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Cuba: The Last Destination of the Republic of Korea's Nordpolitik?

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Abstract: This article analyzes the possibility of normalizing diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Republic of Cuba (Cuba). It poses two main questions: Why does the ROK desire to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba? Can diplomatic normalization be achieved, and if so, what policy measures are necessary to make it happen? To answer these questions, the article explores the ROK's previous efforts and assesses the current state of bilateral relations between the ROK and Cuba. The strong relationship between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Cuba is pointed out as an essential obstacle, and the article examines what policy actions could be taken to overcome it. Finally, the article draws on previous experiences and cases of Nordpolitik (Northern Policy) to suggest a direction for the ROK's foreign policy toward normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Keywords: the Republic of Korea; the Republic of Cuba; the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; diplomatic normalization; Nordpolitik; Northern Policy

1. Introduction

The relationship between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Republic of Cuba (Cuba) dates back to 1921 when approximately 300 Koreans migrated to Cuba for a better life. They were part of a group of 1033 Korean workers who had emigrated to Mexico in 1905 and were referred to as "anniquin" due to their work on "henequen" farms in the Yucatán Peninsula. In 1948, just right after the liberation of Korea, Cuba recognized the ROK after the United Nations (UN) did, and the two countries established diplomatic relations on 12 July 1949. During the Korean War, Cuba sent a relief of USD 270,000 to support the ROK. The relationship between the two countries was positive until the Cuban Revolution occurred in 1959.

Following the Cuban Revolution, Cuba established diplomatic ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and ended its relationship with the ROK. The DPRK saw the triumph of the Cuban revolution as a win for Latin American revolutionary potential. It endeavored to establish a close partnership with Cuba to fortify international socialist capability and the fight against the United States (US). As a result, Cuba has maintained a strong relationship with the DPRK while refraining from normalizing diplomatic relations with the ROK.

After the breakdown of diplomatic relations, the ROK's first attempt to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba was made during the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003), but unfortunately, it was unsuccessful. Later, during the Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017), the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba was presented and promoted as a policy goal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) of the ROK. In June 2016, Yun Byung-Se, the ROK Foreign Minister, visited Cuba and met his Cuban counterpart, Bruno Eduardo Rodríguez Parrilla. That marked the first time a ROK Foreign Minister had ever been to Cuba. Minister Yun's trip was part of his involvement with the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). However, it received much attention because



Citation: Jung, Giwoong. 2023. Cuba: The Last Destination of the Republic of Korea's Nordpolitik? *Social Sciences* 12: 638. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110638>

Academic Editors: Nigel Parton and Patrick James

Received: 17 September 2023
Revised: 16 November 2023
Accepted: 17 November 2023
Published: 19 November 2023



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the ACS host country invited him while the ROK was working to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba. Consequently, there were high hopes for diplomatic normalization between the ROK and Cuba following his visit.

Even before Minister Yun's visit, the ROK had been working toward establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. Several steps were taken to achieve this goal, including opening the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) office in 2005 and Hyundai Heavy Industries' export of packaged power systems. Cuba has also expressed interest in having ROK companies participate in the Mariel Port project ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015](#), p. 132). In May 2016, a month before Minister Yun's visit, the Cuban Chamber of Commerce signed an MOU with the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Federation of Korean Industries; in October 2016, the Ministry of Economy and Finance signed an MOU with the Cuban Foreign Trade Ministry (MINCEX: Ministerio Comercio Exterior) on the Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP) of the ROK. After the normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba in 2015, the ROK became more optimistic about establishing diplomatic ties with Cuba.

Regrettably, as of 2023, Cuba remains one of only two countries among UN members that have yet to establish diplomatic relations with the ROK. Additionally, the once prevalent fascination with Cuba and its culture in Korean society, which reached its highest point in 2016, appears to have diminished. Furthermore, the Moon Jae-in administration (2017~2022) did not prioritize efforts toward diplomatic normalization with Cuba, in contrast to the previous two governments.

What caused the shift toward diplomatic normalization between the two countries? One major factor is the significant decrease in international travel caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strained relationship between the US and Cuba during the Trump administration also played a role. The ROK's geopolitical location and surrounding circumstances make it quite sensitive to the foreign policy direction of the United States. Consequently, the hostile relationship between the US and Cuba has inevitably affected the ROK's diplomatic normalization efforts with Cuba. In addition, it is worth noting the policy direction of the Moon Jae-in administration, which, among other things, focused on improving relations with the DPRK. Given its ties to the DPRK, the Moon administration did not want to offend Pyongyang by establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba, which has long-standing ties with the DPRK and is one of the few countries to maintain a single diplomatic relationship with the DPRK.

On 10 May 2022, the Yoon Suk-yeol government was inaugurated, and there are expected to be changes in the ROK's foreign policies, including the diplomatic normalization efforts with Cuba. Recently, a conservative newspaper reported that the current Foreign Minister, Park Jin, had a secret meeting with Cuban Vice Foreign Minister Josefina de la Caridad Vidal Ferreiro in Guatemala to discuss diplomatic normalization between the two countries ([Kim 2023](#)). Whether the new government will pursue diplomatic normalization with Cuba or maintain the current status quo is still yet to be determined. The questions remain: Will they actively seek to establish diplomatic contacts with Cuba and make history by achieving diplomatic normalization? Or will they maintain the current status quo? Should both countries wait for diplomatic normalization while maintaining their current relationship?

This article seeks to clarify the diplomatic normalization between the ROK and Cuba by addressing two critical questions from the ROK's perspective. Firstly, what is the reason behind the ROK's desire to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba? Secondly, what policy measures are required to facilitate the realization of diplomatic normalization? To answer these questions, this article assesses the current state of bilateral relations between the ROK and Cuba. It explains the strong relationship between the DPRK and Cuba as an essential obstacle. Finally, the article introduces Nordpolitik (Northern Policy) cases to suggest a direction for the ROK's foreign policy toward normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba.

