

A Constructivist Perspective on Inter-Korean Relations: The Evolution of Identity and Interstate Interactions

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Abstract:

The issue of the confrontational relationship between the two countries on the Korean Peninsula has been widely discussed worldwide, but there are still shortcomings in research on the Cold War period. Based on the current situation, this article utilizes constructivist theory, represented by Alexander Wendt's viewpoint, to analyze the evolution of identity recognition and interaction between North and South Korea during the Cold War. Through analysis, the relationship between North and South Korea was at a freezing point at the end of the Korean War, and there were signs of easing in the following twenty years. The idea and concept of peaceful reunification were proposed, and after the end of the Cold War, the relationship took a big step forward, beginning cultural and economic exchanges and cooperation. Therefore, this article concludes that the relationship between North and South Korea gradually shifted from extreme confrontation to a certain degree of cooperation during the Cold War.

Keywords: International relation, constructivism, identity, Cold War period, Korean peninsula

1. Introduction

The Korean peninsula, as the heart of the north-east Asian region, has been receiving extensive attention from the international community since the mid-20th century. Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Korean Peninsula has been divided into two parts, north and south, under the military occupation of the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively. The political arrangements during this period laid the foundation for the birth of North Korea and South Korea and also laid the groundwork for their identity recognition. With the intensification of the Cold War pattern, the Korean Peninsula has become the forefront of East-West confrontation, and the confrontation and conflict between North Korea and South Korea continue to escalate. During this process, the identities of the two countries gradually solidified, forming their own unique political, economic, and cultural systems.

Constructivism, an important school of thought in international relations theory, provides a new analytical framework to understand and explain the evolution and development of inter-Korean relations. According to constructivism, a state's identity is not a priori but is gradually formed and evolved in interaction with other states. In this process, factors such as norms, cognition, and culture play an important role. Therefore, from a constructivist

perspective, the issue of identity in inter-Korean relations can be explored in greater depth and how this identity affects interstate interaction and cooperation. This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the evolution and development of inter-Korean relations from a constructivist perspective. By reviewing and analyzing the historical background and current situation of inter-Korean relations as well as the application of constructivism in the study of international relations, this paper attempts to reveal the important role of identity, norms, and perceptions in inter-Korean relations, and compares and analyses the differences in identity between the South and North Korea, to provide readers with a new perspective to understand and explain the evolution and development of inter-Korean relations.

2. Development of Inter-Korean Relations and Points of Conflict During the Cold War Period

2.1 Korean War Period

The Korean War period, following the end of the Second World War, was the most tense and antagonistic in the relationship between South Korea and North Korea, which had just been established through the complexity of the international community and the polarisation of internal

political forces. During this period, the two countries were not only geopolitically close yet isolated from each other but also had fundamental differences and conflicts in their ideologies, political systems, and national development goals. The outbreak of the war brought these underlying conflicts to a head, plunging relations between the two countries into an unprecedented state of tension.

The origins of the 1950-1953 Korean War can be traced back to the demarcation of the 38th parallel in 1945. After the establishment of South Korea, which, according to the "History of the Korean War", had officially become "a confrontation between two systems" (i.e. a confrontation between two social systems), neither side recognized the existence of the other. Soon after, South Korea openly signaled its northward unification. For North Korea at this time, its consideration was still mostly on the question of how to cope with South Korea's military attack, that is to say, mostly from a defensive point of view. At the same time, South Korea was firmly opposed to the proposal to hold general elections in North and South Korea and to establish a unified central government. Thus, on 25 June 1950, the Korean Civil War finally broke out.

As the Korean War was underway, despite South Korea's economic and military disadvantages, the President advocated reunification by force, proposed a policy of reunification first, construction later, no reunification, no construction, and used anti-communist ideological propaganda to defend autocracy and dictatorship [1]. Later, on 27 July 1953, the Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations forces, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Korea, and the Commander of the People's Volunteer Army of the People's Republic of China finally signed an agreement in Panmunjom to end the war. As a result of this agreement, the North and the South entered a partial truce, with a temporary cessation of hostilities, but a state of war continued, and a demilitarized zone and military demarcation line were established between North and South Korea. However, South Korea did not participate in the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement because the supreme leader of South Korea insisted on the idea of unifying the Korean Peninsula.

The Korean War was fought as a revolutionary unification and forceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, but it did not achieve its purpose. At the same time, the war proved that in the Korean Peninsula, which was divided by ideological oppositions, it was impossible to achieve political and military reunification in a short period by generating an overwhelming superiority in the system of either side. At the same time, the war further defined the ethnic division internally, exacerbated mistrust between the ethnic groups, intensified the military confrontation

between the two countries and led the two regimes, north and south, towards dictatorship.

