

The Roh Tae-woo Administration's Nordpolitik and Its Diplomatic Intervention in North Korea-Japan Relations

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This article examines the role of the South Korean government in the diplomatic normalization process between North Korea and Japan during the early 1990s, with a particular focus on the Roh Tae-woo administration's Nordpolitik. While initially supportive of cross-recognition and improved North Korea-Japan ties as part of Nordpolitik, South Korea gradually shifted to a more cautious and restrictive posture as formal negotiations progressed. Drawing on declassified South Korean diplomatic documents, this study reveals how the South Korean government changed its policy goals and engaged in indirect interventions — most notably by employing strategic public diplomacy campaigns aimed at influencing Japanese public opinion against North Korea. These efforts included the dissemination of negative narratives concerning North Korean human rights abuses and the regime's nuclear ambitions. Although limitations remain due to the restricted availability of diplomatic archives, the analysis demonstrates that South Korea played a critical third-party role in the North Korea-Japan normalization talks. By investigating the constraints and strategies employed by Seoul, this article offers a new perspective on trilateral diplomacy in Northeast Asia and sheds light on the domestic and international considerations underpinning South Korea's foreign policy during the post-Cold War transition.

Keywords: Nordpolitik, Roh Tae-woo administration, North Korea-Japan relations

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1. Introduction

The term Nordpolitik originated from West Germany's Ostpolitik. In the Korean context, "Nord(the North)" symbolized not only the geographical north (i.e., North Korea) but also the ideological divide with the socialist bloc. Park Chul-un, a key architect of this policy, described it narrowly as an initiative to establish relations with socialist states excluding North Korea. The broader interpretation frames Nordpolitik as a comprehensive strategy for reconciliation, coexistence, and ultimately peaceful reunification with North Korea.¹⁾

Through the implementation of Nordpolitik, South Korea established diplomatic ties with major socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and China, thereby significantly expanding its diplomatic footprint. Simultaneously, North Korea, seeking to escape international isolation and revive its economy, pursued normalization talks with Japan. However, these negotiations ultimately broke down, and diplomatic normalization between Pyongyang and Tokyo failed to materialize.

During this period, the Roh administration publicly stated that it did not oppose North Korea improving relations with South Korea's allies, including the United States and Japan — an approach consistent with the logic of "cross recognition." Despite this, the extent to which South Korea's diplomatic posture influenced the dynamics of North Korea-

1) Chul-un Park, *Barun Yeoksarul Wihan Jungeon 2[Testimony for a Correct History 2]*(Seoul: Random House Korea, 2005), p.23.

Japan negotiations remains insufficiently examined. In particular, the role of South Korean diplomacy as an external variable in shaping the outcome of these negotiations has not yet been subject to rigorous empirical analysis.

This study investigates how the South Korean government engaged with, responded to, or influenced the trajectory of North Korea-Japan normalization talks during the Roh Tae-woo administration (1988-1992). To this end, the research primarily draws upon declassified diplomatic documents produced during the period, conducting a first-hand analysis of primary sources, while also drawing on existing secondary literature on Nordpolitik and the North Korea-Japan negotiations. In particular, the analysis of primary documents reveals, for the first time, concrete diplomatic efforts undertaken by the South Korean government to hinder improvements in North Korea-Japan relations. In addition, the study supplements these findings with in-depth interviews and oral histories involving high-ranking South Korean diplomats and North Korean defectors with diplomatic backgrounds who were involved in the policy-making and implementation process, thereby elucidating aspects of decision-making that cannot be fully understood through documentary sources alone.

This study offers a distinct perspective from the dominant body of existing research, which has largely focused on the diplomatic achievements of Nordpolitik, framing it as a representative case of “successful foreign policy.” By analyzing diplomatic documents, this study uncovers new empirical evidence showing how the South Korean government took concrete

actions to obstruct the improvement of North Korea-Japan relations. In doing so, it reveals a lesser-known dimension of Nordpolitik, thereby enhancing the scholarly value of the research. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more multidimensional and in-depth understanding of Nordpolitik.

2. Literature Review

The existing literature on Nordpolitik and North Korea-Japan relations tends to focus either on the general trajectory of South Korea's foreign policy in the Roh-Tae-woo era or on the historical patterns of North Korea-Japan diplomatic negotiations. Most studies position the Roh Tae-woo administration's Nordpolitik within the broader context of post-Cold War realignments, treating the North Korea-Japan relationship only peripherally. In particular, scholarly analyses have primarily emphasized the role of South Korea's "cross recognition" proposal — put forth through the July 7 Declaration — in opening the door for North Korea-Japan talks. This cross-recognition policy is widely interpreted as having created a permissive diplomatic environment in which Tokyo felt emboldened to initiate dialogue with Pyongyang.

However, these studies tend to treat Nordpolitik as a catalyst only for the initiation of talks, while overlooking its role — or lack thereof — in the eventual breakdown or stagnation of the normalization process. That is, while the opening phase of North Korea-Japan talks during the early 1990s has been examined through the lens of Seoul's diplomatic signal-

ing, few studies analyze how the Roh administration's foreign policy responded to, influenced, or adapted to the protracted negotiation stalemate that followed. As a result, the full arc of the Nordpolitik-North Korea-Japan relationship remains underexplored, especially when considered from the perspective of South Korean diplomatic agency.

For instance, Jin Chang-Soo (2014) provides a comparative analysis of Japan's North Korea policies across different administrations, noting both structural opportunities and domestic resistance to engagement.²⁾ Ko Yun-Beom (2006) highlights the role of South Korea's cross-recognition in facilitating North Korea-Japan rapprochement, though he does not explore how this contributed to later diplomatic setbacks.³⁾ Yang Ki-woong (1998), utilizing negotiation theory, identifies South Korea-the USA-Japan relations and Japan's internal constraints as key factors in the collapse of talks.⁴⁾ More recent work by Yoon Kyung-min (2022), through a systematic analysis of Rodong Sinmun, shows how North Korea's media rhetoric correlated with trajectory of negotiations, and how both U.S. and South Korean pressure — especially through conditional messaging — contributed to the failure of the talks.⁵⁾ Similarly,

2) Chang-Soo Jin, *Ilbonui Daebuk Jeongchaek [Japan's Policy toward North Korea: Is There a Difference between the Democratic Party and the Liberal Democratic Party?]* (Seongnam: Sejong Institute, 2014).

3) Yun-Beom Ko, "Japan's Policy toward North Korea and North Korea-Japan Negotiation"(M.A. Diss., Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, 2006).

4) Ki-woong Yang, *Ilbonui WoigyoHyeopsang [Japan's Diplomatic Negotiations]*(Seoul: Sohwa, 1998).