2. Diplomatic Normalization Process: What Has Been Done?

2.1. Why Cuba?

The ROK's decision to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba raises a fundamental question: Why Cuba? The government must clarify its reasoning to the public before proceeding.

Limited research is available on this topic, especially in English, with most studies being in Korean. Among the few studies available, one examines the possibility and timing of normalizing diplomatic relations between the ROK and Cuba (Jung 2015); another analyzes bilateral ties using Robert D. Putnam's two-level game (Jung 2016). Research by Chung et al. (2015) examines the possibility of cooperation through economic, cultural, and environmental exchanges between the ROK and Cuba. Additionally, some studies link the normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba to US–DPRK relations (Kim 2021; Lee et al. 2019; Park and Kim 2018; Hwang 2015). In contrast, Kim (2018) identifies the normalization of US–Cuba relations as a US response to the rise of China. Comparative studies are also available on Cuba and the DPRK (Kim 2021; Cin and Lee 2021; Lee 2018).

Generally, the existing research argues that it would benefit the ROK to increase economic, cultural, environmental, and societal ties with Cuba. This would improve communication between the two nations in various fields, leading to diplomatic normalization. This approach aligns with the idea of (neo)functionalism, which emphasizes spillover and ramification effects, recommending establishing a liaison office as the first step toward achieving diplomatic normalization.

This article argues that establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba could be advantageous for the ROK in three ways. Firstly, establishing diplomatic ties would help secure the ROK's global diplomatic arena. Currently, the ROK only lacks diplomatic relations with two UN member states—Cuba and Syria. However, given the ongoing civil war in Syria, Cuba is the only country with a functioning government with which the ROK has yet to establish diplomatic ties. From this perspective, establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba would be a symbolic event, signifying the completion of the ROK's diplomatic history that has grown through colonization, division, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era. Secondly, it would enable the completion of Nordpolitik, which aims to expand the ROK's diplomatic circle. Nordpolitik began in the Park Chung-hee administration (1961–1979) in 1973 and bloomed in the Roh Tae-woo administration (1988–1993), when Seoul hosted the Olympic Games, with only 128 diplomatic relations with other countries. The Roh administration, under the flag of Nordpolitik, expanded the ROK's diplomatic arena by normalizing diplomatic relations with countries from the former communist bloc. In 1992 alone, the ROK established diplomatic ties with 18 countries, totaling 169. In light of these considerations, the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba represents the completion of Nordpolitik, which has been in place for over a generation. Thirdly, establishing diplomatic ties would allow Korean tourists visiting Cuba to receive consular services. In 2019, there were over 16,000 Korean tourists in Cuba (KOTRA 2022), which dropped severely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is expected to increase rapidly again as the pandemic subsides.

On the other hand, there is an essential but often unspoken factor to consider when discussing the potential normalization of diplomatic relations between the ROK and Cuba. It is the ROK government's intention to leverage diplomatic ties with Cuba to influence the DPRK, which could significantly impact the DPRK, given Cuba's longstanding relationship with the country based on close friendship and solidarity (Chung 2007; Hudson 2012; Pearson 2012). The two countries' leaders have expressed a strong sense of solidarity, which has grown stronger since the end of the Cold War (Hoare 2012, pp. 138–40). Past Cuban leaders, including Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz, Ernesto Che Guevara, and the current president of Cuba, Miguel Mario Díaz-Canel y Bermúdez, have all been treated as state guests when visiting the DPRK. Similarly, high officials from the DPRK who visited Cuba were treated equally well.

Moreover, Cuba serves as the DPRK's primary point of communication with the Caribbean and Latin America. The two countries celebrate Diplomatic Relations Day every year and have pledged their unwavering solidarity. Given these factors, if the ROK does succeed in establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba, the DPRK would feel psychological pressure from diplomatic normalization between the ROK and Cuba, which the ROK cannot overlook.

2.2. Koreans' Perception of Cuba

To observers, Cuba can appear in different ways. While Cuba's various faces may make it more appealing, they can also make it challenging to understand Cuba objectively. This is because of the two extreme perspectives toward the Cuban people and the Cuban state, making it difficult to take an objective and neutral approach to Cuba.

For example, take the two contrasting views of the Cuban state. Some view the country negatively and use words like dictatorship, communism, and repression to describe it. They are hostile toward Cuba and want to see it destroyed or overthrown. This view was reflected in the US foreign policy toward Cuba before diplomatic normalization. On the other hand, others see Cuba as an icon of the civil revolution (Domínguez 1989). They view it as an independent state with established cultural identities and a leader in the anti-imperialist movement (Bardach 2003). To them, Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz is seen as a spearhead of the non-alignment movement (NAM), like Simon Bolivar, the hero of the Latin American Independence Movement, fighting against US imperialism with solid ideals of internationalism. With this view, Cuba is portrayed as a small but resilient country that maintains revolutionary spirits while facing pressure from the US.

Likewise, there are different opinions about the Cuban people. Some believe that they are suffering under a dictatorship and poverty, and this perspective influences the anti-Cuban policies of US decision-makers. They argue that the US should support the Cuban people oppressed by the Castro regime and those who have fled Cuba on boats to escape the tyranny of the Cuban state. On the other hand, some view Cubans as happy and creative individuals who enjoy free education and medical care (Feinsilver 2008). They praise the Cuban education and medical system (Huish 2014) and highlight the positive qualities of Cubans, such as their love for music and art. This positive portrayal of the Cuban people creates a more favorable image of Cubans. To summarize the previous arguments, please refer to Figure 1.

