

# A Geo-Economic Object or an Object of Geo-Political Absorption? Competing Visions of North Korea in South Korean Politics

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**ABSTRACT** *The so-called Sunshine Policy launched by the liberal regime of South Korea brought about a significant transformation in its visions of North Korea. Through it, North Korea became an “object of development.” This was something different from the previous idea of North Korea as a politico-military target. However, to conservatives, North Korea remains within the politico-military realm as an object of territorial and ideological absorption. As a result, political conflicts in South Korea in the conception of North Korea – between a geo-economic object and an object of geo-political absorption – entail competitive appropriation of the discourse of “China’s colonisation of North Korea” and affect the way North Korean territory is produced.*

**KEY WORDS:** South Korea, North Korea, geo-economy, geo-politics, China-North Korea relations, neo-liberalisation

The struggle over geography is also a conflict between competing images and imaginings, a contest of power and resistance that involves not only struggles to represent the materiality of physical geographical objects and boundaries but also the equally powerful and, in a different manner, the equally material force of discursive borders between an idealised Self and a demonised Other, between “us” and “them” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 14–15).

In both North and South Korea, despite decades of animosity, the reunification of the Korean peninsula has long been desired – a dream for the Korean nation to fulfil. Since the division of the peninsula and during the Cold War, the South Korean state forcibly imposed and sustained its monopolistic vision of North Korea as an arch-enemy. This entailed the production of imaginative geographies and territorial representations of the North which were negative in content. This imaginary was bolstered by institutional mechanisms such as the National Security Law. The territory of the North was naturalised not only as a dangerous place but also as an object to be re-appropriated. Article Three of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, enacted July 17, 1948, stipulates: “The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands” (Constitutional Court of Korea 1987). By this conception, the North was deemed as

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legally and morally “our land” but still an “unrecovered territory,” occupied by the enemy (see Schmitt [1932] 2007).<sup>1</sup> This “othering” of the North was particularly crucial to illegitimate military regimes of the South (see Lee et al. 2014).

After regime change in 1998, old hostilities shifted. The liberal regime of South Korea launched the so-called Sunshine Policy to promote peace and reconciliation through economic aid and co-operation, or “South-North economic co-operation” (남북경제협력). Though this term means the development of mutual economic co-operation between South and North Korea, it is driven by the underlying intention of bringing about gradual changes in North Korea’s socialist system. Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung claimed that “Sunshine is more effective than strong wind in inducing North Korea to come out of isolation and confrontation” (Koo and Nam 2001, 83).<sup>2</sup> The June 2000 summit meeting between the two Koreas facilitated the expansion of economic interchange and co-operation and led to the development of the Mt Kumgang and the Kaesong Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Despite several problems, economic co-operation was coaxed along for ten years, from February 1998 to February 2008, by liberal regimes. This entailed a significant change in the vision of North Korea; it challenged the prevalent view of North Korea as an enemy that should be defeated (Lee et al. 2014). A new narrative replaced this hegemonic vision. North Korea became a *geo-economic object*. In this sense, Hyun Ok Park (2009, 112) explains that inter-Korean economic co-operation consists in the transition “from the once-and-for-all unification to a gradual and linear process of unification, and *from territorial to market integration of the two Koreas*” (emphasis added).

Yet the transformation has not been fully successful. It has sparked new political conflicts facilitated by politicians and intellectuals but spread throughout South Korean society. These conflicts are generally envisioned as ideological confrontations between liberal (or progressive) and conservative groups. They are called the “South-South conflicts” (남남갈등). While this antagonism first centred on ex-President Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy (for example, conservatives consistently attacked inter-Korean economic co-operation because they thought that it helped fund the development of North Korean nuclear power), it has encompassed various other political and economic issues regarding not only North Korea but also the US. For example, conflicts rage over issues such as the transfer of wartime operational control from the United States (US) to South Korean forces and the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (W.-Y. Lee 2012).

This article examines conflicts in South Korea regarding the discourses describing North Korea in order to scrutinise how different territorial imaginaries of the North underlie these political-economic struggles.<sup>3</sup> It is argued that while North Korea has been appropriated through a neo-liberal frame by liberals, to conservatives it remains a politico-military object of territorial absorption. As a result of this bifurcation, political conflicts in South Korea over the conception of North Korea – as an object of geo-political absorption or as a geo-economic object – have come, dialectically, to influence the way North Korean territory is produced. In other words, political contestations between competing visions and interests in South Korea help to shape the production of state territory in North Korea.

However, this does not mean that only liberals retain a geo-economic vision of North Korea and conservatives stick to a geo-political one. Both factions have both geo-political and geo-economic representations and concerns towards the North. What distinguishes them is that they consistently highlight one side over the other: while liberals see that

geo-economic practices can address geo-political concerns, conservatives still favour the hegemonic geo-political scripts of North Korea to describe a particular geo-economic vision of the North. This article will elaborate this claim through an analysis that moves across two different planes: South Korea's North Korea policies and Sino-North Korean economic relations. The former concerns the political contestations over how to view North Korea. The latter will entail a synoptic genealogy of the discourse of "China's colonisation of North Korea."

### **Political Conflicts over How to View North Korea**

Geo-political visions of North Korea, which were hegemonic during the Cold War, have shifted since the 1990s. When the North suffered serious economic crises in the mid-1990s, a new economic vision of the North surfaced in the South as expectations were raised of reunification brought on by the collapse of North Korea. After witnessing the unification of the two Germanies (which caused considerable stress for the German economy), calculations of the costs of reunification with the devastated North Korean economy presented it as an economic burden on the South Korean economy.<sup>4</sup> Concomitantly, the necessity of reunification became contested.<sup>5</sup> As Kaplan (2006) asserts:

The truth is, many South Koreans have an interest in the perpetuation of the Kim Family Regime [KFR], or something like it, since the KFR's demise would usher in a period of economic sacrifice that nobody in South Korea is prepared for. A long-standing commitment by the American military has allowed the country to evolve into a materialistic society. Few South Koreans have any interest in the disruption the collapse of the KFR would produce.

Kaplan's argument is too simplistic. Ten years of liberal governments forged a new vision of North Korea as a geo-economic object rather than a serious economic liability. The North was viewed as "an object of development" (Mitchell 2002) both to revitalise the failing economy of North Korea and to promote renewed economic growth of South Korea after the 1997–98 financial crisis. Under this vision, inter-Korean economic co-operation expanded under the "Sunshine Policy" during the Kim Dae-jung regime and the "Peace and Prosperity Policy" under the Roh Moo-Hyun government.

