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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Inter-Korean family reunions</th>
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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
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INTER-KOREAN FAMILY REUNIONS

by

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Background: Since the 1953 armistice agreement that ended the battles of the Korean War, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) has served as a border between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, and the Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea. For many, the division of Korea represents one of the final frontiers of Cold War-era ideological struggle. For Korean families, the DMZ can also serve as an impenetrable barrier between them and their relatives. Families became separated in the years following liberation from Japanese occupation and during the Korean War, as people moved about the peninsula for various reasons. The separations became permanent once the 1953 armistice agreement was signed. 60 years have passed and increasing numbers of Koreans with parents, siblings, children, and other relatives on the opposite side of the DMZ are passing away. Figure 1 depicts the status of those registered with the ROK government’s Integrated Information System for Separated Families, while Figure 2 shows the ages of surviving applicants.

Figure 1 (Data Source: Eng.unikorea.go.kr)
The first official inter-Korean family reunions took place in 1985, one year after a flood-stricken South Korea accepted humanitarian aid from North Korea. The reunions were not repeated again until 2000, during the ROK presidency of Kim Dae-jung (in office from 1998-2003) and his policy of engagement dubbed ‘the sunshine policy.’ Kim’s successor, Roh Moo-hyun (in office 2003-2008), also adopted this policy. By engaging with North Korea rather than approaching it with a mindset of confrontation, Kim hoped to boost cooperation between the two Koreas. Roh went further and agreed with sending unconditional aid to the DPRK. Klingner (2013) notes, ‘President Roh was determined to engage Pyongyang - regardless of North Korean behavior.’ In the case of the family reunions, the ‘sunshine’ approach of engagement had a positive effect.

Between 2000 and 2007, 16 rounds of inter-Korean family reunions took place. The reunions were sparked by an agreement made at the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit. The summit was a groundbreaking event in the history of divided Korea, as it was the first time the leaders of the North and South met in person since the formal division of the peninsula in 1948 (O’Neil, 2001). In 2003, an investigation revealed that a large bribe - US$100 million of government money and US$400 million from Hyundai - had been paid to the DPRK to secure participation in the summit (BBC, 2003). Despite the scandal surrounding the summit, its goal of establishing family reunions was relatively successful. Nearly 3,400 families met in the reunions between 2000 and
2007 (Choe, 2009). In 2008, Roh Moo-hyun was replaced by Lee Myung-bak. During his four years in office, Lee pursued a more hardline approach to North Korea than his predecessors. 2008 saw the halting of unconditional aid to the DPRK, as well as a year without family reunions.

One reunion was each year held in both 2009 and 2010. 2010 was a particularly tumultuous year for the two Koreas, with the sinking of the South Korean Navy ship the Cheonan, the subsequent May 24 sanctions, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Only a few weeks before the shelling of Yeonpyeong, 100 families were reunited at Mount Kumgang in North Korea. In exchange for the reunions, the DPRK demanded rice and fertiliser from the ROK (Kim, 2010). After the Yeonpyeong incident, hopes of continuation and even expansion of the reunion programme were shelved (Kim, 2011).

Current president Park Geun-Hye was inaugurated in February 2013. Park advocated for a new approach to the DPRK, one she dubbed ‘trustpolitik.’ Cheon posits that Park’s approach to North Korea differs from Kim, Roh, and Lee’s in that Park ‘is willing to deliver humanitarian assistances to the fullest extent possible’ but that ‘North Korea’s positive response is inevitably needed for the trust process to make meaningful progress’ (2013, p. 4). Park was very open and enthusiastic about family reunions and other ways to have Koreans from North and South interact on a personal level - even advocating the construction of an international park for such meetings at the DMZ (Keck, 2013).

In August 2013, about six months into Park’s presidency, the two Koreas came to an agreement to restart the family reunions. The next round was scheduled for that September, but a week before the reunions were set to begin, the DPRK pulled out. North Korea cited a need for a “normal atmosphere” before they would consider restarting talks about the reunions (Park, 2013). This reaction may have been in response to the ROK’s refusal to settle the issue of family reunions concurrently with the reopening of Mount Kumgang resort, despite previously having signaled a willingness to tackle both topics at once (Foster-Carter, 2014).
In January 2014, President Park suggested that if the DPRK were to agree to hold more reunions, the ROK would send more humanitarian aid (Choe, 2014). A round of family reunions took place in February 2014. On the second day of the reunion, South Korea approved a shipment of aid to North Korea by two private groups totaling nearly US$1 million (South China Morning Post, 2014), thereby fulfilling Park’s statement from the month before. Shortly after the reunions, President Park made a proposal to the DPRK to establish regular family reunions, an idea the DPRK rejected. In August 2014, Park called again for the resumption of family reunions.