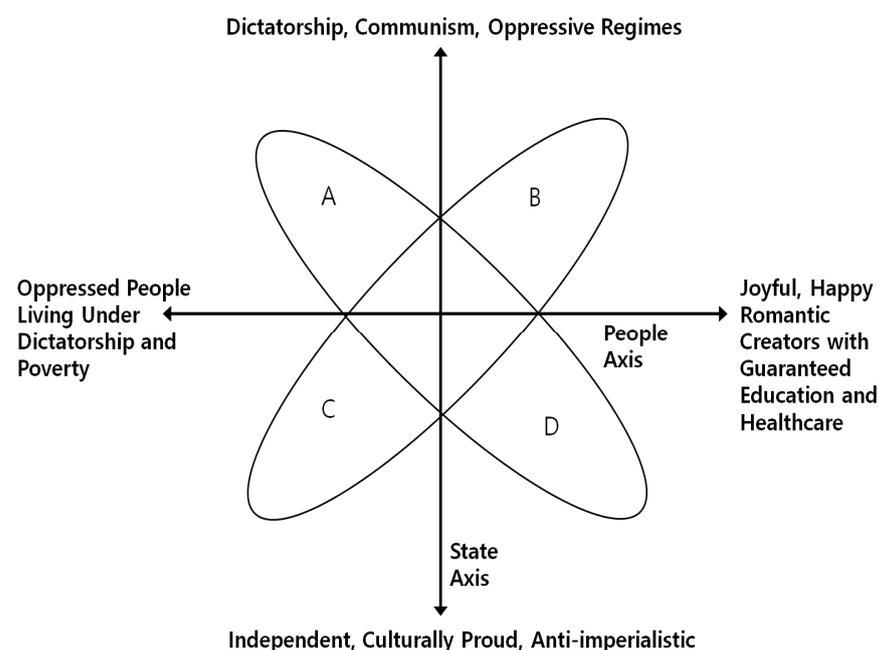


Figure 1. Four Different Perspectives on Cuba. Source: (Jung 2015, p. 301).

When watching Cuba, observers typically use one or some combination of four perspectives, with some biased toward a particular viewpoint. The observer's position on the dimensions of Figure 1 can influence their tendency. For example, those closer to dimension A may have a negative and conservative view of Cuba, while those more relative to dimension D may view it as an attractive country worth visiting.

In Korean society, in many cases, it appears that Cuba is viewed as similar to dimension D. There have been some exchanges between Cuba and Korea since the KOTRA Trade Center opened in Havana in 2005. The popularity of Korean dramas in Cuba has led to a craze for Hallyu, which has attracted significant attention in Korean society. The combination of Cuba's revolutionary and art-loving image with the liberal sentiment of the Korean people has made Koreans sympathetic to Cuba. As a result, many Koreans perceive Cuba positively, and some even fantasize about the country.

During the Park Geun-hye administration, the announcement of diplomatic relations with Cuba as a policy goal and the popularity of the Korean Wave in Cuba gave rise to a phenomenon in Korean society that could be described as "Cuba fever". The press covered Cuba extensively, featuring articles on the Cuban Revolution, legendary revolutionary leader Che Guevara, the Cuban healthcare system, and Cuban culture. Books on Cuba flooded the market and increased flights due to improved US–Cuba relations, which made traveling to Cuba easier. Many young Koreans were fascinated with Cuba and considered it a beautiful and charming country despite its economic struggles. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, over 16,000 Korean tourists visited Cuba, showing favorable sentiment toward the country. This positive perspective is advantageous for the ROK government's efforts to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba.

However, it is essential to recognize that this perception may not necessarily reflect the harsh reality of the country. In addition, it is worth noting that the perception of Cuba in the ROK varies based on the government's political stance, whether liberal or conservative. This perception has ranged from being highly favorable to unfavorable, as shown in the quadrant of Figure 1, which encompasses the highest point of dimension A (upper left) to the lowest point of dimension D (lower right), which directly influences the ROK's policy attitude toward Cuba. Establishing diplomatic ties is easier when Koreans are in dimension D.

2.3. The Current Status of Diplomatic Normalization between the ROK and Cuba

Considering the situation, it seems unlikely that diplomatic relations with Cuba will be easy. How much progress has been made in normalizing diplomatic relations between the ROK and Cuba? A graphical representation of the negotiations between the two countries is displayed in Figure 2, indicating that they are currently in the exploratory phase after initial contact. Unfortunately, despite a decade of efforts, diplomatic relations have not yet progressed beyond this stage.

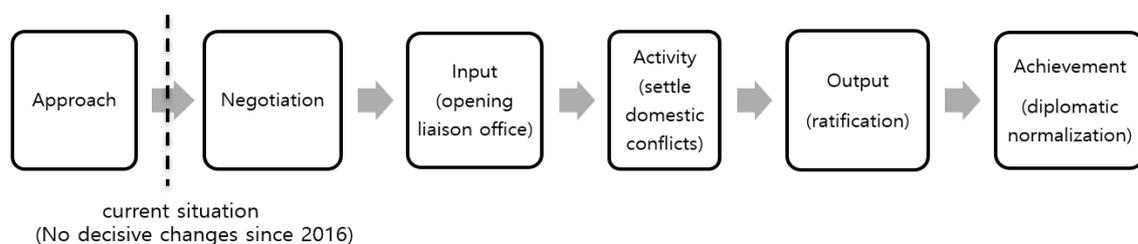


Figure 2. The Flow of Diplomatic Normalization. Source: (Jung 2016, p. 158). Modified by the author.

2.4. Extending the Existing Research Results

According to a study by Jung (2016) that analyzed the normalization of diplomatic relations between the ROK and Cuba through the lens of game theory, both countries' optimal strategy is to defect through passive offers or indifference. This analysis still applies

today, as there have been no significant developments in the relationship since the study was conducted in 2016.

In 2017 and 2018, two high officials from the ROK visited Cuba (Ahn Chong-ghee, second Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Kang Kyung-wha, Minister of Foreign Affairs, respectively). However, these visits did not bring about significant changes in the normalization process. During the Moon administration, efforts to establish diplomatic relations had been relatively weak due to contextual constraints, including the COVID-19 pandemic and deteriorated relations between the US and Cuba.