The Kaesong Industrial Complex (hereafter KIC) was hailed as the symbolic locus and space for these new economic approaches to the North. Liberals stress both geo-political and geo-economic benefits of economic engagement with North Korea via the KIC. First, the geographical location of the KIC in the northern border region of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), 40 miles from Seoul, provides close economic linkages between the KIC and the huge markets of the Seoul Metropolitan Area; it also has a substantial deterrent effect on military action. Second, the KIC represents a promising economic "survival strategy" to both the South and North Korean economies. The competitiveness of small- and medium-sized South Korean firms has been in decline because of cheaper labour costs in China and Southeast Asian countries (see Table 1).

The KIC attests that North Korea can provide reserves of cheap and disciplined labour – speaking the same language as South Korean managers. In addition, vast underdeveloped, low-cost industrial lands are expected to enhance the comparative

**Table 1.** A comparison of labour costs and productivity

	Sihwa Industrial Complex (South Korea)	Chengdu Economic and Technological Development Zone (China)	Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone (Vietnam)	Kaesong Industrial Complex (North Korea)
Monthly wage (US\$)	831	194	98.5	63.8
Minimum wage Annual growth rate (%)	6	13	29	5
Labour productivity (relative to South Korea) (%)	100	69	40	71

Source: H.-J. Lee (2012, 3).

advantage of South Korean capital. The joint industrial project is also seen as crucial for North Korea to overcome its economic difficulties by attracting productive capital from the South, and in the long term it will reduce the cost of reunification (see S.-O. Lee 2014a). Thus, the KIC and inter-Korean economic co-operation is usually regarded as a “win-win strategy to both Koreas” (K.-S. Lee 2004, 108). As former South Korean President Roh emphasised in his 2007 Independence Day speech, “Now we should develop South-North economic cooperation into productive investment cooperation and interactive cooperation, and bring about the opportunity for investment for us and the opportunity to recover economy for North Korea [sic.]” In addition, liberals anticipated that the KIC would function as a showcase of the capitalist market economy to help North Korea understand the concepts and importance of profit and hopefully bring about transformation of North Korea’s socialist economy (Kang 2006; Wrobel 2011).

Some liberal scholars contend that inter-Korean economic co-operation can contribute to the peace and prosperity of the Korean peninsula by creating a unified economic sphere. Using the KIC as an archetype, they argue that a gradual expansion of SEZs would be one important step towards realising this imaginary (Yang and Lee 2007, 158). This geo-economic vision of North Korea and the Korean peninsula extends from criticism of both reunification-through-absorption and economic scepticism towards the integration with the North. This position interprets geo-economic processes led by the state-capital nexus as the basis for geo-political security. Liberal politicians and scholars in this camp see inter-Korean economic co-operation as the cornerstone for more open policies across Northeast Asia (Y.-I. Lee 2009, 72–77). In other words, North Korea is regarded as an important economic asset to the South, but this is not the whole story. Peace and co-operation with the North is envisioned as a crucial precondition for placing Korea as the economic hub of Northeast Asia. In this sense, reunification is seen as a new accumulation strategy for the South. Liberals’ geo-economic view of North Korea entails the construction of new geographical imaginaries beyond the peninsula.

This imaginary first materialised as a plan to restructure the country into “an international business hub for the Northeast Asian region” during the Kim Dae-jung regime (Lee and Hobday 2003, 498). The Roh administration developed it into the concept of the peninsula as the “hub of Northeast Asia”:

The Korean peninsula is located at the heart of the region. It is a big bridge linking China and Japan, the continent and the ocean. Such a geopolitical characteristic often caused pain for us in the past. Today, however, this same feature is offering us an opportunity. Indeed, it demands that we play a pivotal role in the Age of Northeast Asia in the 21st century (Roh 2003).<sup>6</sup>

President Kim employed the concept of the “hub” in symbolic terms to attract foreign direct investment; subsequently, the Roh government saw the hub as transforming the peninsula into a regional centre of international logistics and financial services. This plan has led to the development of SEZs both in North Korea and South Korea (B.-G. Park 2005).

These new geo-economic visions and imaginaries of the liberals mostly draw on two different but related theoretical sources – Paik Nak-chung’s “theory of the division system” and Suh Dong-man’s “theory of the economy of the Korean peninsula.” Paik, long a leader in the South Korean civic movements, has played a pioneering role in proposing an alternative vision of the Korean peninsula. In his article titled “For the recognition of the division system,” Paik (1992, 289) asserts that it is imperative to study the effects of the division structure in the Korean peninsula more systemically. Drawing on Wallerstein’s (1974) World-Systems theory, he argues that the ontological character of the division system can be identified at once as a sub-system of the world-system and as the superordinate system of South and North Korean systems. Instead of seeing the division as a confrontation between two systems, ideologies, or states, he describes the *division system* as a temporally and spatially particular world-subsystem that encompasses both the South and North (Paik 2000, 110). The main mechanism sustaining this system is the mutual dependence of the ruling powers in both Koreas (Paik 1992, 293–294). This makes it impossible for either Korea to transform into a “normal” democratic society or to reduce its dependence on foreign powers. Moreover, the division system is inherently unstable, swayed by internal contradictions and external geo-political conditions (Paik 2000, 108). This interpretation leads to the conclusion that unification and domestic reform are firmly woven together through one essential task: overcoming the division system (J.-Y. Kim 2004). In other words, Paik’s idea suggests that both South Korea’s and North Korea’s political-economic contradictions derive from the division system. The top priority for undoing the division system is to remove mutual distrust between the two Koreas. This idea has served as a key alternative approach to North Korea beyond the hegemonic prism from the conservative powers, and it provides a theoretical basis for liberals’ and centrists’ novel ideas on the Korean peninsula. A prominent one is from Suh Dong-man.

Suh, who was a political science professor and the former director of the Office of Planning and Coordination at the National Intelligence Service under the Roh government, proposed a theory that envisioned the Korean peninsula as a unified economic space. Developing Paik’s idea of unification as a process, he claims that inter-Korean economic relations can pose a viable solution to the problematic economies of both Koreas. Specifically, the formation of North–South economic linkages can curb excessive market powers in South Korea through the creation of markets in North Korea (Suh 2007). To avoid exploitation of North Korea, he proposes two different economic linkages: (i) vertical division of labour between South Korean capital and North Korean labour power and land; and (ii) horizontal division of labour in the development of

high-tech industries (hardware from South Korea and software from the North) (Suh 2007, 213). According to Suh (2006a), inter-Korean economic relations would create two virtuous cycles in geo-political-economic terms: one is between South Korean surplus capital to find productive investment opportunities and development of the North Korean economy; and the other is between welfare and peace. He believes that the South–North economic co-operation will not only check the increasing penetration of neo-liberal logic but also open an alternative economic space. This view is bolstered by a new geographical imaginary of North Korea as the object of a “spatial fix,” as a region where South Korean capital can search for new profitable opportunities (Harvey 2003).