5) Kyung-min Yoon, "A Study on the Negotiation for the Normalization of Diplomatic

Bae Jeong-ho (2020) suggests that Nordpolitik shaped a favorable environment for dialogue but concedes that concrete analysis of South Korea's diplomatic actions during the negotiations is still lacking.⁶⁾

Other scholars, including Jeong Yeong-sun (2010) and Jeon Jinho (2018), have examined North Korea's negotiation tactics and Japan's strategic constraints including the impact of domestic political cleavages, but do not treat South Korea as a principal actor in the negotiation matrix.⁷⁾

Taken together, the literature offers valuable insight into the initiation of North Korea-Japan normalization talks but falls short in analyzing the continuing interplay between South Korea's Nordpolitik and the subsequent impasse in negotiations. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how the South Korean government, under the Roh Tae-woo administration understood, responded to, and possibly influenced both the initiation and eventual stagnation of North Korea-Japan normalization efforts between 1988 and 1992. By grounding the analysis in pri-

Relations between North Korea and Japan”(Ph.D Diss, Graduate School of Political Studies, Kyonggi University, 2022).

6) Jeong-ho Bae, “Case Studies of Past North Korea-Japan Dialogue,” in Kitae Lee (ed.), *Hanbando Pyeonghwa Beonyeongkwa Bukil Kwankye Yeonku*[*A Study on Peace and Prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and Relations between North Korea and Japan*](Seoul: KINU, 2020).

7) Yeong-sun Jeong, “A Study on Japanese Foreign Policies Toward North Korea: Focusing on North Korea-Japan Diplomatic Normalization”(Ph.D Diss., Keimyung University, 2010); Jinho Jeon, “Negotiations for Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between North Korea and Japan,” *THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, Vol.21, No.2(2018), pp.131~155.

mary diplomatic documents and oral testimony, this research contributes a micro-level, empirical perspective on South Korea's indirect yet consequential role in shaping North Korean-Japan relations during the post-Cold War transition.

3. Nordpolitik and North Korea-Japan Relations

Nordpolitik

President Roh Tae-woo articulated in his memoirs that “the immediate goal of Nordpolitik is to achieve unification, while the ultimate goal is to extend our living and cultural sphere northward.”⁸⁾ This statement encapsulates the dual-track nature of Nordpolitik: the pursuit of national reunification with North Korea alongside the expansion of diplomatic engagement with communist states.

Kim Dal-Choong was among the earliest scholars to conceptualize Nordpolitik within the broader framework of South Korean foreign policy. He analyzed the initiative along three dimensions: (1) the geographical expansion of diplomatic outreach; (2) the strategic articulation of policy objectives; and (3) the institutionalization of diplomatic processes. Kim characterized Nordpolitik as a foreign policy strategy targeting China, the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, and North Korea. Its

8) Tae-woo Roh, *Roh Tae-woo Hwoigorok: The Great Strategy of a Transitional Period* [*Roh Tae-woo Memoir, Volume 2*](Seoul: Chosun News Press, 2011), p.142.

primary objectives included promoting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula through the normalization of relations with China and the Soviet Union, advancing economic cooperation with communist states, facilitating inter-Korean exchanges, and ultimately establishing diplomatic recognition with these states as a pathway toward unification. This conceptualization has since become a foundational reference in the scholarly literature on Nordpolitik.⁹⁾

Cross Recognition

A central mechanism in the implementation of Nordpolitik was the concept of cross-recognition, a policy Roh Tae-woo emphasized from the outset of his presidential campaign. He advocated reciprocal visits by the leaders of both Koreas and supported a phased approach to mutual recognition among the four major powers: the United States, Japan, the Soviet Union, and China. According to Lee Jong-won's research, this phased cross-recognition framework was derived from Chun Doo-hwan's earlier "two-stage cross-recognition plan," which proposed that China and Japan would first recognize both Koreas, followed subsequently by reciprocal recognition by the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁾

The institutionalization of Nordpolitik was most clearly expressed in

9) Dal-Choong Kim, "Nordpolitik: Its Concept, Objects and Background," *Korean Journal of International Relations*, Vol.29, No.2(1990), p.43.

10) Jong Won Lee, "Longevity of the Korean Armistice System in the Changing Cold War: Conflict between Unification and Co-existence," *Korea and World Politics*, Vol.39, No.1(2023), p.186.

the July 7 Declaration of 1988, issued in advance of the Seoul Olympics. The declaration articulated six key principles: The active promotion of exchanges between South and North Koreans; Support for family reunifications; Classification of inter-Korean trade as domestic in nature; No objection to non-military trade between allies and North Korea; A call to end diplomatic confrontation between the two Koreas; Support for North Korea's normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, alongside South Korea's efforts to improve relations with the Soviet Union and China.

Among these, Clause Six explicitly endorsed the principle of cross-recognition — defined as mutual diplomatic recognition between two adversarial states by their respective allies. In the Korean context, this meant gaining recognition of the Republic of Korea by China and the Soviet Union, and of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea by the United States and Japan.

1) North Korea-Japan Relations in the 1980s

The normalization of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan remained the final unresolved component of Japan's postwar settlement. Since the signing of the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco, Japan had entered into a series of agreements with former adversaries to address wartime reparations and restore diplomatic ties. Although relations with South Korea were normalized through the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations, Japan's postwar settlement with North Korea remained in-

complete, rendering it a persistent and sensitive issue in Japanese foreign policy.¹¹⁾

Efforts to initiate contact with North Korea gained momentum during the 1980s, led primarily by Japan's Socialist Party. A key milestone was the joint declaration issued in March 1981 by the Workers' Party of Korea and the Socialist Party of Japan, which called for the creation of a Nuclear-Free Peace Zone in Northeast Asia. This declaration marked the beginning of semi-official exchanges between the two sides. Subsequent high-profile engagements included visits by Socialist Party figures such as Tanabe Makoto and Kubo in July 1987 followed by a meeting between Chairwoman Doi Takako and Kim Il-sung in September of the same year. These activities highlighted the Socialist Party's leading role in promoting rapprochement with Pyongyang.

However, the momentum for dialogue was soon interrupted by North Korea's involvement in international terrorism. The 1983 Rangoon bombing and the 1988 bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 — the latter orchestrated by Kim Hyon-hui — led Japan to impose sanctions on North Korea. These incidents significantly strained bilateral relations, leading to an abrupt halt in government-level contact. As a result, diplomatic efforts between the two countries entered a prolonged period of stagnation.¹²⁾

11) Jinho Jeon, "Negotiations for Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between North Korea and Japan," p.137.