This article analyzes the status of diplomatic normalization based on existing research results. It adopts a framework that argues the two countries have different interests and expectations related to political, diplomatic, military, security, economic, and cultural aspects, leading to their differing attitudes toward diplomatic normalization. This article assumes the attitudes of the ROK and Cuba toward diplomatic normalization as follows. Given these assumptions, the choices of the two countries can be predicted.

- Both countries are interested in normalizing diplomatic relations.
- The ROK has more to gain from diplomatic relations than Cuba in political and economic terms and is more willing to establish diplomatic relations.
- Regarding the normalization of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the ROK, Cuba is heavily influenced by the DPRK factor.
- The ROK's main interest in normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba is the impact on the DPRK.
- The top leaders or decision-making groups of both countries have the most influence in the decision-making process regarding the normalization of diplomatic relations.
- The public is not actively engaged in the diplomatic normalization process as they perceive it as the exclusive domain of top decision-makers.

Game theory shows what is the most rational choice in a given situation by simplifying the interaction of two actors into cooperation (C) and betrayal (or defection: D). Assuming two actors and only two choices (C and D), four outcomes (CC, CD, DC, DD) of 2×2 can be predicted, and various combinations are possible depending on the assumed situation.

Let us categorize the ROK's and Cuba's positions on diplomatic relations into [active proposal (C)] and [passive proposal or indifference (D)], respectively. Given that game theory generally considers C to be "cooperation" and D to be "betrayal," we can assume that C and D in the Korea–Cuba diplomatic normalization game are [C (diplomatic relations)/D (refusal to diplomatic relations)]. However, if one of the two countries is actively pursuing diplomatic relations (currently, the ROK is actively pursuing diplomatic ties), [D (refusal to establish diplomatic relations)] becomes an impossible situation. Therefore, for the game's sake, C is assumed to be an "active diplomatic proposal," and D is assumed to be a "passive diplomatic proposal or indifference (status quo)."

By looking at the ROK's position, the assumption is that the ROK is currently seeking diplomatic normalization with Cuba. The most crucial benefit the ROK would gain from diplomatic normalization with Cuba is the special symbolism it would bring to its relationship with the DPRK. This comes from the special ties between Cuba and the DPRK. Cuba is one of the DPRK's few remaining allies, and the two countries have long enjoyed an extraordinary relationship. The DPRK's psychological dependence on Cuba has never been greater, especially in the current context of international solid sanctions and isolation due to its nuclear armament.

Under these circumstances, if the ROK were to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba, it would not only be a psychological blow to the DPRK but also serve as a powerful diplomatic symbol of the international community's rejection of the DPRK's nuclear armament. In other words, this symbolism would make it harder for Cuba to ignore the DPRK, ultimately making it more difficult for Cuba to normalize diplomatic relations with the ROK. In this context, the ROK has much to gain by normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Table 1 summarizes the ROK–Cuba diplomatic normalization game results from the ROK’s perspective. As can be seen from the interpretation of the results presented in Table 1, the ROK can achieve a more favorable outcome in normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba by taking a passive rather than an active stance. Not only would it have to promise substantial compensation to Cuba, but the political cost of failure is not tiny, and it would also have to consider the backlash from the DPRK. In any case, it can be interpreted that the ROK has a stronger preference for establishing diplomatic relations than for the failure.

Table 1. Game Tree of Diplomatic Normalization (the ROK’s Side).

ROK’s Choice	C (Active Offer)		D (Passive Offer or Indifferent)	
Cuba’s Choice	Accept (C)	Refuse (D)	Accept (C)	Refuse (D)
Result	CC (Diplomatic Normalization)	CD (Failure)	DC (Diplomatic Normalization)	DD (Failure)
Interpretation of the outcome from the ROK’s perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: expansion of diplomatic relations; symbolic advantage in relations with the DPRK; expected economic benefits from trade; propaganda effect in domestic politics; political leader’s dignity enhanced by increased national prestige Disadvantages: need to provide tangible benefits to Cuba to establish diplomatic relations; backlash from the DPRK and deterioration of inter-Korean relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: nothing particular Disadvantages: loss of national prestige if done publicly and fails/possibility of having to make more concessions to Cuba to move forward with future negotiations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: no need to provide active incentives for diplomatic normalization/expanding list of diplomatic partners/symbolic dominance in relations with the DPRK/expectation of economic benefits from trade/propaganda effect in domestic politics/political leader’s dignity enhanced by increased national prestige/minimized backlash from the DPRK Disadvantages: possible domestic dissatisfaction with the passive progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: no need to provide active incentives for diplomatic normalization/maintain the status quo Disadvantages: possible domestic dissatisfaction with the passive progress
preferential order	2nd	4th	1st	3rd

From Cuba’s perspective, the results of the diplomatic normalization game can be summarized as shown in Table 2. Cuba’s incentives to actively pursue diplomatic normalizations with the ROK are relatively weak compared to the ROK’s incentives. Cuba could have several adverse effects if it were to take an active stance on diplomatic relations with the ROK. First and foremost, it would be difficult for Cuba to ignore the DPRK, given the special bilateral relationship between Cuba’s first generation of revolutionaries and the DPRK leaders. Moreover, ignoring the DPRK would significantly blow the symbolism of Cuba’s “solidarity” diplomacy.

Erasmus Lazcano Lopez, a former vice president of the Jose Marti Cultural Society of Cuba, can be an example of Cuba’s sensitivity to the DPRK. In an interview with the Yonhap News Agency of the ROK (Yonhap News Agency 2015), Lopez stated, “Cuba can normalize ties earlier than expected”. After a Korean newspaper published this interview, the DPRK complained, leading to Lopez’s dismissal from his position (Park 2015).

Therefore, it is relatively unlikely that Cuba will take the initiative to normalize diplomatic relations with the ROK. To use an analogy, Cuba’s stance on diplomatic normalization with the ROK can be described as a damsel in distress who will not reject someone’s

ardent courtship but will not respond to it either. Of course, it is hard to deny that the ardent suitor here is the ROK.

Table 2. Game Tree of Diplomatic Normalization (Cuba’s Side).