The twenty rounds of family reunions outlined above were all in-person, with family members traveling from the ROK to the DPRK, or in some early cases vice-versa, to spend time with their relatives. Some alternative forms of communication have also been used to put families back in contact. The three main examples are confirmation of status (living/deceased), video reunions, and sending letters.

From 2000-2010, about 17,000 Koreans were reunited in person. In the same period, 3,700 ‘met’ through official video reunions (Kim, 2010). Seven rounds of video reunions took place between 2000 and 2013. They have not received as much attention as in-person reunions, perhaps in part because they do not produce the same emotional photographs of elderly relatives embracing each other, although President Park included both video reunions and letter exchanges in a call for renewed talks with North Korea in March 2014 (Press TV, 2014).

Confirmation of status is perhaps the most basic form of familial ‘contact’ that has been employed by the two Koreas. Letter exchanges have also been conducted. However, it is possible for South Koreans to achieve these same aims without going through the official system. Through secret exchanges with brokers, usually based in the northeast of China, South Koreans - and North Korean defectors living in the South - send money, exchange information about family members, and even speak on the phone (Lurie, 2014). These communication channels are risky, expensive, and illegal - any unauthorised contact by a ROK citizen, even a defector, to the DPRK is prohibited. The same is true for North Koreans wanting to contact South Koreans.
Family reunions and related activities such as letter exchanges and confirmation of status messages, as well as some inter-governmental correspondence between the two Koreas, are channeled through the Red Cross system. The ROK National Red Cross (ROKNRC) and the DPRK National Red Cross (DPRKNRC), like all national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies across the world, are guided by the seven principles of the Red Cross. These principles are humanity, equity, neutrality, independence, service, unity,1 and universality. Unfortunately, doubts exist about the impartiality of both the ROKNRC and the DPRKNRC (Foley, 2003). On their website, the ROKNRC admits that they are not able practice independence fully: ‘While physical reunions that offers [sic] direct contact with the separated families is obviously the most effective form of [Restoring Family Links/RFL], it is also most heavily influenced by external factors (e.g. politics) for this very reason’ (Redcross.or.kr).

The issue of family reunions has gained a moderate amount of attention in the United States (US), particularly amongst members of the Korean diaspora and those with connections to Korea such as Korean War veterans. Divided Families is an American group attempting to raise awareness about the separated families issue and how it affects Korean-Americans. In 2014, two resolutions concerning Korean divided families were submitted to the US Congress. The resolutions cite an ageing population and the lack of US-DPRK diplomatic relations as reasoning for urging Pyongyang to allow the divided family members to meet (Korea Herald, 2014).

**Analysis:** The biggest challenge in the divided families issue is finding a way for the DPRK and ROK to agree on regular reunions. Part of the difficulty in finding common ground is the difference in viewpoints. Suh explains, ‘North Korea perceives this issue as a political matter, whereas South Korea regards it as a humanitarian one’ (2002, p. 353). Foley also argues that to the DPRK, the divided families issue is a part of the larger issue of reunification, while the ROK sees it as its own separate problem (2003). Furthermore, the North Korean government sees two large issues with family reunions. The first is that the DPRK views those members of divided families that fled to the ROK before or during the war as traitors. Allowing visitation with those

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1 Interestingly in the case of the divided Korean peninsula, the unity principle addresses the idea that each country should have only one Red Cross society.
whom the regime has denounced seems counter-intuitive. Secondly, visits with family from South Korea have the potential to spread information that the North Korean regime does not want their population to receive (Suh, 2002). There is speculation that the DPRK attempts to overcome these issues by only selecting loyal party members for the reunions, and pre-coaching them on what to say (Choe, 2009).

In order to be successful in arranging for more family reunions, the ROK must understand this difference in viewpoint and try to mitigate it by not attaching family reunions to other aims. Foley claims that reunions have been used as a ‘political tool and bargaining chip in inter-Korean talks’ (2003, p. 84). Putting family reunions in the same speeches as calls for denuclearisation should be avoided. Proposed dates for meetings and reunions should be carefully considered. This summer, the ROK proposed August 19 for an inter-Korean meeting - the same day that an annual joint US-ROK military training exercise was scheduled (Kwon, 2014). Since the DPRK already regards the reunions as a political issue, moves such as this reinforce their view and make it more difficult for the ROK to convince their counterparts that the issue is solely humanitarian. Snyder writes, ‘Precisely because [the divided families] issue will continue to diminish with the passage of time as a politically salient form of leverage in inter-Korean relations, now is the time for family exchanges to be depoliticised and treated as a purely humanitarian issue’ (2014). Incidents such as the cancellation in 2013, where the DPRK cited the ROK’s backpedaling on tackling Mount Kumgang tourism and family reunions concurrently, demonstrate how connecting family reunions with other aims can endanger their coming to fruition.