2.2 Period of Detente and Improvement

After the 1960s, relations between the DPRK and the ROK showed a trend towards détente and improvement, and with the subtle adjustments in the pattern of the Cold War and the evolution of the international situation, the two countries realized that prolonged hostility would not be conducive to their development, explored peaceful reunification as a means of easing the tense situation.

Since 1960, the DPRK has been advocating the reunification of North and South Korea. In the 1960s, the DPRK vaguely advocated federalism, then changed it to "Goryeo Federation" in 1973, and on 10 October 1980, at the Sixth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, they put forward a plan for the establishment of the Democratic Federal Republic of Goryeo. In other words, until the 1970s, they insisted on the federation as a transitional measure leading to reunification, but later they insisted on the confederation as the final form of reunification, which was reflected in the speech at the Sixth Congress. The DPRK proposed that the North and the South would establish a government of national reunification based on recognition and tolerance of each other's ideas and systems, and on that basis, a federal republic in which the North and the South would enjoy equal rights and obligations and exercise regional autonomy. The main elements are divided into three main categories: the preconditions for independent and peaceful reunification, the form and operating principles of the federal government, and the 10 corrective policies of the federal government.

North Korea's 1980 reunification plan advocated federalism as a complete form of reunification. In the 1960s, North Korea advocated reunification under a federal system, changed the name of the country to the Goryeo Confederation in the 1970s, and on 10 October 1980, at the Sixth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), added the word democracy and put forward a plan for the so-called establishment of a democratic federal republic of Goryeo [2]. This unification plan did not advocate for the Confederation as a transitional measure before unification, but rather as the complete form of a unified country. The establishment plan of the Democratic Federal Republic of Korea is one country, two systems, and two governments, with local governments in the north and south in charge of internal affairs, and the central government in charge of foreign affairs and national defense. The federal formation principle proposed in the plan is a "national unity government", in which the North and the South participate equally while recognizing the ideological systems of the North

and the South. In October 1980, the Workers' Party of Korea proposed a unification plan at its congress, which aimed to establish two governments and two systems in one country under the principles of independence, peace, and national unity. North Korean leaders proposed a unified policy at the Workers' Party Congress, which included three points: independence, peace, and national unity. The basic goal was to establish an independent democratic regime, namely a communist regime in South Korea. The Goryeo Confederation system is a proposal to unify the Korean Peninsula into a federal form. However, before implementation, North Korea insisted on three conditions: abolishing South Korea's national security law, allowing communism to operate in South Korea, and withdrawing US troops from South Korea.

Although the idea was not put into practice on this occasion, it demonstrated that there was a possibility of improvement and reconciliation in relations between the two countries. At the same time, it laid the groundwork for the agreements that were to follow in the 1990s.

2.3 A Big Step Forward in Relations

The second phase of the North-South dialogue resumed in the early 1990s with the collapse of the micro-bipolar Cold War system resulting from the collapse of the socialist camp in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the signing of the North-South Reconciliation Non-Aggressive Exchanges and Co-operation Agreement (hereinafter referred to as the "North-South Basic Agreement"), signed in 1991, is an agreement that contains a great deal of detail. This agreement marked the beginning of the ensuing North-South dialogue and the resulting North-South agreement.

As the first framework for defining the political and legal relations between the North and South since the division of the country, it recognized the ethnicity of the two sides, stating that North-South relations were not relations between states, but rather a special relationship that had been temporarily formed in the pursuit of unification. It consists of five parts: a preamble, reconciliation between the North and the South, non-aggression between the North and the South, inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation, and effective provisions [3].

In the preamble, the Basic Agreement between North and South Korea reaffirms three principles and states that inter-Korean relations are a unity relationship rather than a state relationship [4]. It is defined as a special relationship that was temporarily formed during the pursuit process after joining the United Nations. In the field of reconciliation between North and South Korea, it is stipulated to recognize each other's system and not interfere in their

internal affairs. It is prohibited to defame the other party, attempt to destroy or subvert the other party, strive to transition from a ceasefire state to a peaceful state, and comply with military ceasefire agreements. In terms of international cooperation, a liaison office between North and South Korea will be established in Panmunjom within three months after the agreement takes effect, and a North-South political subcommittee will be established within one month. The North and South sides will not invade each other by force based on the current military demarcation line. To ensure the establishment of the North-South Joint Military Committee and direct communication between the North-South military authorities, it is stipulated to establish a North-South Military Subcommittee. In terms of exchanges and cooperation between North and South Korea, the joint development of the economy as a resource and domestic exchanges, education, literature, publishing, newspapers, radio and television exchanges, and cooperation, as well as the free movement and contact of ethnic members, communication and visits of separated families, and transportation networks. The North-South Economic Exchange and Cooperation Joint Committee shall be established within three months after the agreement comes into effect.