12) Chang-Hee Nam, "An Analysis of Diplomatic Negotiations in the 1990s and the Prospects for DPRK-ROK Relations," *Defense Policy Studies*, Vol.48(2000), p.35.

2) The July 7 Declaration as a Diplomatic Catalyst

South Korea's public commitment to a peaceful and open approach toward North Korea — articulated in the July 7 Declaration of 1988 — reshaped the strategic calculus in both Tokyo and Pyongyang. The declaration signaled Seoul's willingness to recognize North Korea as a dialogue partner and called for broader international engagement with Pyongyang. This shift prompted regional actors, particularly Japan, to reassess their diplomatic posture toward the Korean Peninsula.

In the wake of the July 7 Declaration, the Japanese government began exploring avenues for improving its relationship with North Korea.¹³⁾ In an official statement, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs articulated conditional openness to dialogue with Pyongyang:

“Should North Korea demonstrate a constructive attitude, Japan will actively pursue the improvement of relations with the North in close coordination with relevant countries, particularly in light of expanding exchanges between North Korea and South Korea, China, and the Soviet Union. However, the resolution of the Fujisanmaru No. 18 incident¹⁴⁾ must be a prerequisite. The government is willing to

13) Masao Okonogi (小此木正夫), “Japan's Policy toward North Korea,” *Hogaku Kenkyu* Vol.68, No.2(1995), p.96, quoted in Kyung-min Yoon, “A Study on the Negotiation for the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between North Korea and Japan”(PhD diss., Graduate School of Political Studies, Kyonggi University, 2022), p.60.

14) The Fujisanmaru No. 18 incident refers to the detainment of a Japanese fishing

engage in dialogue with North Korea on all outstanding bilateral issues.”¹⁵⁾

This statement, issued in late 1988, marked a clear shift in Tokyo’s policy — from passive containment to cautious engagement — partially influenced by Seoul’s evolving Nordpolitik.¹⁶⁾ Japan subsequently undertook a series of reciprocal gestures. In the lead-up to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Tokyo lifted sanctions imposed on North Korea following the 1987 Korean Air Flight 858 bombing. In January 1989, the Japanese government permitted a high-level delegation of the Workers’ Party of Korea, led by Kim Yang-gon, to attend the Japanese Socialist Party’s annual convention without preconditions.

A further diplomatic overture came in March 1989, when Prime

vessel by North Korea in August 1983 on charges of illegal fishing in the East Sea. The issue remained unresolved throughout the 1980s and was frequently cited by Japan as a condition for any movement toward normalization.

15) Soji Takasaki (高崎宗司), *Verification of Japan-South Korea Negotiations* (Tokyo Heibonsha, 2004), p.19, quoted in Kyung-min Yoon, “A Study on the Negotiation for the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between North Korea and Japan” (Ph.D Diss., Graduate School of Political Studies, Kyonggi University, 2022), p. 60.

16) Japan’s growing recognition of the need to normalize relations with North Korea has also been interpreted as a response to rapidly changing international dynamics, particularly as a means to secure strategic influence on the Korean Peninsula and to pave the way for the entry of Japanese goods into the North Korean market. Yeong-sun Jeong, “A Study on Japanese Foreign Policies Toward North Korea: Focusing on North Korea-Japan Diplomatic Normalization”(Ph.D Diss., Keimyung University, 2010), p.47.

Minister Takeshita Noboru publicly acknowledged Japan's colonial past and expressed remorse during a speech in the Diet — a gesture widely interpreted as an attempt to lay the groundwork for dialogue with Pyongyang.¹⁷⁾ Notably, Takeshita referred to North Korea using its official name, the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” rather than the more commonly used Japanese term Kitachōsen (北朝鮮), signaling a rare moment of rhetorical recognition.¹⁸⁾

In response to Seoul’s diplomatic activism — including its normalization of relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 — North Korea intensified its pursuit of bilateral normalization with Japan. Pyongyang sought diplomatic recognition from Tokyo in order to (1) break out of international isolation, (2) secure economic assistance and war reparations from Japan, and (3) leverage Japan as a conduit to the United States for future negotiations. Confronted with Seoul’s growing international legitimacy and expanding network of partnerships, the North Korean regime viewed Japan as a critical diplomatic counterweight.¹⁹⁾

In this context, the July 7 Declaration and the broader Nordpolitik strategy not only reshaped South Korea’s foreign relations but also con-

17) Ki-Wong Yang and Jun-Dong Kim, “Some Conditions of the Breakdown and Resumption of the Normalization Negotiation between North Korea and Japan (1990-2006),” *Japanese Studies Review*, Vol.23(2006), p.116.

18) Kyung-min Yoon, “A Study on the Negotiation for the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between North Korea and Japan”(Ph.D Diss., Graduate School of Political Studies, Kyonggi University, 2022), p.61.

19) Jinho Jeon, “Negotiations for Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between North Korea and Japan,” p.140.

tributed to recalibrating strategic thinking in Tokyo. While full normalization between Japan and North Korea was not achieved during this period, Seoul's initiative played a pivotal role in making such dialogue diplomatically conceivable.

3) The "Three-Party Joint Declaration"

A pivotal development in North Korea-Japan relations occurred in September 1990 with the issuance of the so-called "Three-Party Joint Declaration" (三党共同宣言). This declaration marked the first high-level political engagement between the two states since the Korean War, representing a significant departure from Japan's traditionally cautious approach toward Pyongyang.

In late September 1990, a cross-party Japanese delegation visited Pyongyang, led by Kanemaru Shin (金丸信) of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Tanabe Makoto (田邊誠), then Vice Chairman of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP). The delegation held talks with Kim Il-sung, culminating in the signing of the "Three-Party Joint Declaration," which involved the Workers' Party of Korea, the LDP, and the JSP, on September 28, 1990. The declaration affirmed a mutual commitment to normalize diplomatic relations and expressed a shared willingness to address unresolved historical and humanitarian issues, including Japan's colonial rule and the status of ethnic Koreans residing in Japan.