Cuba’s Choice	C (Active Offer)		D (Passive Offer or Indifferent)	
ROK’s Choice	Accept (C)	Refuse (D)	Accept (C)	Refuse (D)
Result	CC (Diplomatic Normalization)	CD (Failure)	DC (Diplomatic Normalization)	DD (Failure)
Interpretation of the outcome from Cuba’s perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: expanding diplomatic relations/expecting economic benefits from trade/propaganda effect in domestic politics/International image enhancement Disadvantages: possible internal discontent from first-generation revolutionaries or pro-DPRKs/potential for strong pushback from the DPRK/difficult to expect a return on diplomatic relations from the ROK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: nothing particular Disadvantages: may result in public criticism of key policymakers; domestic political situation may make it impossible to pursue diplomatic normalization in the future; could be a blow to the symbolism of Cuba’s “solidarity” diplomacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: expansion of diplomatic relations/economic benefits from trade/propaganda effect in domestic politics/international image enhancement/Minimize backlash from the DPRK/expectation of benefits from the ROK in return for diplomatic normalization Disadvantages: possible internal discontent from first-generation revolutionaries or pro-DPRKs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advantages: no particular political risk of failure of diplomatic normalization/Minimize backlash from the DPRK/maintain the status quo Disadvantages: expected benefits from diplomatic normalization may not be realized
preferential order	3rd	4th	1st	2nd

Suppose we accept the results of the analysis above. In that case, speeding the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba requires changing the preferences of the ROK and Cuba by modifying the pay-off structure. The pay-off structure can be modified by “increasing the gains from cooperation, decreasing the losses from cooperation, decreasing the gains from betrayal, and increasing the losses from betrayal”. As a strategy to change the preferences of the ROK and Cuba through this modification of the pay-off structure, existing research has applied the theoretical framework of Robert D. Putnam’s (1988) two-level game to suggest the strategies of synergistic linkage, collusion, and side payment (Jung 2016, pp. 165–70).

Do the strategies outlined in the past still apply in the current situation? There are two possible answers to this question. Firstly, it is still possible to establish diplomatic relations between the ROK and Cuba by changing their preferences through synergistic linkages, collusion, and side payments. However, if the ROK must bear most of the cost of this diplomatic normalization, is it appropriate for them to incur such expenses? Secondly, it is believed that diplomatic relations cannot be established by simply modifying the pay-off structure. A country’s policy decisions are influenced not only by profit calculations but also by invisible values, path dependencies, and rationales. Cuba’s longstanding ties to the DPRK, obsession with solidarity diplomacy, and loyalty to old friends may all play a role in its reluctance to normalize diplomatic relations with the ROK.

As previously stated, one of the ROK’s objectives in normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba is to exert pressure on the DPRK by including the DPRK’s old ally in the ROK’s diplomatic circle. However, Cuba has shown reluctance to establish diplomatic ties with

the ROK for several reasons. How can the ROK overcome this barrier? This article will utilize Nordpolitik's experience to suggest policy measures (as a kind of synergistic linkage of issues) that can bring about changes in the situation and assist the ROK in its diplomatic efforts to establish normal relations with Cuba.

3. Linking Nordpolitik

3.1. *The Beginning of Nordpolitik*

Nordpolitik, also known as the ROK's Northern Policy, is a foreign policy that has been in place for a long time and is well-known. It has significantly impacted the ROK's foreign policy and is considered the origin of branded foreign policy practices. The only other policy rivaling Nordpolitik in popularity and recognition is the Sunshine Policy in the ROK's diplomatic history.

During the Cold War, Korea forbade diplomatic ties with communist countries, making it critical for Nordpolitik to be initiated. President Park Chung-hee's "June 23 declaration" in 1973 discarded the Hallstein Doctrine (a diplomatic principle that Walter Hallstein of West Germany proposed on 22 September 1955, which stated that West Germany was the only legitimate government of Germany and that it would not acknowledge the German Democratic Republic or establish relations with any country, except the Soviet Union, that had diplomatic relations with East Germany), which governed Korea's foreign policy in the 1960s. By discarding the doctrine, the ROK opened diplomatic gates to hostile communist countries.

This tendency was reinforced by a speech by Foreign Minister Lee Bum-suk in 1983. President Roh Tae-woo then made the final move toward diplomatic normalization with communist countries, including the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Through this gradual process, Nordpolitik was concretized and practiced, leaving a clear and vivid image of "the North" to the Korean public.

Nordpolitik has been a well-known foreign policy to the public since 1988, when President Roh Tae-woo announced its beginning at his inaugural address (Roh 1988). Nordpolitik was initially created with the purpose of unifying and securing the Korean Peninsula. According to the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(1992, p. 44\)](#), the ROK government began vigorously pursuing Nordpolitik to establish better inter-Korean relations and improve the security environment on the peninsula by taking advantage of the changing international situation. The goals of Nordpolitik, as stated by the [Bureau of Public Information \(1992a, p. 97\)](#), were to normalize relations with pro-DPRK socialist countries, like the PRC and the USSR, to urge the DPRK to become a responsible member of the global community through a policy of reform and opening up, to expand the ROK diplomacy into all-round diplomacy by normalizing relations with northern socialist empires, and to seek economic benefits through trade and economic exchanges with socialist countries, including the PRC and the USSR.

Yeom Don Jay, who oversaw Nordpolitik as President Roh Tae-woo's policy secretary, stated the goals of Nordpolitik as follows ([Center for Diplomatic History 2020, p. 118](#)). "First, to settle peace on the Korean Peninsula and create conditions for reunification; second, to overcome half-hearted diplomacy based on national pride and promote all-round diplomacy; third, to secure new economic partners; and fourth, to break down the Cold War barriers and contribute to world peace."

Nordpolitik has evolved under each presidential administration, resulting in varying degrees of success. It is closely tied to the ROK's approach to the DPRK and has faced many challenges. Despite this, Nordpolitik has persisted by changing its branding and experiencing both successes and setbacks. The Moon Jae-in administration announced the most recent version of the policy, the New Nordpolitik.