The signing of the North-South Basic Agreement is not only an important contribution to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula but also a result that the international community expects. It demonstrates the willingness and ability of both the North and the South to resolve differences through dialogue and cooperation, setting a positive example for peace and development in the region and even the world.

3. Causal Analysis from a Constructivist Perspective

As the Cold War drew to a close, and as the realist and liberal theories of the time did not do a good job of foreseeing the end of the Cold War and explaining the reasons for its end, an emerging theory of international relations, constructivist international relations, naturally appeared on the international scene. Constructivism draws from many schools of thought, including but not limited to the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, and its ideological sources include sociology, philosophy of language, and international relations.

Alexander Wendt, one of the representatives of the constructivist school of thought, questioned the ontology of the international system of mainstream theory and proposed a conceptualist and holistic ontology of constructivism. Three central concepts are included in Alexander Wendt's view: the mutual construction of agents and

structures; identity, interests, and behavior; and three cultures in anarchy. These will be the theoretical basis for the analyses in this paper.

3.1 The Mutual Construction Between the Actors and the Structure

In international relations, actors usually refer to states or other entities with autonomous action capabilities. They have their own goals, beliefs, and action capabilities, which can influence the structure of the international system and other actors. In Wendt's constructivist theory, structure is not simply a material existence, but a social structure composed of various factors such as shared knowledge, material factors (such as national strength), and social practices. This structure not only contains material factors, but more importantly, non-material factors such as ideas, culture, and norms.

According to Wendt, the relationship between the actor and the structure is mutually constructive. Actors shape structures through their actions and practices, and structures, in turn, influence the behavior and perceptions of actors through their shared knowledge and practice patterns. This process of mutual construction is one of the key drivers of the continuous development and change of international relations [5].

As independent State actors, North Korea and South Korea directly influence the political and security structure of the peninsula and the Northeast Asian region through their respective political, economic, and military actions and policy choices. At the beginning of the end of the Korean War, there was acute hostility between the North and South, which led to instability on the Korean Peninsula through numerous military clashes. Subsequently, from the 1970s onwards, despite the political antagonism between the two sides, occasional cultural exchanges and civilian contacts gradually began, which weakened tensions at the official level to a certain extent and played an important role in the peaceful evolution of the region.

At the same time, the attention of the international community to the Korean peninsula constitutes an external constraint on the behavior of the two Koreas, influencing their policy choices and course of action. As time passes, the international community's understanding of the problems on the Korean peninsula has gradually developed into a universal view, which not only influences the international community's attitudes and policies towards the Korean peninsula and North and South Korea but also affects the perceptions and values of the people of the two countries and contributes to the change of the situation on the peninsula.

3.2 Identity, Interests and Behaviour

Identity refers to the content of who or what the actor is. Interest refers to the needs of actors. Interest is a prerequisite for identity, as the actors cannot know what they need until they know who they are[5]. Due to the varying degrees of cultural content associated with identity, interests also have varying degrees of cultural content. Identity and interests work together. In this way, identity determines interests, interests determine behavior, and only by considering identity, interests, and cognition can behavior be explained. Winter uses Gorbachev's "New Thinking" as an example to illustrate how ideas play a huge role in the process of identity change and transform international relations from a competitive security system to a cooperative security system.

Before taking a certain action, the actor still needs to be defined, and this definition is based on at least two considerations: what identity and interests the actor has, which reflects their recognition of their role; The actor's perception of what actions others may take reflects their recognition of the identity and interests of others. After the end of the Korean War, South Korea and North Korea formed a concept that they were enemies of each other. Not only that, after the ceasefire agreement was issued, on September 9, 1953, the presidential spokesperson stated that the South Korean government had never expressed any plans to unify Korea through peaceful means in any way. This also means that the outbreak of the Korean War is inevitable. On the other hand, from the perspective of South Korea, this is a powerful means for their leaders to maintain their ruling position, while also meeting South Korea's interests; However, for the North Korean side, at this time South Korea considers itself the ruler of the Korean Peninsula, which seriously damages North Korea's interests on the Korean Peninsula and in the international community [6].

But with the development of the times and changes in the form of the international community, the relationship between the two countries is also gradually changing. In the 1970s, as the world gradually developed, North and South Korea gradually ceased their hostile relationship and expressed their desire for peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, such as establishing the Goryeo Federation. For North and South Korea at this time, continuing to maintain hostile diplomatic relations will prevent them from obtaining many deserved benefits, and both sides often face significant sanctions from major powers, which to some extent forces the two countries to put aside their hostility and shift towards a more gentle relationship.

