ways only mirroring the actions of South Korea, the US and its allies.

In lieu of conclusion: security as a non-violent and disorderly relationship with difference?

Korea defies conclusions. It is an open book, whose storyline has yet to be written to the end. Whether peace or conflict will prevail is to a great extent dependent on the mind-sets that will guide not only future decision-makers, but also the respective societies at large.

Despite deeply entrenched Cold War patterns, recent events have given rise for hope. More tolerant South Korean and US approaches, coupled with signs of opening emanating from Pyongyang, have led to a more dialogical environment and to what is the most significant symbolic breakthrough since the Korean War: a summit meeting between the two Korean heads of state. While some progress has been achieved, the tasks that lie ahead are gargantuan. Past events have shown that a sudden increase in tension, and a possible military confrontation on the peninsula, cannot be entirely excluded. More importantly, perhaps, is the spectre of a possible collapse of the North Korean regime. Although the soft-landing scenario is geared towards pre-empting such a destabilizing event, a collapse scenario remains a possibility and should thus be a central concern for both scholars and policy-makers. Indeed, the chances of a collapse may well increase if the summit meeting of June 2000 is, as expected, leading towards more daily interactions between the divided sides. The consequences are potentially disastrous: a German-style unification resulting from a rapid disintegration of the North could easily trigger a civil war or a refugee crisis – in short, a complex emergency that may engender a ‘humanitarian intervention’ which could destabilize far more than just the Northeast Asian region. The responsibility to restore order would then most likely lie with the US and South Korean armed forces – institutions that have the power to deal with such a crisis, but are in many ways ill-equipped to take on humanitarian tasks. Of course, conducting
humanitarian and wartime operations simultaneously is, as Scott Snyder (1998a: 43) stresses, always a highly problematic endeavour. The US and South Korean armed forces are institutions that have been built and trained to fight and destroy, rather than to help and heal. Indeed, they are the very phenomena that institutionally epitomize the antagonistic identity constructs which have given rise to the conflict in the first place.

The security situation on the Korean Peninsula will remain volatile as long as current identity constructs continue to guide policy formation. A soft-landing approach may well be the most reasonable and desirable scenario, but it can only unfold and develop to its fullest potential once it incorporates, in a central manner, issues of identity and difference. This process starts with recognizing that identities are constructed, and that these constructs constitute key elements of the security situation on the peninsula. Needed, then, is a move away from the widespread essentialist tendency to ground policy in an understanding of North Korea ‘as it is’ (see, for instance, Choi 1999: 2). The Perry Report is a case in point: it recommends that the US should deal with North Korea ‘as it is, not as we might wish it to be’. It advocates a ‘realist view [of North Korea], a hard-headed understanding of military realities’ (Perry 1999: 5, 12). But, of course, there is no such thing as a ‘reality’ on the Korean Peninsula. There has been far too much destruction and antagonistic rhetoric to allow for judgements that are even remotely objective. Earlier sections of this essay have pointed out how decades of media representations have constituted North Korea as a ‘rogue state’. As a result, signs of compromise and dialogue that diverged from the expected pattern of hostility and aggression were – with notable exceptions – often neither reported in the press nor appreciated by policy-makers.

Needed, then, are policy approaches based not on an understanding of North Korea ‘as it is’, but on a critical appreciation of how the current security dilemmas ‘have become what they are’. Needed are approaches that do not deny difference, but make it part of a new, more pluralistically defined vision of identity and unity – a vision that may one day replace the present, violence-prone demarcation of self and other. Such a struggle on behalf of alterity, as David Campbell (1998) calls it, is all the more imperative in Korea since a hermatically sealed-off border between South and North has prevented virtually all forms of interactions that could have engendered at least a rudimentary appreciation of the other’s identity practices. As a result, countless post-war incidents, from the Rangoon bombing to recent naval clashes in the Yellow Sea, have established antagonistic identity practices that are now entrenched in political culture and societal consciousness. In the context of such hostile identity performances it is imperative that an ethical position on national division and unification is based on an approach that does not subsume the other into the self. To advance such an argument, is, of course, not to defend the authoritarian regime in the North or to suggest its ideological
world-view be retained. Rather, it is to stress that a peaceful *rapprochement* can only occur if a multitude of identity practices are recognized as legitimate and, indeed, as essential to laying the foundation for what one day may be a peaceful peninsula, unified or not. Needed is what Grinker (1998: xiv, 10–12) calls for: an active process of mourning, rather than a denial of loss. Indeed, the German precedent demonstrates that decades of national division can create different sets of identities that persist and cause conflict long after political unification (see Maaz 1990; Gilliar 1996). Owing to the Korean War and countless other confrontations, the potential for violence that arises from these antagonistic identity constructs is far greater in Korea than it ever was in Germany (Paik 1996: 17). And as long as there is an operative mythology of homogeneous nationhood, the conflict over competing forms of identity will remain a present source of conflict and danger.