Yet such visions of North Korea held by liberal politicians and scholars are neither hegemonic nor uncontested. South Korean conservative politicians, scholars and media fired back with a new discourse featuring the word “giveaways” (퍼주기). Kim and colleagues (2009, 456) translate this term into “the most generous aid to North Korea.” This discourse claims that unilateral economic aid without a fair return only contributes to the survival of the Kim regime in the North and consequently delays unification. Especially after the 2003 crisis over North Korea’s nuclear programme, this discourse evolved into the claim that funding from South Korea actually supports North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and missiles. For example, expressions such as “Give rice and get slapped in the face,” “South’s support for North Korea is returned with missiles,” and “The South makes North Korea develop bad habits” embody the “giveaways” discourse (G.-S. Kim 2006, 61). Instead of seeking clear evidence for this flow of money – for example, showing that the money from the KIC is invested in the development of nuclear capability – they argue for more transparent distribution of funds, strict mutualism, and a strategy linking economic policy and political (nuclear) policy (G.-S. Kim 2006).<sup>7</sup> This position is undergirded by the firm belief that economic support and co-operation will never transform North Korea.<sup>8</sup> And implicitly it is still predicated on a fixed and normative vision of the North as a geo-political object – an evil thing that must be conquered.

To recapitulate a central element of the argument, it is clear that liberals and conservatives share a common territorial aspiration towards North Korea as “our territory.” Yet the specific representations, imaginations and practices have significantly diverged according to their underlying imperatives. South Korean liberals project geo-economic hopes and desires onto the northern territory as a space to renew growth. They contend that expanding economic links with the North will alleviate pressing geo-political concerns. For instance, it is reported that during the 2007 inter-Korean summit meeting, President Roh suggested to Kim Jong Il a plan for “drawing a peace-economy map on top of the security-military map” (*Yonhap News*, June 24, 2013). For its part, the conservative faction is obsessed with the Cold War-era geo-political scripts of fear and danger about North Korea. Conservative forces endlessly lambasted the liberal regimes for risking national security in return for economic engagement with the North (Doucette 2010, 24). This narrative is interlaced with geo-economic fears of the high costs of unification. As Sparke (2007, 342) makes clear, geo-economic imperatives anticipate unfettered capitalist penetration into the most isolated country in the world, and fantasise flow, connectivity and interactions, whereas geo-political imperatives stress and reproduce distinctions between “us” and “them” and provoke an urgent need to contain and expel others from “our” territory.

These political conflicts have become more pronounced since 2008 with the return of conservative leadership in South Korea. When Lee Myung-bak – called “the bulldozer”



due to his successful career as the chief executive officer of Hyundai Engineering and Construction and mayor of Seoul – was elected, few predicted that the two Koreas' relationship would rupture, given his advocacy for pragmatism and his connection with Hyundai, which has pioneered the business in North Korea (Doucette 2010). Armstrong (2008, 128) explains:

Though he needs to demonstrate his toughness on Pyongyang to please his conservative base, given Hyundai's record as South Korea's largest corporate investor in the North, Lee would seem particularly well positioned to continue and deepen South Korea's economic penetration of the DPRK...It remains to be seen whether the ideological or economically opportunistic side of Lee's North Korea policy will win out.

Yet the relationship broke down completely. President Lee's deep hostility towards the North manifested itself even before he officially assumed the presidency. For instance, the Presidential Transition Committee attempted to abolish the Ministry of Unification and merge it into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Snyder 2009). Though this plan was cancelled due to strong opposition from civic groups and opposition parties, this episode is regarded as an important indicator of the Lee regime's view of inter-Korean relations not as a distinctive, intra-national problem but as a sub-set of foreign affairs (Toloraya 2008).

As this episode evinces, Lee's stance towards North Korea was obvious. Criticising liberal regimes for "coddling" North Korea with "unconditional" economic support, Lee proclaimed a new principle on North Korean policy: *conditional reciprocity*.<sup>9</sup> This idea materialised in a policy called "Vision 3000: Denuclearisation and Openness," which was explained as "a strategic initiative that seeks to encourage North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons by clearly spelling out the benefits that would accrue from such a decision" (Office of the President 2009, 17). Specifically, this plan had the South supporting the North in achieving US\$3,000 per capita GNP on the condition that it pursued denuclearisation and opening. While the conservative government declared that it would pursue mutual benefits and common prosperity in its relationship with North Korea (Office of the President 2009), it did not have any specific economic vision towards the North or for how the South could benefit from economic engagement with the North. Simply put, this policy declares: abandon your nuclear weapons and open your country, then we will modernise you.<sup>10</sup> This patronising view, deriving from a deep mistrust and extreme animosity, has no doubt cooled inter-Korean relations, which have been further aggravated by two incidents – the sinking of the South Korean warship, the *Cheonan*, and North Korea's shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island in the Yellow Sea in 2010.

Concomitantly, South Korean conservatives clamoured for the imminence of reunification. Kim Jong Il's stroke in August 2008 and reports about a deepening economic crisis fuelled strong doubts about the sustainability of the North Korean regime (*The Sunday Guardian*, June 6, 2010). Though this collapse scenario had repeatedly popped up since the North's crisis in the 1990s, it has been taken most seriously at this time by South Korean conservatives. Thus Vision 3000 is off the table, replaced by "unification by absorption." WikiLeaks cables help us detail this position. In February 2010, South Korea's then Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Chun Yung-woo, told the US Embassy officers that "[t]he DPRK...had already collapsed economically and would

collapse politically two to three years after the death of Kim Jong-il” (emphasis added). He further assured them that China would be “comfortable with a reunified Korea controlled by Seoul and anchored to the United States in a ‘benign alliance’ – as long as Korea was not hostile towards China.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, President Lee said twice in public that “unification is near,” blatantly indicating his wish for the implosion of the North (S. Lee 2012). Favouring economic sanctions and pressures, the Lee government’s policy involved waiting for the North “to collapse” rather than “to change” (*Reuters*, February 28, 2012).

This waiting strategy entailed making preparations for an abrupt unification. The government reassigned the budget for inter-Korean co-operation under the item “funding research to deal with contingencies in North Korea” (Y.-C. Kim 2011). Then on August 15, 2010, the president announced his introduction of a unification tax to finance the high cost of reunification, explaining: “Reunification will happen. It is therefore our duty to start thinking about real and substantive ways to prepare for reunification such as the adoption of a unification tax” (Lee Myung-bak 2010a). The Ministry of Unification promoted a new fund-raising campaign for unification called the “unification jar” (통일항아리). This project, intended to fund the costs of unification from donations, elicited criticism from the North that this jar “actually aimed to raise [the] money needed for the ‘unification under liberal democracy’” (*Korea News Service*, May 22, 2012).