In the 1990s, with the advancement of globalization and

regional cooperation becoming mainstream in the international community, the relationship between North and South Korea gradually improved. Both sides realized that only by building a more stable Korean Peninsula could they gain widespread support from the international community and strengthen their development. Therefore, the two countries signed the North-South Basic Agreement to cooperate in areas such as economy and culture and to improve the relationship between the two countries.

The changes in the relationship, identity, and interests between North and South Korea have played a crucial role, which is beneficial for the development of the Korean Peninsula and also for its development.

3.3 Hobbesian Culture and Locke Culture in Anarchy

Among the Hobbesian cultures, the Hobbesian anarchic culture is established by the structure of the role of the enemy, which is centered on enmity. States reproduce each other as enemies, behave on the principle of not recognizing their right to exist as independent actors, and have unlimited access to violence [7]. Lockean culture, on the other hand, its logic regards states as rivals, and rivals expect mutual behavior to be based on the recognition of sovereignty and thus do not try to conquer or dominate each other. However, mutual recognition between rivals is not the same as refraining from violence in the event of a dispute. Rivalry and enmity are fundamentally different: rivals recognize each other's rights to existence and property, and this recognition is expressed by the institution of sovereignty. Rivals do not try to dominate and destroy each other unlike enemies who are life and death threats [7].

In the early days after the Korean War, relations between the two countries were undoubtedly shrouded in a strong Hobbesian culture against the backdrop of which the two Koreas viewed each other as a direct threat, and mutual hostility and suspicion reached a peak. Both sides not only maintained a high level of military alert and constantly strengthened themselves through military exercises and weapons upgrades but also blockaded and confronted each other in many fields, including politics, economy, and culture, in an attempt to consolidate their security position by weakening the other side. The strong military power displayed by North Korea in the early stages of the war once put South Korea in an extremely unfavorable position, almost pinned down at the southernmost tip of the peninsula, with large swathes of territory occupied. This situation not only intensified the hostility between the two sides, but also further solidified the Hobbesian notion of security, that is, "Survival comes first, and security can

only be guaranteed through strength". However, with the intervention of the international community, especially the entry of the United Nations forces, the balance of the war was gradually tilted, which eventually led to the signing of an armistice, but the hostility between the two countries did not dissipate immediately.

As time passed, especially into the 1970s and 1980s, the situation on the Korean peninsula began to change subtly. With the easing of the Cold War pattern and the acceleration of global economic integration, the idea of Lockean culture gradually permeated between North and South Korea. Lockean culture, in contrast to Hobbesian culture, emphasized the protection of individual rights and the importance of a social contract and believed that peaceful coexistence between nations could be achieved through mutual respect for sovereignty, adherence to international law, and resolution of differences through dialogue and consultation. During this period, although friction and conflict still occurred from time to time between North and South Korea, the scale and intensity were far less than at the beginning of the war. Both sides began to realize that resolving disputes by force was no longer a viable option and that seeking peace and cooperation was the long-term way forward. Channels of communication between the two countries have gradually opened up, including increasingly frequent exchanges in the economic, cultural, and sports fields, providing an important platform for easing tensions and enhancing mutual understanding.

4. Conclusion

This paper unpacks the changes in identity and interstate interaction between the two Koreas during the Cold War period using the three dimensions of mutual construction of actor and structure, identity, interest, and behavior, and Hobbesian and Lockean cultures in anarchy under a constructivist perspective. Under the long haze of the Cold War, the relationship between the North and South of the Korean Peninsula--the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea - underwent a tortuous and complex evolution. At first, owing to the profound impact of the Cold War pattern and the fundamental differences between the two sides in terms of their political systems and ideologies, the two countries regarded each other as hostile countries, refused to recognize each other's sovereign status, and severely restricted any form of inter-State exchanges and contacts. During this period, the border areas were tense and confrontational, with the risk of military conflict looming at times, and the entire peninsula was shrouded in a thick atmosphere of hostility. However, over time, changes in the international situation and the needs of domestic political and economic devel-

opment on both sides prompted the two countries to begin to re-examine their relations. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the gradual de-escalation of the Cold War and the intensification of globalization, the two Koreas began to seek to ease tensions and explore new avenues for peaceful coexistence through dialogue and cooperation. After years of tireless efforts, the two Koreas issued a landmark declaration aimed at improving relations between the two countries. The declaration not only marked a historic turnaround in relations between the two countries but also laid a solid foundation for cooperation between the two sides in various fields. Since then, the two Koreas have begun to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in various fields, including politics, economy, and culture, to jointly promote peace, stability, development, and prosperity on the peninsula.

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