South Korea should be prepared to make small concessions - for example regarding the location or timing of the reunions - in order to make the reunions happen, within reason. One of the disadvantages to this approach is that the DPRK may continue to see the divided families as a political issue. They may try to entangle family reunions in other issues, but only by being firm and consistent can the ROK demonstrate their commitment to depoliticisation. This strategy may also have an effect on the working of the Red Cross societies, particularly the ROKNRC, as they would be able to operate more in line with the global Red Cross principles.
Building trust in the realm of family reunions and depoliticising them will of course take time, but the alternative of continuing the sporadic, political history of family reunions in the same time frame leaves much to be desired. The information provided in the background section of this paper demonstrates that changing politics in the South has an effect on the reunions as well. ROK policymakers must be aware of this and not try to only pin blame on their counterparts to the north, while also considering the differing perceptions of the DPRK.

While in-person reunions are more ideal for those with family on the other side of the DMZ, video reunions offer several advantages. First, they avoid the issue of which side will travel. As North Korea is wary about its population traveling to South Korea, most reunions have taken place in the North. One of the challenges has been agreeing on a venue. With video reunions, neither side has to travel. This is also important when the ages and health status of those wanting to visit family are considered. The ROK should expand its family reunion efforts to include more video reunions.

The South Korean Ministry of Unification currently lists three aspects of their approach to the divided families issue on their website: organisation of reunions, support for private sector exchanges, and internal efforts to help divided families. The Ministry offers financial help for families to turn to the private sector for arranging reunions, exchanging letters, or providing a confirmation of status. The Ministry says, ‘The government is also inducing more active exchange through the private sector by supporting agencies involved in helping separated families locate relatives in the North’ (Separated Families Issues). Such exchanges are rare, though, with only 34 people using private sector services in the divided families issue in 2013. Private sector exchanges take place in a third country, typically China, although they have also taken place in Japan and the US (Suh, 2002).

The ROK government should work to open opportunities for family reunions in every way possible. This could include offering more financial and/or logistical support to families that are interested in pursuing reunions orchestrated by private firms or third countries. The ROK government should encourage these reunions to take place in China, as opposed to Japan or the US, to avoid a threatening interpretation by the
DPRK. In the same vein, the ROK should monitor but not involve themselves in the efforts of American politicians for Korean-American family reunions with the DPRK. Becoming entangled in US efforts runs the risk of sending stronger politicization signals to the DPRK. Korean-Americans that hold Korean citizenship should be able to access the same family reunion channels as ROK citizens living in South Korea.

The Ministry also addresses some of the internal activities they conduct to help the situation of the divided families. These activities include producing and archiving video messages, with the intention of sending them to relatives in the North via the Red Cross. In a survey of interest lasting less than two months in 2012, the Ministry received 16,800 applications. As of 2013, only 2,815 videos were made and stored at the Integrated Information Center for Separated Families (eng.unikorea.go.kr).

The South Korean government must actively work on the divided families issue, even if North Korea is unwilling to arrange reunions, by expanding their internal activities. The ROK Ministry of Unification should expand their video programme and make it a priority. While producing and storing the videos is not an ideal scenario, it can provide a safety net of sorts for if reunions are stalled as well as providing historical records for future generations of Koreans. The same system can be used for letters. As unauthorised contact between citizens of the two Koreas is prohibited, the South should pursue as many channels of communication as they can - for example increasing the number of letters sent as well as sending pre-recorded videos to the North. This may also appeal to the DPRK, as increased chances of official contact may make using clandestine methods less attractive to families on either side of the border. Sending letters and videos may also be viewed more favourably by the DPRK as the authorities can monitor the content. Some may view this as ‘giving in’ to the regime’s ideals, but it can also be seen as working within the very real constraints to find a solution to the issue.

South Korea cannot afford to simply hope that the North will accept an offer for reunions in the near future. The separated families issue has a dwindling time limit. It is in the best interests of the ROK to make consistent, depoliticised efforts that take into account the perceptions of the DPRK. South Korea should expand the use of media, particularly video, in family reunions both across the DMZ and domestically.
The ROK government must work to ensure that the stories of separated families are not forgotten even if the DPRK does not agree to reunions. The South should be proactive, if not for the sake of future inter-Korea relations, but for the thousands of men and women enduring a life of separation from their loved ones.

Cautionary notes: N/A

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References
A combination of journalistic, analytical, and academic works were used in the research for this policy paper.