As mentioned above, Nordpolitik was created with the goal of unifying the Korean Peninsula, which remains a crucial objective despite changes in administration. Depending on the policies of each administration, the focus of Nordpolitik may shift. Nevertheless, pursuing Nordpolitik will remain a fundamental aspect of the ROK's foreign policy until

unification. Even after unification, given the ROK's geopolitical location, its four powerful neighboring countries, and its national goals, the significance of Nordpolitik will only continue to increase.

3.2. The Meaning of "the North" in the ROK's Nordpolitik

The term "North" used in the context of Nordpolitik can be confusing for many readers. While "North" is commonly known as a geographic direction, its meaning in Nordpolitik is more complex. The definition of "North" as a policy term has evolved over time since the inception of Nordpolitik.

The simplest definition of "North" refers to the direction of true north. In the *Book of Changes*, north is described as a bearing of 11 o'clock to 1 o'clock north (亥子丑). This means that "11 o'clock (亥)" is slightly west of true north, "12 o'clock (子)" is true north, and "1 o'clock (丑)" is slightly east of true north. In other words, a range of directions of 30 degrees, each centered on true north, is called north (Noh 2006, p. 232).

The Institute of Foreign Affairs and Security Studies (1988), the predecessor of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, defined Nordpolitik as "foreign policy and diplomatic activities that seek to improve relations with the USSR, the PRC, and the DPRK to the north of Korea (1) individually, (2) simultaneously with two countries, or (3) simultaneously with the USSR, the PRC, and the DPRK". Here, the North is used in a very narrow sense.

A generation later, in 2017, the North refers to a much more comprehensive range of countries and regions. The Moon Jae-in administration's "New Nordpolitik" targets 14 countries for the New North, including Russia, Moldova, Mongolia, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Georgia, China (Northeast Three Provinces), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (in alphabetical order). Most of these countries are located to the west, not the north, of the Korean Peninsula on a world map.

However, Koreans call them "Northern" countries because the concept of the North, as used in Nordpolitik, does not just refer to the direction on a map but a political definition based on the journey required to reach those countries. Their location is less important than the mode of transportation needed to get there, which is by foot rather than by air or sea. As such, individuals looking to visit these countries from Korea must head north.

The "South" and "North" concepts in global politics can further support this argument. Snarr and Snarr (2016, p. 5) argue that they use the terms "third world," "the South," "developing world," and "less-developed countries" interchangeably to call the poorer countries, in contrast to using "first world," "the North," "developed world," and "more-developed countries" when they call the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Geographically, Australia and New Zealand are located in the southern hemisphere but are considered "Northern" states. The meaning of north and south here is not decided by geographical location but by geopolitical and economic contexts. Like this, in the ROK's Nordpolitik, the notion of "North" is not confined to those countries located north of the Korean Peninsula but encompasses the entire Eurasian continent.

As mentioned above, the definition of the North in the ROK's foreign policy is closely related to the ROK's geopolitical situation and the aims of Nordpolitik. The ROK's territory is confined to the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, and the creation of Nordpolitik is to achieve unification by rehabilitating the northern part of the peninsula (Kim 1998, pp. 23–56; Chun 2003, pp. 23–45). The country's division restricts the Korean people's geographic mobility, forcing them to use the sea or air to move to other countries. It has been maintained for 70 years since the armistice was signed. In this vein, overcoming the practical restrictions posed by the division has been a long wish of the Korean people, which can be realized through the unification of the divided country. Nordpolitik shows the vision of reaching the Eurasian continent by an overland route, achieving territorial unification, and unifying the divided people. To the citizens of the ROK, the North means "everywhere that they can reach by walking, starting from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, where

they live now". We can refer to Doreen Massey's arguments to understand the North's spatial concept better.

Massey (1994, pp. 1–16) defines *space* as not only physical landmarks but also places where multiple actors interact daily, implying a multiplicity of identities that are constantly changing and constructive. They can refer to the structural systems of synchronicity or describe the multi-dimensional space of identity. Similarly, the concept of the North for Koreans is constructed through the interactions of many actors, resulting in a complex and layered imagined space whose meaning is shaped by the speaker's intention and related agenda. When combined with specific policies, the implications of this concept become more diverse, variable, and constructive (Kang et al. 2020, p. 223).

As can be inferred from Massey's arguments, "the North" in the context of Nordpolitik and related research is not a geographically fixed space but rather a complex, layered, "imagined" territory whose meaning has been constructed and transformed according to the "aims and intentions of the speaker and the agendas and issues involved". It is also appropriate to understand it as having a highly variable and constructive nature, taking in a broader range of meanings when coupled with policy.

3.3. *The Continuance and Changes of Nordpolitik*

Nordpolitik has been a vital part of the ROK's foreign policy for over a generation. Despite variations in names, contents, actors, and measures depending on the administration, the central tenet of the policy has remained constant. The policy's continuation and evolution align with the ROK's foreign policy attitude.

A country's foreign policy changes when the world, state, or leaders change. However, foreign policy's fundamental principles, values, and perennial purposes remain constant even with changes (Dallek 1989; Hook 2020). Likewise, the ROK's foreign policy has undergone changes and kept continuity.

Three main factors affect the changes in the ROK's foreign policy. Firstly, external factors such as the location of the Korean Peninsula, the ROK's relative power compared to its neighboring countries, and how it implements its foreign policy play a significant role. Secondly, the characteristics of the ROK as a nation also influence its foreign policy. This includes its political regime, domestic political situation, and social strata. Lastly, observing the critical political actors and elites in Korean society is crucial, as their perceptions and interests can play a vital role in shaping the ROK's foreign policy.