These policies of South Korean conservatives clearly communicate their vision of North Korea as a geo-political object of territorial claims, but one that will be very costly. Such territorial representations do not take into account the geo-economic calculations of land, labour power and natural resources in the North: “Lee ...views Nordpolitik mainly through prisms of politics, ideology, and security rather than geo-economics” (Foster-Carter 2012). Thus, one liberal scholar makes the criticism that there is “a major contradiction in his proposal, proposing a unification tax while having burnt all the bridges with North Korea” (*The Washington Post*, August 16, 2010). Actually, the Lee government’s policy is more consistent than contradictory. We only need to recognise the links from the underlying vision of the North as an evil that must be conquered to the belief in its imminent collapse and a cost-oriented calculation about unification.

This divergence between liberals and conservatives also emerged in President Lee’s economic project of *resource diplomacy*. The Lee government stressed resource diplomacy as an imperative for a resource-scarce country that needed to maintain a stable energy supply for economic growth. The government widely propagated its accomplishments in securing overseas resources (mostly in Africa), but a series of corruption scandals and exaggerated achievements were a serious blow to the regime (Chun 2010; *Ilyo Shinmun*, October 19, 2011; *The Korea Herald*, February 6, 2012). However, resource diplomacy is not only the preserve of this conservative government. The Roh government also sought various channels to secure energy and natural resources, and resource-affluent North Korea was an important target. Several joint resource development projects were implemented by combining South Korean capital with the North’s labour and resources. The South even suggested the establishment of a SEZ for inter-Korean joint resource development in Dancheon where magnesite abounds (K. Lee 2006). Yet, as Snyder (2008) notes, “it is not yet clear how or whether President Lee’s early emphasis on ‘resource diplomacy’ may be applied to North Korea.” Despite many excursions to Africa and Latin America for scores of hours in the name of resource diplomacy, the Lee administration paid no attention to the resources just across the DMZ.



Instead, they worry that money from China's resource development in the North is sustaining the Kim regime. This line is consistently applied to other issues. For example, the South Korean embassy sent emails to South Korean tourists in Nepal, warning: "Please refrain from visiting North Korean restaurants that are becoming sources of funds for the Kim Jong-il regime. Anyone who has visited such restaurants will be subject to investigation on charges of violating the Inter-Korean Exchange and Co-operation Law and the National Security Law upon returning home" (*Chosun Ilbo*, January 3, 2011). One South Korean who has done business in North Korea showed the absurdness of the Lee administration's North Korea policy. When the South Korean government enforced the "5.24 measures" that suspended all inter-Korean economic exchange except the KIC, he asked why the government would adopt a policy that damaged the South's numerous private firms doing business in the North. A government official answered that the goal was not to let even one dollar slip into North Korea. The businessman asked: "Then, more than 35 million dollars flow into the North every year via the KIC; are they not money but mere scraps of paper?" His question was met with silence (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, November 9, 2011).

Another South-South conflict arises in the conception of North Korean people. Liberals have constructed a representation that corresponds to their geo-economic calculation towards the North. Beyond the Cold War normative perspective, they view North Koreans through a neo-liberal lens as so much cheap, well-disciplined labour power, ready to benefit South Korean capital (Lim 2005; Hong 2011). Liberal intellectuals and politicians see the KIC as a training site where neo-liberal subjectivity should be engendered and moulded. They expect that North Korean labourers will learn about the market economy and this will naturally bring about economic reform and opening in the North (*Yonhap News*, May 24, 2004; Heo 2011). In this sense, for liberals, the KIC demonstrates that "establishing 'market rule' was never a matter of imposing, from above, a singular regulatory template. It has been about learning by doing (and by failing) within an evolving framework of market-oriented reform parameters and strategic objectives" (Peck et al. 2009, 107).

Conservative powers reject these ideas. They see that the money from inter-Korean economic co-operation has rewarded and sustained the Kim Jong Il regime that has harshly suppressed the North Korean people. For them the KIC has little to do with the constitution of neo-liberal subjects. Rather, conservatives view the North Korean people through the prism of human rights. Hence, it was the conservative media that criticised the North Korean government for exploitation of labour power in the KIC because of lower wages and long working hours (Kang 2006; Cho 2011).<sup>12</sup> These groups have seldom criticised the abuses of human rights during the modern history of South Korea; indeed, they have been mostly complicit in them (Jeong 2009; *Ohmynews*, February 9, 2011). Ironically, conservative politicians who once suppressed democracy movements under military dictatorships in their own country now support the human rights of the North Korean people and demand the democratisation of the North. For example, Hyung-Keun Chung, former assemblyman and First Deputy Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, was notorious for torturing anti-government activists. During the liberal regimes, he criticised the government's North Korea policy and called for the improvement of human rights in North Korea (*Ohmynews*, November 19, 2005).

Across the globe, the idea of human rights has provided grounds for military interventions, mostly of the West into Third World countries (Bricmont 2006). More

fundamentally, the rhetoric of human rights entails the construction of a particular form of subject. Žižek (1999) offers an insightful criticism of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia:

We have the ideological construction of the idea of subject-victim to whose aid NATO intervenes – not a political subject with a clear agenda, but a subject of helpless suffering...caught in the madness of a local clash that can only be pacified by the intervention of a benevolent foreign power...beneath this depoliticized, let's-just-protect-human-rights rhetoric, there is an extremely violent gesture of reducing the other to the helpless victim.

The South Korean conservatives' human rights offensive is in line with these practices. For example, joint action between South Korean and US conservatives to adopt the North Korean Human Rights Act is seen as support for military sanctions on North Korea (*Pressian*, July 28, 2004). In particular, the Lee government proposed several laws concerning North Korean human rights (for example, laws to support civil groups in the South that engage in this issue), which are currently pending in the National Assembly (*Pressian*, December 8, 2008). The presentation of North Koreans as helpless subjects to be liberated from dictatorial rule serves to encourage and facilitate direct intervention by foreign powers and, in the end, leads to unification by territorial absorption (*Chosun Ilbo*, May 4, 2002; Chung 2008).<sup>13</sup> Conservative groups reiterate the claim that horrible conditions exist in the camps along with massive violations of human rights in the North and that the only solution is the collapse of the regime (Hong 2009).