This meeting constituted the first official contact between the ruling parties of North Korea and Japan in the 45 years since the end of World

War II. The declaration is especially noteworthy for its inclusion of groundbreaking language that signaled a fundamental shift in Japan's North Korea policy.²⁰⁾ North Korea expressed considerable satisfaction with the outcome of the Three-Party Joint Declaration and appeared highly interested in the economic assistance expected from Japan. A North Korean defector A who had previously served as a diplomat recalled the situation at the time, stating, "Kim Jong-il gifted a bottle of liquor containing gold flakes to Jeon In-cheol, the official in charge of North Korea-Japan negotiations. That is how high the expectations were in Pyongyang. North Korea demanded \$10 billion from Japan as colonial compensation."²¹⁾ Another defector B, also a former North Korean diplomat, stated, "Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to secure \$10 billion in reparations from Japan for its colonial rule."²²⁾

Despite its symbolic significance, the declaration carried no legal or intergovernmental authority. It was signed by political party representatives rather than government officials and, therefore, did not bind the Japanese cabinet. Nevertheless, for North Korea, the declaration constituted a major diplomatic achievement. It allowed Pyongyang to showcase both domestic and international momentum toward ending its dip-

20) Yeong-sun Jeong, "A Study on Japanese Foreign Policies Toward North Korea: Focusing on North Korea-Japan Diplomatic Normalization"(Ph.D Diss., Keimyung University, 2010), p.49.

21) Interview with a North Korean defector, October 10, 2023, Myeong-dong, Seoul.

22) Interview with a North Korean defector, August 23, 2023, Gangnamku, Seoul.

lomatic isolation — particularly in the context of South Korea's successful normalization of relations with the Soviet Union earlier that same year.

4) North Korea-Japan Negotiations from 1991 to 1992

Following Kanemaru Shin's visit to Pyongyang in 1990, three rounds of preliminary talks were convened in Beijing in November of that year to establish an agenda for formal negotiations between North Korea and Japan. The agreed agenda included four key items: (1) core issues related to the normalization of diplomatic relations; (2) matters of economic cooperation; (3) peace and security on the Korean Peninsula; and (4) the legal status of Koreans residing in Japan, along with other mutual concerns.²³⁾ These preparatory talks marked the beginning of structured diplomatic engagement between the two countries. However, despite this initial progress, the negotiations were soon beset by significant challenges.

Between January 1991 and November 1992, North Korea and Japan held eight rounds of formal negotiations. Nevertheless, the talks failed to produce any substantive outcomes. The breakdown in negotiations stemmed primarily from North Korea's unilateral suspension of the dialogue in response to Japan's persistent emphasis on two contentious issues: the

23) Dongman Seo, "The Relationship between the Korea-Japan Framework Treaty and the Korea-Japan Diplomatic Relations," *ASEAN Studies*, Vol.102(1999), p.16.

Table 1 Summary of Key Issues in North Korea–Japan Talks

Round	Date & Location	Key Issues
1 st Round	Jan. 30, 1991. Pyongyang	Japan demanded North Korea accept nuclear inspections, while North Korea claimed the nuclear issue was a U.S.-North Korea matter.
2 nd Round	Mar. 11–12, 1991. Tokyo	Disputes arose over the validity and legality of Japan’s annexation of Korea.
3 rd Round	May 20–22, 1991. Beijing	North Korea proposed establishing diplomatic relations first, deferring reparation discussions. Japan insisted nuclear inspections precede normalization.
4 th Round	Aug. 30–Sep. 2, 1991. Beijing	North Korea expressed willingness to address the issue of Japanese spouses but Japan continued to demand nuclear inspections.
5 th Round	Nov. 18–20, 1991. Beijing	North Korea provided a list of 20 Japanese spouses and verified the status of 12 individuals, but Japan demanded further clarifications.
6 th Round	Jan. 29–31, 1992. Beijing	The validity of the Korea-Japan Annexation Treaty resurfaced as a contentious issue.
7 th Round	May 25–27, 1992. Beijing	Disputes over the treaty’s nullity, scope of reparations, and nuclear inspection mechanisms persisted.
8 th Round	Nov. 5, 1992. Beijing	Japan’s renewed focus on nuclear suspicions and the Lee Eun-hye abduction case led to the breakdown of talks.

source: Compilation of materials including Jinho Jeon (2018), and Je Hun Lee (2016).

nuclear question and the unresolved cases of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea — particularly the case of Lee Eun-hye. As a result, the normalization talks of the early 1990s ultimately concluded without any tangible progress, ushering in another period of diplomatic stalemate be-

tween the two states.

The breakdown of negotiations was not solely the result of bilateral tensions between North Korea and Japan. Rather, escalating frictions between North Korea and the United States over the nuclear inspections during the negotiation period significantly disrupted progress in Japan-North Korea talks. Although North Korea had fulfilled several key conditions previously outlined by Japan — including its admission to the United Nations, facilitation of inter-Korean dialogue, and agreement to international nuclear inspections — Tokyo abruptly raised its demands during the seventh round of negotiations. At that stage, the Japanese government insisted on the early, unconditional, and comprehensive implementation of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) nuclear safeguards, as well as full adherence to the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which explicitly prohibited the operation of nuclear reprocessing facilities.

4. South Korea's Diplomatic Response to North Korea-Japan Normalization Talks

1) South Korea's Strategic Constraint

Following the "Three-Party Joint Declaration"

Although the Roh Tae-woo administration publicly supported the July 7 Declaration's principle of promoting diplomatic normalization be-

tween North Korea and other friendly states, its actual diplomatic conduct revealed a more cautious — and at times obstructive — posture rather than outright support.

In April 1989, during a regular meeting of South Korean and Japanese foreign ministers held in Tokyo, Japanese officials explained that their engagement with North Korea was intended to encourage Pyongyang's openness in line with Seoul's July 7 Declaration. In response, South Korean officials conveyed concern that Japan's approach appeared overly hasty and urged Tokyo to remain in alignment with the broader strategic progress being pursued under South Korea's Nordpolitik.²⁴⁾

Particularly after the issuance of the "Three-Party Joint Declaration" in September 1990 — signed by the Workers' Party of Korea and Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Socialist Party — the Roh government began taking a more assertive stance aimed at containing the momentum of North Korea-Japan normalization. Following Kanemaru Shin's visit to Pyongyang and the announcement of the joint declaration, the South Korean government formally expressed its dissatisfaction to the Japanese side.

Kim Jong-hwi, who served as Senior Presidential Secretary for Foreign Affairs and National Security under Roh, later stated in an interview: "We blocked direct contact between North Korea and Japan. After the

24) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, "Regular Foreign Ministers' Meeting between South Korea and Japan, 4th Tokyo, 1 April 1989 (V.3 Outcome of the Meeting)," Registration NO. 27986, Classification NO. 723.1, Frame NO. 0006-0008 (Microfilm: Roll 2019-0015, File 13).

Three-Party Joint Declaration was issued, the South Korean government pressured Japan by saying, ‘Will you choose North Korea or South Korea? The choice is yours.’”²⁵⁾

This statement illustrates how Seoul sought to assert influence over the emerging North Korea-Japan dialogue by cautioning Tokyo that further engagement with Pyongyang could jeopardize Japan’s relationship with South Korea.