Of the three factors mentioned, the most impactful was the external influence—also known as the systemic factor. Due to its strategic location, the Korean Peninsula has been continuously invaded throughout history and could not break free from the resulting geopolitical constraints. From the Korean Peninsula's liberation and division to the Korean War, Armistice, and Cold War, the ROK has followed a foreign policy centered around its alliance with the US. The ROK's foreign policy has been governed by a dichotomous mindset that divides the world into the free world and the communist bloc, with the US being the central focus.

The changes in the system, particularly in the US, directly impact the ROK's foreign policy. The July 4th Joint Statement of 1972 and the June 23rd declarations of 1973 were made possible due to the improved relationship between the US and China, facilitated by ping-pong diplomacy. However, this improved relationship also caused concern for the ROK's security, given the ongoing Cold War and military confrontation with the DPRK due to the country's division. As a result, the ROK's foreign policy was often limited by "weak state diplomacy, dependency, and Cold War foreign policy". Nordpolitik was created to overcome these structural constraints and establish an independent foreign policy. Nordpolitik began to be promoted earnestly during the Roh Tae-woo administration, like a seed that would grow into a flower.

The introduction of Nordpolitik allowed the ROK to expand its horizons beyond Northeast Asia and reduce its reliance on the US. This shift in foreign policy allowed for more active and independent foreign policy pursuits, breaking away from the previous

passive and dependent approach. It aimed to broaden the scope and direction of the ROK's foreign affairs while breaking free from the bipolar structure.

Since establishing diplomatic relations with the USSR and the PRC, the ROK's diplomacy has become more proactive and independent. A new path of coexistence was sought that helped break the confrontational structure of Northeast Asia, which used to be described as the confrontation between the Northern Triangle and Southern Triangle. Nordpolitik has continued to evolve, including unification and foreign and security policies as part of its national strategy. The policy remains flexible and adapts to changing global conditions and different administrations while maintaining its core values.

The end of the Cold War brought about significant changes that were unprecedented and unexpected. This presented new opportunities for the ROK's foreign policy, which led to the country's simultaneous membership in the UN with the DPRK in 1991, signing the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement in 1991 (effectuated in 1992) and jointly declaring the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in 1992. At the time, there was much optimism and hope for reunification with the success of Nordpolitik, but this was premature. While democratization, the Seoul Olympics, sustained economic growth, and diplomatic relations with the communist bloc boosted the ROK's self-esteem and positivity, they also caused the ROK to underestimate the extent of the DPRK's fears and its potential for backlash against unwelcome changes. The miscalculation ultimately drove the DPRK to pursue nuclear weapons.

3.4. Cuba as a Northern Country

Nordpolitik implemented by the ROK had some significant achievements. For instance, on 1 February 1989, diplomatic relations were established with Hungary, and diplomatic relations with the PRC and the USSR were also established. The ROK's most successful diplomatic relations were established in 1962, when it established diplomatic relations with 28 countries, followed by 1992, when it established diplomatic relations with 18 countries in a year. Many of these countries were previously part of the communist bloc, demonstrating the success of the Roh Tae-woo government's proactive Nordpolitik.

Regarding Nordpolitik during his term, President Roh, at the last "Nordpolitik Report Conference" held in November 1992, noted the achievements of Nordpolitik: "First, we have blossomed an era of all-round diplomacy through active and creative diplomacy; second, the unlimited market of the Northern Continent has been opened; third, the Nordpolitik has contributed greatly to national security; and fourth, the most important achievement is that a great path to reunification has been opened" ([Bureau of Public Information 1992b](#), pp. 427–29).

As evaluated above, Nordpolitik was launched with the goal of "the DPRK, unification, and security" and has shifted to "world, peace, and prosperity" as systemic conditions and regime changes have occurred after the collapse of the Cold War. Having prepared the seeds under Park Chung-hee and planted the seedlings under Roh Tae-woo, Nordpolitik has since grown into a giant tree and blossomed into a spectacular flower through the "Iron Silk Road" under Kim Dae-Jung, the "Three New Silk Roads" under Lee Myung-bak, the "Eurasian Initiative" under Park Geun-hye, and the "New Nordpolitik" under Moon Jae-in. The normalization of diplomatic relations between the ROK and Cuba can be the fruit of this long journey and should be harvested as a fruit of the great tree of Nordpolitik.

In this vein, normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba can also be understood as an extension of Nordpolitik. Of particular note is the strategic nature of Nordpolitik. Including substantial improvements in relations with socialist countries, Nordpolitik is "an 'indirect and bypassing strategy' that knocks on the door of Pyongyang through the normalization of relations with communist countries" ([Kim 1998](#), p. 46), intending to achieve reunification through indirect influence on the North ([Chun 2003](#), pp. 23–45). If we understand Nordpolitik from this perspective, Cuba's geographical location is in the Western Hemisphere, but its political location is in the north, as defined above. In this context, this

article argues for the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba as another policy goal of Nordpolitik.

4. Diplomatic Normalization Process: What Is to Be Done?

4.1. Lessons from Nordpolitik

The success of Nordpolitik can be attributed to three main reasons. Firstly, the dissolution of the Cold War played a significant role. Without this historical event, the policy would have faced more difficulties and taken longer to succeed. Secondly, informal diplomatic channels, mainly through academia, were crucial in establishing contacts and discussing sensitive issues. The use of informal channels has a history of resolving hostile relations, as seen in the examples of Ping-Pong Diplomacy and the Oslo Accords. In the case of the ROK's Nordpolitik, the Council for the Study of the Communist Bloc played an important role, and academic conferences in Germany facilitated contacts with the Eastern Bloc (Center for Diplomatic History 2020, pp. 28–33). Finally, the willingness of the top leaders of the diplomatic partners was crucial in establishing diplomatic relations. The efforts to change their perception and systemic changes in the situation played essential roles in changing the supreme leader's will. The role of critical actors such as Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping cannot be overstated in establishing diplomatic relations with Hungary, the USSR, and the PRC.

Applying these three reasons to the current situation, the following arguments can be made.