This is not the space to discuss in detail the specific policy changes that would follow from rethinking Korean security through an appreciation of identity and difference. Rather, the purpose of the essay has been to draw attention to some of the broad conceptual domains that need urgent rethinking. While conventional security concerns will (and should) remain central to both academics and security practitioners, one must also recognize that fundamental political change can occur only once the underlying issue of political identity has become a topic of discussion and scrutiny. This, in turn, would entail searching for a political perspective that reaches beyond the parameters of current political manoeuvrings. Such a search is inevitably a long-term affair, for it revolves around the need to rethink notions of security that are deeply entrenched in political practice and societal consciousness – not just in Korea, but in international politics in general. Perhaps security may one day no longer be associated with order and certainty, for it is exactly the search for order and certainty (the process of drawing a rigid line across the 38th parallel, for instance) that has generated the problematic demarcation between inside and outside, the political and mental boundaries that account for the violent nature of present political structures. An alternative understanding of security would, in Costas Constantinou’s words (2000: 303), ‘desynchronise security from safety and certitude’. He, alongside a number of other critical scholars, now seek to validate a different notion of security, one that points not to an (impossible) escape from danger, but to a ‘passage through fear and loss’, one that allows us to ‘feel secure-in-danger . . . and dwell next to one’s enemy in security, without surrendering, or dominating, or making the foe friend’ (Constantinou 2000: 290; Burke 2000: 308). These and a range of other related security challenges can clearly not be solved today, nor can they be addressed at the level of the nation-state. They call for ways of heeding the cross-territorial bonds that may develop between people and the human ideals they stand for. To think ahead of security in such a broad and post-national way is a first step – necessary and long
overdue as it is – towards life in a Korea that is no longer defined by the constant spectre of violent encounters.

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Notes

2 Cumings’s detailed and insightful work (1981, 1990) on the Korean War is both one of the most authoritative and most controversial treatments of the topic. Trying to see beyond the black and white images that make up most historical and political accounts of the events, Cumings (1997: 238) stresses that the Korean War, ‘did not begin on June 25, 1950, much special pleading and argument to the contrary’. The war, he insists, ‘originate[d] in multiple causes, with blame enough to go around for everyone – and blame enough to include Americans who thoughtlessly divided Korea and then reestablished the colonial government machinery’. This revisionist position has led to much opposition in Korea, ranging from mild factual critiques related to recently released Soviet material (Moon 1996: 50) to unusually hostile accusations of irresponsible scholarship, subjective teleology, and pro-North Korea propaganda. This is not the space to discuss in detail the substance of Cumings’s arguments, but it must be noted that his provocative insights have been immensely beneficial to Korean studies in a variety of ways, including the fact that they have opened up critical discussions on the peninsula’s past and present.
3 Krause and Williams (1997: 47). See also Campbell (1992); Dillon (1996); Neumann (1996); Walker (1993); Williams (1998).
4 For a compelling historical investigation into this theme see Shapiro (1997).
5 For a variety of discussions on the position of the great powers towards the division and possible unification of Korea, see Harrison (1997: 57–75); Kihl
Seoul’s official position, however, remains linked to a familiar Cold War imagery: ‘North Korea has the quantitative upper hand in troops and weaponry, and it possesses strong capabilities of conducting mobile warfare designed to succeed in a short-term blitzkrieg’ (Defence White Paper 1999: 59).

Pyongyang has for long insisted that the main obstacles to a rapprochement between North and South are Seoul’s National Security Law and the presence of US troops on the peninsula (KCNA, 20 April 2000).

For elaborations on various problems associated with different unification scenarios see Kim and Eui (1995); Moon and Ryoo (1997); Noland (1998); Pollack and Lee (1999).

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