The ongoing division of the Korean peninsula, and the North’s avowed objective of uniting the peninsula by force, is a powerful factor in South Korean politics. President Kim Dae-jung’s focus on this issue since he assumed office in February 1998 has raised it to a new level of prominence, although it is still second to the ongoing concerns about the South Korean economy. There is no issue in South Korea that approaches that of North Korea. The ongoing division of this historically integrated land is a trauma in the South. For the North, the division provides its whole rationality and legitimacy: uniting the two halves by war. The South, by contrast, wants to bring about this mutually desired unification, but by peaceful reconciliation and cooperation. So, the North Korea problem represents the alpha and omega of both South Korean foreign policy and domestic politics. Everything, everywhere relates to relations with North Korea. The “sunshine policy” of the South, however, does not appear to the North as it does to the South, and there hangs the dilemma of peace on the Korean peninsula. The epiphenomenon represented by the June 2000 Pyongyang summit came out of a specific context. To understand this event it is necessary to review the past several decades in inter-Korean relations to see where things were, because they will still continue to shape the future.

By the beginning of 2000, both the tactics and politics of South Korea were rapidly changing in an all-out effort, as President Kim Dae-jung describes it, to “eradicate the vestiges of the cold war” and make 2000 “the first year of securing a stable peace on the Korean Peninsula.”¹ At the same time, however, North Korea is showing signs of recovering from its economic slide, which had long been counted on (incorrectly)
to bring the North to the bargaining table on its way to becoming a normal state, i.e., in a manner acceptable to South Korean and U.S. interests. An article by Richard Halloran in January 2000 in the *San Francisco Chronicle* claimed that “North Korea’s Recovery Dashes Hopes for Reunification.”

Certainly the path to reunification will be a long one. Reviewing the history of this proposition is required before speculating on prospects of a better, or even different, relationship between the North and the South.

The South Korean and North Korean desire to create a united Korea by force of arms did not end with the armistice at Panmunjom in July 1953. The “armistice” was signed by the UN participants on the one side and China and North Korea on the other. Syngman Rhee refused to sign for two reasons: (1) to register his fierce displeasure with the ending of the fighting as a stalemate; and (2) as a heavy bargaining chip in negotiations with the U.S. for a mutual bilateral defense treaty. He received the treaty in October 1953, and the situation between the two Koreas—marked by occasional moves toward better relations like the Mutual Accords of 1991, never implemented—has a dreary familiarity. Threats by the North, sea infiltrations of heavily armed agents, espionage and dirty tricks by both sides, most notably by the North in the case of the bombing of the South Korean cabinet in Burma in 1983 and the blowing up of a South Korean airliner over the Indian ocean in 1993—all these outrages are regular fare in normal South-North relations.

While the North’s position on unification by conquest has remained constant, the South has developed more subtle and academic scenarios. The unification problem in the South has attracted the attention of Korean political scientists, many trained abroad, and with this rich inventory of scholastic talent, all kinds of ways have been found to move from humanitarian assistance to economic development, all foreseeing a future in which the free market economy and democracy will prevail. All of these logical plans, varieties of rational choice, have all foundered on the same rock—North Korea’s rational position on regime survival.

There has been a significant change, however, in the attitude of South Korea since the inauguration of Kim Dae-jung in February 1998. Having witnessed these years of failure, Kim was willing to depart from the “we’re going to take them over” philosophy that had long prevailed. The administration of each of the South Korean republics displayed a similarly bellicose tone toward the North. The politics of this decade under presidents Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam demonstrate the continuity of the confrontation policy and now the transition to engagement under Kim Dae-jung. There is, however, very strong opposition to DJ’s “sunshine policy” from the principal conservative opposition party. As the economy