Lastly, these political conflicts have reshaped the production of territory in North Korea. Since the return of conservative powers in 2008, the Mt Kumgang SEZ has been closed and the KIC suspended. The substantial flow of tourists and businessmen crossing the DMZ has been disrupted. The advance of de-bordering processes, which was improving the “three *tong*” problems – the poor conditions of passage (통행), communication (통신) and customs clearance procedures (통관), has been checked (*Joongang Daily*, October 4, 2007). Geo-economic de-bordering of “the most heavily armed border in the world” (Bush 2005) is again overshadowed by geo-political imperatives.<sup>14</sup> And these South–South conflicts have undergone a complicated evolution since China's economic move into North Korea became conspicuous in the early 2000s.

### **Competitive Appropriation of the “China's Colonisation” Discourse**

Concerns about China's increasing economic penetration into North Korea surfaced in South Korean media around 2004. Kaplan (2006) again interprets this situation in terms of South Koreans' narrow-minded economic calculation: “from the point of view of the average South Korean, the Chinese look to be offering a better deal [to North Korea] than the Americans, whose plan for a free and democratic unified peninsula would require South Korean taxpayers to pay much of the cost.” However; South Korea's view of the relations between China and North Korea is more complicated. In pure economic terms, China's growing investment in North Korea may reduce South Korea's economic burdens. However, many South Koreans interpret rapidly growing economic ties between China and North Korea as China's colonial or imperial ambition towards the North – a prize that should be “ours.” According to a poll of the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, more than 70% of 1,200 respondents show concern about

Sino-North Korean economic co-operation (76.1% in 2011 and 72.5% in 2012) (Park et al. 2012, 140–141). These views reflect territorial desires, either in geo-political or geo-economic terms, that are projected onto North Korea. As a result, this new situation has stimulated a “China’s colonisation of North Korea” discourse (alternatively, “North Korea’s becoming the fourth province of Northeast China”). This discourse has not been consistently deployed but differently appropriated to serve particular political objectives. In this sense, Sunny Lee (2011) claims that “Chinese influence over North Korea is an assumption [that is] strategically adopted by the US and South Korea.”

The South–South conflict of visions towards North Korea has become articulated with competitive mobilisation of the discourses on the relationship between China and North Korea. Each group holds different interpretations of the situation which reflect and strengthen its own political stance and position. Nevertheless, a common assumption underlies their views, that is, that China’s colonisation of North Korea derives from the combination of two different discourses: the “China threat” and “powerless North Korea.” In short, the discourse signals that a powerful, expansive China is absorbing a weak, failed North Korea.

Conservative newspapers began to highlight China’s economic occupation of North Korea in 2005. Sung-wook Nam (2005a), a conservative scholar and key figure in the Lee government’s North Korea policy, claimed that the North Korean economy would be incorporated into China’s north-eastern economy. As a result, he claimed North Korea would become the fourth province of Northeast China (Nam 2005b). Behind these concerns lie two criticisms of the previous liberal government: first, the Roh government neglected the US–South Korea alliance and leaned towards China, so China looked down upon the South Korean government and freely penetrated the Korean peninsula; and second, trying to transform North Korea through economic aid and co-operation was futile (*Ohmynews*, March 30, 2006; *Pressian*, October 8, 2009). For instance, one conservative newspaper commented that South Korea’s influence on the North’s economy was weaker than China despite massive economic support (*Chosun Ilbo*, April 12, 2007). These criticisms suggest that the discourse of China’s colonisation of North Korea is organised with a particular political motive: to strengthen the US–South Korea alliance and problematise any economic co-operation with North Korea.<sup>15</sup>

A number of scholars, most of whom belonged to the liberal faction and supported inter-Korean economic co-operation, argued against these politically-oriented interpretations of the relationship between China and North Korea (see Joo 2006; J.-O. Kim 2006; Oh 2006; H. Lee 2006; Yoon 2006). They criticised media reports for inflating Sino-North Korean economic co-operation into a story about China’s dominance of the North Korean economy. Instead, they claimed that an expansion of economic relations would encourage North Korea’s economic opening and, in the long term, expand the space for inter-Korean economic co-operation. T.-K. Kim (2006), for instance, pointed out the contradictory attitude of the conservative media: while worrying about China’s increasing economic power over North Korea, they opposed inter-Korean economic co-operation – the logical means to address this situation – as a “giveaway.” To reject the “giveaways” discourse of the conservatives, the liberal factions also drew out a new geographic imaginary of North Korea as a “Blue Ocean” or uncontested market space (Kim and Mauborgne 2005; K.-S. Lee 2008).<sup>16</sup> In short, North Korea is a new economic opportunity where South Korea could monopolise all the benefits.

A new frame of confrontation has been constructed since conservative powers regained the presidency in 2008. Positions have switched. Now the liberal groups advance a

“colonisation” discourse. They blamed the Lee government for rupturing the inter-Korean relationship, intensifying North Korea’s dependence on China. This trend became more palpable after Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang in October 2009, which has led to a new phase in bilateral economic relations (S-O. Lee 2014b). For this, liberal media and scholars criticised the conservative government for losing “our” national economic foundation to China (*Hankyoreh*, October 27, 2009; Hyundai Research Institute 2009; Y-C. Kim 2009a, 2009b; Lim 2009). The content of the discourse is little changed from the previous line, but the logic underlying has changed. Instead of singling out an ambitious China as the major culprit, liberals ascribed China’s growing economic influence over North Korea to Lee’s failed North Korea policy. North Korea has no choice but to rely on China when international economic sanctions (and independent sanctions from the South) choke off its economy (Lim 2009). In this narrative, China walks into an empty space hollowed out by a disrupted relationship between the two Koreas. The geo-economic fear that China will capture the North’s vast natural resources and labour power, extending its economic power over the entire territory, resonates loudly: “If China occupies everything, there is no share for us” (Y.-C. Kim 2009b). When North Korea eagerly sought to attract investment from South Korea for the development of mineral extraction, the Lee government flatly refused. Now China has taken South Korea’s place (*Ohmynews*, March 29, 2010). Like the conservative media, liberal media and scholars overstate reality, for example, arguing that China had secured mining development rights in the North. Yet it is not true. In addition, it was reported that North and South Korea held two secret meetings in 2011 to discuss the joint development of rare-earth resources on the western coast of North Korea (*Korea Joongang Daily*, July 24, 2012). However, there has been no further progress.

Foreign media and experts have often supported this liberal argument. *Newsweek* (April 14, 2010) evoked the necessity of a new approach to North Korea in the Lee administration: “By ending cooperation with the North, Seoul is giving up influence in the northern half of what it still claims as its own territory, *yielding the field to a Beijing* that can’t believe its luck” (emphasis added). John Delury charged conservative powers with giving North Korea to China: China’s economic dominance over North Korea is “the result of Lee Myung-bak’s decision to let the Sunshine Policy unravel, rather than a strategic plot by China to ‘colonize’ North Korea economically” (cited in *The New York Times*, April 28, 2010). In a similar vein, Barry (2012) criticises the South Korean government for its policies: “not providing aid to the North without significant political concessions have helped push the North further into China’s grasp.”