Seoul’s sensitivity to the evolving diplomatic dynamic between Pyongyang and Tokyo continued to manifest in subsequent months. When Kanemaru Shin visited the Blue House to report the outcomes of his trip to North Korea, the South Korean government underscored five principles it expected Japan to follow in future dealings with Pyongyang:

- (1) Prior Consultation: Japan should consult with South Korea before initiating any official talks with North Korea on the normalization of diplomatic relations.
- (2) Nuclear Safeguards: Japan should press North Korea to sign the nuclear safety agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- (3) Coordination with Inter-Korean Dialogue: Japan should remain

25) Interview Date: 14 December 2011. This interview was conducted by Lee Jung-chul and his research team in order to research Nordpolitik. Kim Jong-hwi is now 90 years old and no longer participates in in-depth interviews due to health issues. Therefore, this study draws on a previously recorded interview conducted by Lee Jung-chul’s research team on the subject of Nordpolitik, to which access was granted for academic use.

attentive to the status of inter-Korean talks and act in a manner that supports, rather than undermines, the dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang.

- (4) Conditional Assistance: Japan should not offer compensation or economic aid to North Korea prior to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, and should ensure that any financial assistance would not be diverted to enhance North Korea's military capabilities.
- (5) Promotion of Openness and Reform: Japan should encourage Pyongyang to move toward openness and economic reform.²⁶⁾

These five principles reflected Seoul's effort to shape the trajectory of Japan's North Korea policy in ways that would reinforce South Korea's strategic interests and prevent a diplomatic decoupling between Tokyo and Seoul.

South Korea's Strategic Constraint During North Korea-Japan Normalization Talks

From the outset of these normalization talks, the South Korean gov-

26) Perry Wood, "The Strategic Equilibrium on the Korean Peninsula in the 1990s," in James Cotton(ed.), *Korea under Roh Tae-woo: Democratization, Northern Policy, and Inter-Korean Relations* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen And Unwin, 1993), p. 201, quoted in Hyun Koo Cho, "A Missed Opportunity in the South Korean Nordpolitik, 1988-1992," *Minjokyeonku*, No.42(2010), p.140; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, "North Korea's Attempts to Improve Relations with Non-Diplomatic Countries and Related Measures, 1992," Registration NO. 34693. Classification NO. 725.4, Frame NO. 0110(Microfilm: Roll 2022-0044, File 03).

ernment intervened actively in response to developments. One week before the first formal round of talks — on January 23, 1991 — South Korea obtained the names and schedules of the Japanese and foreign press corps covering the negotiations.²⁷⁾ Three days later, on January 26, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a diplomatic telegram to its embassy in Tokyo titled “The First Round of North Korea-Japan Normalization Talks.” This communication outlined three key directives:

First, it instructed Tokyo-based correspondents and journalists accompanying the Japanese delegation to actively promote South Korea’s five principles for engagement with North Korea.

Second, it encouraged Japanese media outlets to increase coverage of human rights violations in North Korea.

Third, it requested detailed reporting and analysis of foreign media coverage related to the talks.²⁸⁾

These actions reflected a policy line consistent with the earlier stance presented by Kim Jong-hwi to Kanemaru Shin’s delegation: that North Korea-Japan negotiations should be conducted under close coordination with South Korea. The five principles promoted by Seoul included calls for Pyongyang to sign the nuclear safety agreement, cooperate with the international community, and adopt a policy of openness and reform. However, from North Korea’s perspective, these demands were difficult

27) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “North Korea-Japan Relations 1991, V.9 Press Releases,” Registration NO. 32328, Classification NO. 725.1, Frame NO. 0002 (Microfilm: Roll 2021-0048, File 10).

28) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0006.

to accept and effectively functioned as preconditions that hindered rather than facilitated progress in the normalization process.

Following these developments, the Japanese government began to publicly echo South Korea's position. In his January 25, 1991 policy address, Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki stated that normalization talks with North Korea would be pursued in consideration of the broader situation on the Korean Peninsula. Two days later, on January 27, Nakahira Noboru (中平立), the chief Japanese negotiator, declared that Japan could not agree to provide compensation to North Korea unless it accepted nuclear inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). North Korea responded by rejecting the linkage between nuclear inspections and normalization, asserting that nuclear issues were unrelated to bilateral talks with Japan and attributing delays to what it described as U.S. nuclear threats.²⁹⁾

On February 1, 1991 — the day after the first round of North Korea-Japan normalization talks — the South Korean Embassy in Tokyo submitted a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summarizing the editorials of major Japanese newspapers. *Yomiuri Shimbun* criticized North Korea's demands for postwar compensation as unjustifiable, while *Nikkei Shimbun* argued that Pyongyang must accept nuclear inspections in the interest of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean ambassador noted that, both before and during the talks, embassy officials had proactively engaged with editorial staff covering Korean

29) *Ibid.*

Peninsula issues, providing them with Seoul's official position and related materials.³⁰⁾

On March 4, 1991 — just before the second round of negotiations — Roh Jae-bong, Prime Minister of South Korea held a meeting with Japanese journalists covering the North Korea-Japan talks. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs had prepared a briefing document with anticipated questions and suggested responses for the prime minister. The first anticipated question concerned the visit to Japan by Kim Yong-sun, Secretary of the Workers' Party of North Korea, and his meeting with Prime Minister Kaifu. In response, the ministry recommended that the prime minister maintain Japan's existing stance by stating:

“Through this visit, we reaffirmed our support for the implementation of the Three-Party Joint Declaration and for improvement in Japan-North Korea relations. At the same time, however, the North Korean side reiterated its narrow and unrealistic demands regarding inter-Korean issues. Given the lack of progress in Pyongyang's position, we hope the Japanese government and the Liberal Democratic Party will proceed cautiously in future contacts with North Korea.”³¹⁾

30) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0021-0029.

31) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0057-0073.

While this phrasing employed conventional diplomatic language — calling for a “cautious response” — its underlying intent was clear: the South Korean government maintained a critical view of Japan’s engagement with North Korea and sought to influence Japan’s approach accordingly. There is no record in the diplomatic documents confirming whether Prime Minister Roh actually delivered the prepared answers during his meeting with Japanese journalists. Nonetheless, the document reveals the South Korean government’s perspective and stance on the North Korea-Japan negotiations at the time.

2) Spreading Negative Public Opinion on North Korean Human Rights Issues

During the period of North Korea-Japan normalization talks, the South Korean government launched an active public diplomacy campaign aimed at exposing North Korea’s human rights violations within Japan.