For their part, conservative media mostly remained silent on these issues after the Lee regime took office in February 2008. At the beginning, conservative newspapers simply reported the facts about the joint resource development projects and SEZs between China and North Korea. But they could no longer overlook the rapid progress in Sino-DPRK economic relations since late 2009. Then their attitudes showed some new dynamics. First, they devalued the Sino-DPKR relationship. For instance, one editorialist wrote an article titled “When China Will Cut the Lifeline of North Korea,” asserting that China would eventually turn its back on the dictatorial Kim regime (*Donga Ilbo*, February 18, 2011). Some newspapers were sceptical of North Korea’s economic strategy of depending solely on China’s aid (*Joongang Daily*, April 21, 2011; *Donga Ilbo*, August 15, 2012). H.-J. Lee (2010) scoffs at China deluding itself in expecting that North Korea will be grateful for China’s support, asserting that the

bilateral relationship is fragile. Second, a growing number of articles, especially since 2011, express concerns about China's control of North Korea's natural resources (*Chosun Ilbo*, June 15, 2011; *Joongang Daily*, October 16, 2011; *Joongang Daily*, December 12, 2011; K.-S. Choi 2012). Nevertheless, not a single article in the conservative media criticises the Lee government's North Korea policy. They only vaguely state that "we should not overlook this situation" (Jeong 2012).

Despite these controversies, the Lee government stuck to its position. In his speech to honour the March First Independence Movement in 2010, President Lee (2010b) reaffirmed his government's principle: "to make progress in South-North relations, the North has to change its thinking; it has to stop regarding the South as a mere entity for economic cooperation. To realise reconciliation and cooperation on the Korean peninsula, peace has to be maintained first and foremost." *Newsweek* (April 14, 2010) translates this to mean that "expect nothing from us, unless you get serious about giving up nukes." About Sino-North Korean economic relations, President Lee rejected the claim that North Korea depends on China too much, and argued "if China helps North Korea, it will be a good thing" (*Hankyoreh*, May 25, 2011). The conservative government grumbled that the liberal media overstated the situation and even labelled the colonisation discourse as the frame of the left wing (Nam 2010; *Tongilnews*, November 6, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The Sunshine Policy of the Kim Dae-jung government shook the long-standing Cold War structure in the Korean peninsula. A new economic engagement with North Korea forged a new geo-political order, complicating the politics in Northeast Asia. Yet despite numerous eulogies of Kim's North Korea policy that won him the Nobel Peace Prize, we should be attentive to its underlying geo-economic visions. As noted, progressive scholars like Paik (2000) and Suh (2006a; 2006b) claim that inter-Korean economic co-operation can serve as an alternative to the failed economic system in both Koreas – a failed socialist economy in the North and deepening contradictions of neo-liberalisation in the South. They see that economic co-operation with North Korea can open up new conditions for the possibility to curb the progress of neo-liberalisation. However, paradoxically, this suggests that the displacement of neo-liberalism in the South can be facilitated by channelling it into the North in the name of modernisation. This should lead us to ask: is it not China but South Korea who dreams of colonisation of North Korea – either in the form of territorial absorption conceived by conservatives or as neo-liberal integration by liberals?

As we have already glimpsed, we can recognise two different instances of neo-liberalism in South Koreans' neo-liberal vision for North Korea: a political-economic, hegemonic project and a set of government strategies for subjection (Clarke 2008; Foucault 2008). While there is not always "a neat or automatic fit" between these two modes, according to Ferguson (2009, 182), inter-Korean economic co-operation demonstrates that these two different neo-liberal moments are well-articulated. First, the liberals do not hide their desire to use North Korea as a spatial fix for South Korean surplus capital. Suh (2006b) argues that North Korea can serve as an outlet for surplus capital from South Korea's huge real estate market by channelling it into productive investments such as infrastructure and industrial development in the North. In this regard, the discourse of "China's colonisation of North Korea" put forward by these

groups conveys a fear of losing the opportunity for monopolistic appropriation of North Korea's markets, labour power and natural resources, or its territory in geo-economic terms. This geographical imaginary of North Korea as a "blue ocean of our economy" or "land of economic opportunity" that leads beyond the peninsula into the continental economy is how liberals use the colonisation discourse. Second, liberal intellectuals advocate inter-Korean economic co-operation, especially the KIC, because it engenders a new subjectivity suitable for market society in North Korea. For example, Se-Hyun Jeong (2010), the former Minister of Unification in the Roh administration, notes that the KIC is a sort of educational site to teach North Korea how to earn dollars and to learn about concepts such as 'export competitiveness,' just as South Korea did in the Masan Free Export Zone [one of the first SEZs in South Korea for Japanese capital] in the 1970s. In sum, though many critical intellectuals conceive economic co-operation with the North as a clear path away from neo-liberalism, the visions and discourses that they employ towards North Korea are informed by neo-liberal rationalities.

Some scholars have produced critical reflections on the underlying neo-liberal logic of a geo-economic approach to North Korea. Hyun Ok Park (2009) sees inter-Korean economic co-operation as part of a transition from territorial integration to market expansion. To her, a new social consensus among capital, social groups, civic groups and the public in South Korea, undergirded by a strong nationalist discourse, has facilitated this change; it has also rendered it difficult to detect the logic of capital behind it. Inter-Korean economic co-operation with North Korea leads to an "unmediated identification of capitalist exchange with reconciliation and peace" and, as a result, it is viewed as a panacea for everything from geo-economics – the *hope* to revive both South and North Korean economies – to geo-politics – the *hope* to achieve peace and reunification (Park 2009, 112). In this sense, she criticises the naïve and uncritical view of social movement groups which delink the discourse of national division and unification from their capitalist underpinnings (Park 2009, 117). Moreover, in her view, North Korea is also an accomplice in this neo-liberal project (Park 2004, 231–232). Thus, she asks: "When neoliberal reforms have emptied out the meaning of democracy in the economic space, will the capitalist dream for North Korea help to reconcile democratization and economic growth?" (Park 2009, 115).