On January 30, 1991 — the opening day of the first round of formal negotiations — South Korea’s Government Information Agency sent an official communication to the Minister of Foreign Affairs titled “Public Relations Plan in Response to the First Round of North Korea-Japan Normalization Talks.” The document outlined a plan to publish Japanese-language editions of several works documenting North Korean human rights abuses. These included North Korea Human Rights Report by Asia Watch, The Reality of Kim Il-sung’s Units by Heo Dong-chan

and Personal testimonies by Japanese journalists who had visited North Korea.³²⁾

These materials were intended for publication and strategic dissemination in Japan. The timing and content suggest that the campaign aimed less at facilitating diplomatic progress and more at impeding or discrediting North Korea during the negotiations. In the first round of negotiations, Japan asserted that “since there had been no state of war between Japan and North Korea, compensation or reparations cannot be accepted.” In contrast, North Korea emphasized that Kim Il-sung’s Korean People’s Revolutionary Army had formally declared anti-Japanese resistance and fought against the Japanese military for fifteen years, a claim that drew particular attention.³³⁾ Consequently, disseminating Heo Dong-chan’s book — which questions the very existence of Kim Il-sung’s guerrilla unit — in Japan can be interpreted as an activity that potentially undermines the legitimacy of North Korea’s demands for reparations and compensation.

Further evidence of this campaign surfaced on March 2, 1991 — ten days before the second round of negotiations — when the South Korean Embassy in Tokyo reported back to the Foreign Ministry that the April issue of the monthly journal *Shokun* (諸君), published by Bungeishunju, would feature a special article on North Korea. According to the em-

32) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0005-0008.

33) Haruki Wada, *Bukil Gyoseop 30nyeon* [日朝交渉30年史, *Thirty Years of Japan – North Korea Negotiations*], trans. Gil Yun-hyung (Paju: Seohae Munjip, 2023), p.45.

bassy, the article would argue that North Korea's ultimate aim in normalizing relations with Japan was to gain access to an estimated ¥20 trillion in property and assets held by pro-Pyongyang Chongryon (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), as well as to secure control over Chongryon-affiliated personnel.³⁴⁾

Linking Progress in North Korea-Japan Relations to Inter-Korean Dialogue

In preparation for the second round of North Korea-Japan normalization talks, scheduled for March 11-12, 1991, the Japanese Prime Minister's press briefing included the following statement:

“Given that the South-North prime ministerial talks are currently suspended due to North Korea's unilateral notification, we hope Japan will underscore to North Korea that substantive progress in North-South dialogue is a prerequisite for advancements in North Korea-Japan relations.”³⁵⁾

This statement reflected Seoul's policy of conditioning Tokyo's engagement with Pyongyang on the broader context of inter-Korean relations. In September 1990, the prime ministers of South and North Korea had convened the first Inter-Korean High-Level Talks — the first

34) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0056.

35) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0063-0064.

such meeting in 45 years since the division of the Korean Peninsula. The talks continued with a second round in October and a third in December of the same year. However, this initial momentum was abruptly lost when North Korea unilaterally suspended the talks, resulting in a near year-long interruption of formal inter-Korean dialogue.

On February 18, 1991, just a week before the fourth round of high-level talks was scheduled to take place in Pyongyang, North Korea officially announced its withdrawal. It justified this decision by citing South Korea's heightened military readiness in response to the Gulf War and its participation in the joint U.S.-South Korea "Team Spirit" military exercises.

Against this backdrop, it becomes evident that the South Korean government was reluctant to support progress in North Korea-Japan normalization talks as long as inter-Korean dialogue remained frozen. According to South Korean diplomats, Japanese journalists who covered the first round of talks reported that "Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam is seriously considering the issue of the continued suspension of the inter-Korean prime ministerial talks."³⁶⁾

When South Korean Prime Minister Roh Jae-bong was scheduled to meet with Japanese journalists in Seoul on March 4, 1991, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had prepared briefing materials that included anticipated questions and model responses. When asked to evaluate Japan's negotiating stance following the first round of talks, the suggested reply re-

36) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0038.

affirmed South Korea's position:

“We expect Japan to remain sufficiently mindful of South Korea's longstanding position and, given the current suspension of inter-Korean dialogue due to North Korea's unilateral actions, to make it clear to Pyongyang that progress in North-South relations is a fundamental precondition for any advancement in North Korea-Japan ties.”³⁷⁾

This statement underscores the South Korean government's continued insistence on linking North Korea-Japan normalization to inter-Korean reconciliation. It reveals Seoul's strategy of using regional diplomacy to reinforce its position in inter-Korean affairs by urging Japan to align its approach accordingly.

3) North Korea's Wooing vs. South Korea's Containment

Before initiating formal diplomatic negotiations aimed at normalizing relations with Japan, North Korea actively promoted cultural exchanges between the two countries. This is believed to have been motivated by the need to change public perceptions prior to establishing diplomatic ties, given the deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment among North Korean people. A North Korean defector who formerly served as a diplo-

37) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0057-0073.

mat, identified as C, explained, “North Koreans harbor very strong anti-American, anti-South Korean, and anti-Japanese sentiments — of which anti-Japanese sentiment is the most intense. It is to the extent that, in international football matches between South Korea and Japan, North Koreans will cheer for the South Korean team.”³⁸⁾ North Korea invited Japanese pop singers to perform in Pyongyang and attempted to broadcast NHK television programs on Mansudae TV. These efforts illustrate the extent to which North Korea actively pursued improved relations with Japan.³⁹⁾

Japan, too, likely recognized the need for cultural exchange as a means to change Japanese people’s negative perceptions of North Korea. From the mid-1990s onward, North Korean cultural troupes began performing in Japan. South Korean diplomats were initially caught off guard by this atmosphere. On August 9, 1990, the Consul General in Fukuoka reported that the Pyongyang Art Troupe was scheduled to perform in Fukuoka in October and conveyed the consulate’s recommendation that local authorities deny permission for the performance.⁴⁰⁾ Similarly, as North Korean cultural troupes began planning performances in various regions of Japan, the South Korean ambassador in Tokyo requested guidance from Seoul.⁴¹⁾ The South Korean government, however, adopted a flexi-

38) Interview with a North Korean defector, August 21, 2023, Gangnamku, Seoul.

39) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “Cultural Exchanges between North Korea and Japan, 1990-1991,” Registration NO. 32319, Classification NO. 725.1, Frame NO. 0119-0120(Microfilm: Roll 2021-0048, File 01).

40) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0026.

ble stance toward these cultural exchanges. According to a public affairs document sent to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on October 2, 1991, the directive stated: “Regardless of developments in North Korea-Japan relations, continue to respond according to the existing policy.” This reflected a view that it was not necessary to oppose every instance of North Korea-Japan cultural exchange. The Public Information Office explained that the rationale behind this directive was that such exchanges, from North Korea’s perspective, were political gestures aimed at normalizing relations with Japan and measures to prepare its people for the potential shock of diplomatic normalization. From Japan’s perspective, these exchanges were interpreted as a “North Korea card” aimed at weakening South Korea’s vigilance toward Japan and softening its anti-Japanese posture. Most importantly, the entry of Japanese popular culture into North Korea was seen as having a positive functional aspect — it could help usher in a wave of openness within North Korean society.⁴²⁾

North Korea actively sought normalization with Japan, reportedly even identifying potential embassy locations in Tokyo. In an effort to cultivate pro-North Korean sentiment within Japanese society, Pyongyang organized a film festival in April 1991 and planned to invite a 200-member Japanese delegation composed of family members of Japanese wives who had repatriated to North Korea. The issue of Japanese wives who had followed their Korean husbands to North Korea

41) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0119-0120.

42) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0148.

was a matter of considerable public interest in Japan and had been designated the fourth item on the bilateral normalization agenda. North Korea's invitation thus signaled a strategic gesture aimed at cultivating goodwill toward Japan.

The Japanese government, for its part, also began showing increased interest in improving relations with North Korea — particularly following the South Korea-Soviet Union summit in June 1990. On June 5, 1990, Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato publicly stated:

“Japan has been making efforts to improve relations with North Korea through dialogue and various measures since last year. In light of the accelerating shifts in international politics surrounding the Korean Peninsula following the South Korea-Soviet summit, we intend to actively pursue further improvements in Japan-North Korea relations.”⁴³⁾

In response, the South Korean government implemented a public relations strategy designed to counter the perceived rise of pro-North Korean sentiment in Japan. This campaign emphasized North Korea's egregious human rights abuses and severe economic deprivation, using newspaper articles and opinion pieces as the primary medium.⁴⁴⁾

43) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “Japanese Reaction to Changes in South Korea-Soviet Relations, 1990,” Registration NO. 34217, Classification NO. 722.1, Frame NO. 0009(Microfilm: Roll 2022-0013, File 11).

44) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “North Korea-Japan

Between the second and third rounds of the North Korea-Japan normalization talks, the South Korean Embassy in Tokyo submitted a report to Seoul on April 17, 1991, outlining a detailed plan titled “Publicizing North Korea’s Realities.” As part of this effort, an article was submitted to the May issue of the monthly Japanese magazine *Jayu* (Freedom, 自由) under the headline: “What Exactly Is the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army? — A Key to Understanding Japan-North Korea Normalization Talks.” The article’s author, Heo Dong-chan, had previously published *The Reality of Kim Il-sung’s Units*, a book that questioned Kim Il-sung’s anti-Japanese guerrilla credentials.⁴⁵⁾ The South Korean Embassy emphasized that this special issue would be distributed to influential figures in Japanese political, business, media, and cultural circles, as well as other key opinion leaders — demonstrating that South Korea’s counter-propaganda campaign was actively being implemented.

The third round of normalization talks was held in Beijing from May 20 to 22, 1991. During this session, the Japanese delegation raised the issue of Lee Eun-hye, requesting confirmation of her whereabouts. This case quickly emerged as a central point of contention. The fourth round of talks, held from August 30 to September 2, 1991, again centered on the Lee Eun-hye issue. Just weeks prior, on August 3, the South Korean Embassy in Tokyo submitted a report detailing a special outreach program targeting Japanese journalists who had visited North Korea. Ahead

Relations 1991, V.9 Press Releases” Registration NO. 32328, Classification NO. 725.1, Frame NO. 0092-0094(Microfilm: Roll 2021-0048, File 10).

45) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0097.

of the fifth round of talks (November 18-20, 1991), the South Korean Embassy organized a roundtable discussion in Tokyo in October, aimed at exposing the realities of life inside North Korea to Japanese journalists and commentators with experience visiting the North. By the time of the fifth round, the Lee Eun-hye case had become a recurring obstacle in the negotiations. According to South Korean diplomatic archives, after this round, the embassy ceased submitting regular media monitoring reports, suggesting a potential shift in either priorities or strategy.

4) Raising the Bar: Seoul's Evolving Diplomatic Stance on North Korea-Japan Normalization

Although the sixth through eighth rounds of North Korea-Japan normalization talks continued through November 1992, no additional files dedicated exclusively to the bilateral relationship appear in South Korea's publicly available diplomatic records from that year. Nevertheless, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to closely monitor and analyze North Korea's attempts to establish relations with non-aligned states and key South Korean allies. These internal documents reveal the evolving stance of the Roh Tae-woo administration toward North Korea-Japan relations.

Until late 1989, the Roh government expressed support for the normalization of relations between North Korea and friendly countries, including the United States and Japan. A December 1989 policy paper prepared by the Bureau of Information and Culture within the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, titled “Policy for Improving Inter-Korean Relations,” recommended facilitating substantive engagement between allies and North Korea and actively promoting cross recognition among the United States, Japan, China, and the Soviet Union.⁴⁶⁾

However, this position shifted within weeks. On January 16, 1990, the ministry issued a cable to overseas missions titled “Our Position on the Improvement of Relations Between Allies and North Korea,” stating that promoting the spirit of the July 7 Declaration required encouraging North Korea’s openness and its integration into the international community. Among the stated principles was the acceptance of peaceful coexistence and cross recognition.⁴⁷⁾ But only three days later, on January 19, the ministry sent a revised version of the same document, deleting all references to “cross recognition.” The phrase “acceptance of peaceful coexistence and cross recognition” was replaced with “expansion of mutual exchanges and cooperation.”⁴⁸⁾ This revision marked a significant recalibration in South Korea’s diplomatic messaging.

By July 1990, a more structured approach emerged. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to distinguish between “core allies” (the United States and Japan) and “general allies” (countries with diplomatic relations

46) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “South Korea’s Position on the Improvement of Relations with North Korea by Countries Friendly to ROK 1989-90,” Registration NO. 30117. Classification NO. 725.1, Frame NO. 0002-0007(Microfilm: Roll 2020-0045, File 12).

47) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0008-0017

48) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0043.

only with South Korea), based on their security interests and strategic weight on the Korean Peninsula. The ministry directed its embassies to urge core allies to refrain from normalizing ties with North Korea until Seoul had fully established relations with both Moscow and Beijing.⁴⁹⁾ In effect, this amounted to a veiled request to delay Japan-North Korea normalization until South Korea had completed normalization with the Soviet Union and China.

A policy paper dated February 19, 1992, and prepared by the Division of Special Affairs within the ministry, further underscored Seoul's increasingly conditional approach. The paper noted that North Korea, citing its recent signing of the IAEA nuclear safeguards agreement (January 30, 1992) and the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement (February 19, 1992), was actively pushing for diplomatic recognition from non-aligned and Western states. As a countermeasure, the ministry instructed South Korean embassies to emphasize two preconditions to allies considering normalization with Pyongyang: (1) the resolution of the nuclear issue, and (2) meaningful progress in inter-Korean dialogue. With regard to Japan, the ministry specifically stressed that Tokyo's stance toward North Korea would serve as a barometer for broader Western diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang, thereby increasing the burden of responsibility on Japan.⁵⁰⁾

49) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0145-0154.

50) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, "North Korea's Attempts to Improve Relations with Non-Diplomatic Countries and Related Measures, 1992," Registration NO. 34693. Classification NO. 725.4., Frame NO. 0038-0058

In April 1992, the Ministry's Policy Planning Office distributed a report to all overseas missions titled "North Korea's Diplomatic Offensive after the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement and Our Response." The report warned that North Korea could exploit the agreement to launch a renewed charm offensive aimed at winning diplomatic recognition, while ignoring its obligations under the accord. It argued that premature recognition by friendly countries could lead North Korea to believe that it could gain diplomatic legitimacy without fulfilling its commitments, thereby undermining inter-Korean dialogue.

The ministry also provided a more detailed interpretation of what constituted "meaningful progress" in inter-Korean relations: halting mutual slander and propaganda, establishing regular mail and visitation exchanges among divided families, and initiating direct North-South economic cooperation, including cross-border trade.⁵¹⁾

In June 1992, the ministry's Policy Planning Office further intensified its strategy through a confidential document titled "Allied Positions on North Korea Relations and Our Response Strategy." The report suggested applying additional pressure on Japan by leveraging U.S. influence to ensure Tokyo aligned with Seoul's stance.⁵²⁾ This indicates that even into the latter stages of 1992, the South Korean government actively sought to constrain Japan's normalization efforts with North Korea through sustained diplomatic pressure.

(Microfilm: Roll 2022-0044, File 03).

51) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0002-0015.

52) *Ibid.*, Frame NO. 0069-0077

5. Conclusion

The normalization talks between North Korea and Japan ended without agreement after the eighth round. Since then, bilateral relations have remained largely stagnant. The failure of these talks can be attributed to a convergence of factors, including growing suspicions over North Korea's nuclear ambitions, negative public sentiment in Japan due to human rights abuses and incidents such as the Lee Eun-hye case, and broader shifts in the geopolitical landscape.

This article has examined the role of the South Korean government in the North Korea-Japan normalization process. Diplomatic records indicate that although President Roh Tae-woo's Nordpolitik initially endorsed cross-recognition and appeared to encourage normalization between North Korea and Japan, Seoul's position shifted significantly as negotiations progressed. Rather than facilitating dialogue, South Korea increasingly pursued containment or obstruction. Although the available documents do not fully clarify the rationale behind this policy reversal or reveal the internal decision-making process in detail, the transition from initial support to strategic constraint is evident.

The scope of this analysis is constrained by the limited availability of declassified diplomatic records. Many relevant files remain classified. For example, among the 1991 diplomatic materials titled "North Korea-Japan Relations 1991," only Volumes 3 (April developments) and 9 (media coverage) have been released, while others remain inaccessible. Even Volume 3 is heavily redacted, with only a single North Korean press statement

fully available. As of 1992, no declassified documents explicitly outlining South Korea's policy on North Korea-Japan relations have been released, suggesting that many remain under higher classification levels. Furthermore, this study primarily draws on official governmental records and statements, which may not fully reflect informal diplomatic practices or backchannel communications. These limitations underscore the need for future research based on a broader array of sources, including Japanese diplomatic archives and North Korean materials.

Despite these constraints, this article contributes to the existing literature by uncovering concrete evidence that the South Korean government undertook strategic efforts to shape Japanese public opinion against North Korea. These efforts — including the dissemination of human rights reports and targeted outreach to Japanese media — demonstrate that public diplomacy served not only to influence international perceptions but also to steer the trajectory of diplomacy between third-party states. In this respect, South Korea functioned as a consequential third-party actor despite not being directly involved in the negotiations. Recognizing this dynamic adds depth to our understanding of trilateral diplomacy in Northeast Asia and provides a valuable lens through which to evaluate South Korea's broader foreign policy during the Roh administration.

The implications of this study are twofold. First, it introduces a new dimension to the evaluation of Nordpolitik by showing that the policy — often regarded as a diplomatic success — also included strategic efforts to constrain North Korea's external engagement. Second, it enriches our

understanding of how South Korea exercised diplomatic agency not only in bilateral or multilateral negotiations to which it was a party, but also in adjacent processes, such as the North Korea-Japan normalization talks, where its influence was indirect. This perspective enables a more comprehensive and critical reassessment of South Korea's diplomatic posture.

Finally, as demonstrated in this article, the Roh Tae-woo administration pursued policies during the North Korea-Japan normalization negotiations that diverged from the original intent of Nordpolitik. Further research is necessary to uncover the underlying motivations for this shift, especially through access to a wider range of primary sources.

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노태우 정부의 북방정책과 북일 관계 1990년대 초 북일 수교 협상에 대한 한국의 대응 분석

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이 글은 1990년대 초 북일 국교정상화 협상 과정에서 한국의 노태우 정부가 어떠한 역할을 수행했는지를 분석했다. 노태우 정부는 초기에 북방정책의 연장선상에서 교차 승인과 북일 관계 개선을 지지하는 입장을 보였으나, 북일 간 본격적인 국교 정상화 교섭이 시작되자 점차 이를 견제하는 방향으로 정책을 전환하였다. 이 글에서는 당시 외교부에서 생산된 외교문서를 분석해, 당시 한국 정부가 북일 협상에 간접적으로 개입한 양상을 고찰했다. 특히 주일한국대사관에서 일본 내 대북 여론에 영향을 미치기 위해 북한의 인권 침해, 핵 개발 의혹 등을 강조하는 부정적 정보를 확산하려 한 점을 분석했다. 외교문서가 부분적으로만 공개됐기 때문에 분석에 일정한 한계는 있으나, 이러한 외교 행위는 탈냉전기 동북아에서 한국이 제3국으로서 북일 협상 과정에 실질적 영향력을 행사하려 했음을 보여준다.

주제어: 북방정책, 노태우 정부, 북일 관계, 교차수교