In a similar vein, Woo (2008) regards inter-Korean economic co-operation as a strategy of South Korean capital to penetrate North Korea and concludes that South Korea is itself imperialist, seeking economic colonies.<sup>17</sup> Sohn (2007) likewise contends that the current economic projects with North Korea are essentially a neo-liberal accumulation strategy to overcome the crisis of over-accumulation in South Korea. Rather than rejecting inter-Korean economic co-operation itself, he problematises economic co-operation in a market driven, neo-liberal manner. In essence, these criticisms from the left that define economic co-operation with North Korea as one of a neo-liberal accumulation strategy have merit. As these scholars imply, liberals as well as conservatives in South Korea desire North Korea as a sort of colony, albeit in different forms. In this sense, left-wing critics like Park, Woo and Sohn provide keen insight. Nevertheless, there are important points of dissent.

Their criticisms frame inter-Korean economic co-operation mostly in geo-economic terms and disregard how it plays out in geo-political terms. For instance, Park's narrative is filled with only geo-economic scripts, with no sense of the dialectic between geo-economic and geo-political imperatives. These critiques are also blind to the political



contestations between conservatives and liberals around China's increasing economic influence upon North Korea. Park (2009, 116) argues that:

[I]n representing capitalist exchange as the mechanism of peace-making in Asia by alleviating military tension, the unification's goals of establishing decolonization, independent national sovereignty, and social justice and equality are disremembered; and unification is only understood as a quantity [of] market expansion that measures the progress of peace.

This narrative shows that these scholars conceive of a smooth and linear transition to the geo-economic script of unification. However, there has never been any consensus around this narrative in South Korean politics. On this point, Woo contends that the difference between liberal and conservative positions lies in which comes first: economic penetration or territorial absorption. For Woo, this is only a tactical issue from the point of view of capital (Woo 2008, 121). I disagree. We cannot fully account for the complicated geo-political economy of the Korean peninsula with this economic logic, which is reminiscent of Gramsci's critique of economism (Gramsci 1971). This requires us to consider the nature of neo-liberalisation "as a politically (re)constructed, nonlinear, and indeed mongrel phenomenon" (Peck et al. 2009, 104–105).

Neo-liberalism never exists in a static and pure form (see Brenner and Theodore 2002; Lee and Wainwright 2010; Jessop 2013). Rather it materialises in variegated forms and facets, each with a flexible and evolutionary character (Clarke 2008; Peck et al. 2009). Therefore, the consequences of neo-liberalisation cannot be pre-determined by any single and fixed principle because neo-liberal moments "are each also – viscerally and strategically – *political* moments" (Peck 2010, 106). This understanding can help to answer the question why conservatives and liberals in South Korea, who convey similar neo-liberal orientations in economic development policies and strategies, present competing and conflicting attitudes towards North Korea and Sino-DPKR economic relations.

These political conflicts reveal the flexible nature of neo-liberalism, which has been articulated with other political projects (Larner 2003). The liberals' vision covers the Korean peninsula and closely connects their neo-liberal ideas and practices with relations with North Korea. North Korea becomes the object of development relatively free from the idea of being a politico-military target. Meanwhile, neo-liberal logic mobilised by conservatives is working in South Korea (and towards the outside world), but does not extend to the North. North Korea has become appropriated through a neo-liberal frame by liberals and even progressives who have identified unification as a sort of revolution: in a word, reunification as the disintegration of the division system that will rupture the existing social structure which is so full of contradictions. However, to conservatives, North Korea remains within the politico-military realm as an object of territorial and ideological absorption.

The presidential election of South Korea in December 2012 only extended these conflicts. To put the conclusion first, Park Geun-hye, a daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee, won the presidency as a candidate for the conservative party, President Lee's governing Saenuri Party. Though she pledged to turn confrontation with North Korea into conversation, she sticks to the same principles as President Lee – to prioritise resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue first, followed by inter-Korean exchange and co-operation (*The Herald Economy*, September 26, 2012; *Yonhap News*,

September 16, 2012). On the other hand, Moon Jae-in, a candidate of the liberal factions and the former chief presidential secretary under the Roh administration, promised to bring back the Nordpolitik of the liberal regimes, in other words, to promote a geo-economic approach to North Korea. Even South Korea's Bill Gates, Ahn Cheol-soo, who was deemed a "new voice in South Korean politics" (cited in *The New York Times*, September 19, 2012), but dropped out of the presidential race in support of Moon, presented nothing new in his North Korea policy. Before announcing that he would run for the presidency, Ahn published a book to communicate his ideas on South Korean politics and society, called *Ahn Cheol-soo's Thoughts*. In this bestseller, he opines on North Korea. Here I cite the translation of his comments on North Korea by Korea Real Time of *The Wall Street Journal*. The quotation shows how South Korean liberal elites imagine and desire North Korea today:

North Korea is a problem for us to solve, but at the same time it could also be a present for our future. When peaceful economic cooperation with the North is activated, our domestic market will expand. North Korea could possibly be a source of growth momentum since the [South] Korean economy is currently stagnant. We can take advantage of North Korea's underground resources, tourist attractions and human resources, and a new way could open up for building a North-East Asia economic zone or for a land route from Busan to Paris. In fact, currently South Korea is much like *an island blocked by North Korea*. The transportation of export goods or raw materials will become easier when we get connected to the continent. This could be an environment where our economy can jump to a higher level. If South and North gradually narrow the gap through economic cooperation, like how Germany lowered unification costs by cooperation, Korea can also reduce unification costs... Even if the international community imposes economic sanctions, I don't think North Korea will be isolated since it has China's support. Isolation can instead accelerate subordination of the North's economy to China... There seem to exist conflicting perspectives that see unification as either an incident or a gradual process. The Lee administration's perspective is the one that sees it as an incident. Since he brought up the issue of unification costs, it seems that he thinks unification will suddenly come one day. I agree with the view that sees it as a process. As economic exchanges progress, North and South will become more dependent on each other. The Kaesong complex is a good example. I think we can reach unification and peace through such cooperation (cited in *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2012, emphasis added).

It is no surprise that this line of thought on North Korea does not show any difference from those of liberal politicians – for example, former presidents Kim and Roh. Ahn's so-called new political imaginary fails to produce anything novel.

The election of President Lee in 2008 set back the geo-political order in Northeast Asia to the time of the Cold War. While bilateral relations between South Korea and the US have strengthened, the relationship between South Korea and China has reached its lowest point since 1992 when both countries established diplomatic relations (Sutter 2012, 201). The election of the conservative Park may impart to us that geo-political visions of North Korea still outweigh the geo-economic rationale of improved inter-Korean economic exchanges and co-operation. While her so-called "trustpolitik" towards the North has brought about some changes in the inter-Korean relationship (for example, the recent

resumption of the KIC), the notion of trust here is not only still vague but also never mutual; her basic position is that only when the North accepts the guidelines suggested by the South Korean government, can trust be built up (*Pressian*, December 27, 2013). This attitude is revealed in her article from *Foreign Affairs*: “if North Korea launches another military strike against the South, Seoul must respond immediately to ensure that Pyongyang understands the costs of provocation. Conversely, if North Korea takes steps toward genuine reconciliation...then the South should match its efforts” (Park 2011, 16; emphasis added). In addition, President Park recently declared that she would not “provide aid until the North wins the South’s ‘trust’ by moving toward denuclearization” (cited in *The New York Times*, December 31, 2013). Thus how her trustpolitik will come into play in specific situations will not only affect the way North Korea produces and reproduces its territory but will also reshape political-economic landscapes around the Korean peninsula.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Katherine Bennett, Hyeseon Jeong, Will Jones, Joel Wainwright, and anonymous reviewers for their insightful criticisms.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In South Korea, there have been heated debates about the contradictions between Article Three and Article Four which stipulates “The Republic of Korea shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the principles of freedom and democracy” (H.-K. Kim 2009). This poses an impasse, how it can be possible to seek a peaceful unification with an illegal occupier.
- <sup>2</sup> The term “sunshine policy” originated in Aesop’s fable, “The North Wind and the Sun” (Hogarth 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> Larkins (2010) approaches the concept of the territorial imaginary as an alternative to the objective and fixed notion of the territorial *a priori*. He defines it as representations of people’s being-in-space and therefore a particular sort of discursive object (Larkins 2010, 4–5). Larkins further claims that the territorial imaginary is “constituted by the ensemble of representations which extend beyond the limit imposed by the facts of experience and the deductive conclusions authorized by them” (Larkins 2010, 5). In this respect, this notion demonstrates the “historically contingent, transformative, and subjective” character of territory (Larkins 2010, 196).
- <sup>4</sup> Before this crisis, a unified Korea was often envisioned as a great power in the global economy, though with no specific vision of North Korea: to be “freed from the burden of unnecessary military spending and perhaps equipped with better social and economic structures, [a unified Korea] would start growing with unprecedented speed, soon overtaking Japan – its long-term rival – and perhaps even China. More zealous nationalists even said that unification would make Korea into a superpower. These dreams are long dead. The early hopes collapsed in the early 1990s under the weight of two almost unrelated events – the unification of Germany and the sudden discovery of the sorry state of the North Korean economy by the South Korean public” (Lankov 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> The 2012 poll of the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University shows that 46.7% of young people in their 20s think that reunification is necessary. This group is the only generation whose ratio to support reunification is less than a half, compared with 63.5% of the over-50s (Park et al. 2012, 195). Thus, there are social concerns about the growing indifference to reunification in the younger generations (*The Guardian*, May 27, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> By using “pain” President Roh resonates with Koreans’ prevalent understanding that it is due to its geographical condition – being a peninsula – that Korea has been relentlessly invaded by neighbouring countries throughout history. He and other liberal intellectuals suggest transforming geo-political suffering into geo-economic opportunity.
- <sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, these arguments were closely aligned with former US President Bush’s North Korea policy (Feffer and Lee 2001).

- <sup>8</sup> Moreover, Chun Yung-Woo, the former Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade under the Lee Myung-bak government, claims that the KIC has become a serious impediment to North Korean denuclearisation efforts (*Yonhap News*, April 13, 2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Despite the ups and downs of economic relations between the two Koreas during liberal regimes – for instance, when military conflicts broke out in the Yellow Sea in 1999 and 2002 or the North conducted nuclear experiments in 2006, the South Korean government disrupted relations, though temporarily – not only South Korean conservatives but foreign experts consistently framed liberal policy towards North Korea as *unconditional* economic support (Snyder 2009).
- <sup>10</sup> While Suh Jae Jean, President of Korea Institute for National Unification, claims that the Vision 3000 policy is not based on “the assumption that North Korea would first denuclearization [sic] and open, but rather is a policy to encourage these processes” (2009, 13), the Lee government has continued to link economic aid and co-operation with the denuclearisation of the North (H. Kim 2011). For instance, it declared that “without full denuclearization by the North, there will not be any expansion of the Gaeseong complex” (cited in *The Korea Times*, July 2, 2008).
- <sup>11</sup> Refer to the website of *The Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/249870>. This cable was classified by the former US ambassador to South Korea, Kathleen Stephens.
- <sup>12</sup> While most liberal and progressive groups display positive attitudes towards the KIC, some left-wing groups share the criticisms of the conservatives (see for example, Cho 2006). The KIC has also figured in the US policy debate, especially in terms of whether it financially supports the North’s regime (Nanto and Manyin 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> Various anti-North Korea civic groups in South Korea such as the “Fighters for Free North Korea,” “Committee for the Democratization of North Korea” and “North Korea People’s Liberation Front” relate human rights in North Korea to regime change. In particular, Christian groups are especially active in the movement on human rights in North Korea. Many South Korean churches hold regular prayer ceremonies for human rights in North Korea (*Christian Today*, November 1, 2011). Robert Park, a Korean-American missionary who illegally crossed the border into North Korea in December 2009, said: “I am Christian, but I do have to say that this is not a legitimate government. We cannot talk to North Korea as if it is a legitimate government, but *we need to liberate North Korea*” (cited in *Reuters*, December 30, 2009; emphasis added).
- <sup>14</sup> In his remarks to US troops at Osan in South Korea, President George W. Bush asserted that the “Republic of Korea is now a beacon of liberty that shines across the most heavily armed border in the world. It is a light reaching to a land shrouded in darkness” (2005). Yet in the Bush administration’s criticism of the KIC he aligned with South Korean conservatives, rejecting geo-economic engagement with the North as a way to illuminate the “darkness” (cited in *The New York Times*, July 18, 2006).
- <sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Nam (2006) admitted that the measures the South Korean government could adopt were too limited to tackle increasing economic ties between China and North Korea. The only advice he offered is to carefully observe the situation in close co-operation with the US and Japan.
- <sup>16</sup> These expressions or geo-economic imaginaries were also employed by the two contenders for the presidency from the opposition party. The former (a blue ocean) is from Kim Doo-kwan, the former governor of Gyeongsangnam-do (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, September 10, 2012); and the latter (land of economic opportunity) was used by Moon Jae-in, a presidential candidate of the main opposition party, Democratic United, in his speech on September 16, 2012 (Moon 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> In similar context, David Harvey argues that imperialisms in the plural should be understood as “specific spatial and geographical strategies on the part of nation states or collections of nation states designed to solve the fundamental underlying contradictions of capitalism” and he contends that the South Korean state, in this sense, increasingly employs certain imperial practices (Toscano 2007, 1128–1129).

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