Firstly, the global political stage is transforming significantly, similar to the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is a rise in geopolitics, great power politics, coercive diplomacy, and the use of force, which may significantly impact global politics. This time of transition presents both opportunities and challenges. For the ROK to normalize relations with Cuba, it is essential to be prepared for sudden changes at a systemic level. It is recommended that a contingency plan be developed with a long-term roadmap, which can guide the journey toward diplomatic normalcy. This plan should be created in close consultation with relevant ministries, including the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the National Intelligence Service.

Secondly, encouraging both formal and informal contact channels is crucial. Informal channels can be utilized in a variety of ways. For instance, by capitalizing on the popularity of the Hallyu in Cuba, increasing tourism and cultural exchanges from the ROK might foster positive responses to diplomatic relations across Cuban society. To actively explore these channels, the 1.5 track should be considered. Private exchanges should also be expanded through institutions such as the Seoul office of the *Club Martiano en Seul* (La Sociedad Cultural José Martí: SCJM) and the Institute of Latin American Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. The Korea Foundation, Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and KOTRA can also play essential roles in facilitating cultural and economic exchanges, as well as KSP.

Lastly, it should be noted that there is little the ROK can do to influence the perceptions of the Cuban supreme leader. Changing the supreme leader's will is difficult, especially given the memory of the good old days and strong ties between the DPRK and Cuba. However, the ongoing transition of the revolutionary generation in both Cuba and the DPRK, the continued growth of civil society in Cuba, and the positive impact of diplomatic relations with the ROK on Cuba's transition to new leadership could lead to a change in the will of the Cuban supreme leaders. The actual induction of such a change will depend on the ROK's policy and strategic choices.

4.2. What Is to Be Done: The Idea of Cross-Recognition

In 1991, Nordpolitik achieved a significant milestone by getting the ROK and the DPRK into full membership in the UN. The policy of cross-recognition was the driving force behind this accomplishment, aimed at reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula by having the USSR and the PRC recognize the ROK and the US and Japan simultaneously rec-

ognize the DPRK. The idea was first conceived by Japanese International political scientist Kamiya Fuji in 1969 and later proposed by US Assistant Secretary of State Philip Charles Habib in 1974. The concept gained momentum during the Roh Tae-woo administration.

The promoters of Nordpolitik had planned to move toward cross-recognition after the two Koreas' simultaneous entry into the UN. However, domestic political struggles within the ROK after achieving simultaneous entry into the UN led to the foreign policy of the Roh Tae-woo administration becoming more conservative ([Center for Diplomatic History 2020](#), pp. 141–43; [Center for Diplomatic History 2021](#), pp. 359–62). Therefore, the ROK government's DPRK policy adopted a contradictory approach of "realist engagement". In other words, while engagement was more potent in the early stages of Nordpolitik, the approach emphasizing the security threat from the DPRK became more pronounced after the simultaneous entry into the UN and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the USSR and the PRC.

The same approach can be taken to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba. Through reviving the once-failed idea of cross-recognition, the ROK can invite the DPRK, the US, Japan, and Cuba to ameliorate their frozen relationship. By persuading the US and Japan to normalize diplomatic relations with the DPRK, the ROK can persuade Cuba to establish diplomatic ties, as the strong relationship between the DPRK and Cuba was one of the main obstacles to diplomatic normalization. Once cross-recognition is achieved, it will help to stabilize Northeast Asia and the global society.

5. Conclusions

In 1949, the ROK had diplomatic ties with only five countries. By 1961, the ROK's total number of diplomatic relations was 27. With the normalization of diplomatic relations with 28 new countries in 1962, the ROK's diplomatic ties increased to 55. Diplomatic ties with Latin American countries played a crucial role in this expansion. Cuba was not among them. A generation later, in 1992, the ROK established diplomatic relations with 18 countries through Nordpolitik, increasing the number of diplomatic relations to 169. In 2022, another 30 years later, the number of diplomatic relations reached 191, but Cuba remains outside the ROK's diplomatic partners.

This article explores the possibility of normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba. The article utilized the analytical framework of game theory based on existing research results to evaluate the possibility, which is low for now. To overcome this, the article proposes to alter the preferences of each player by altering the pay-off structure by adopting the strategies of synergistic linkage, collusion, and side payment. However, as a country's policy decisions are influenced not only by profit calculations but also by invisible values, path dependencies, and rationales, the article recommends that Cuba's longstanding ties to the DPRK should be considered in the diplomatic normalization process. Against this backdrop, the article examines policy options for realizing diplomatic normalcy and attempts to borrow the ideas from the Roh Tae-woo administration's Nordpolitik.

When Nordpolitik was launched in earnest during the Roh Tae-woo administration, it was predicted that it would have adverse effects such as "the entrenchment of the division of Korea, the triggering of DPRK's adventurist provocations, the possibility of a great power struggle in Northeast Asia, and the collapse of the balance of power in Northeast Asia ([Chung 1990](#), p. 5)". To prevent the occurrence and spread of these adverse effects, the Roh Tae-woo administration, in pursuing Nordpolitik, provided the following policy directions from the beginning. "First, we will not seek to isolate the DPRK. Second, link the DPRK policy with the unification policy. Third, boldly promote political and non-political exchanges in parallel. Fourth, it should be based on national consensus. Fifth, build on the foundation of strengthening ties with existing allies, including the US ([Park 1989](#), pp. 188–89)". Unfortunately, the administration failed to maintain these directions and instead adopted conservative policies, causing the DPRK to feel isolated and threatened. This led to the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons as a means of ensuring its security and political stability.

The policy directions mentioned above are equally applicable today when the ROK seeks to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba. This article recommends that the idea of cross-recognition can be borrowed from the past, not only for normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba but also for stabilizing Northeast Asia and the global society.

To conclude, the author suggests three things Koreans should consider as they pursue diplomatic normalization with Cuba.

First and foremost, the ROK government should persuade its people. They should be able to provide answers to the questions: Why does the ROK want to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba? What does the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba mean? The answer could be the completion of the Nordpolitik and ROK diplomacy, indirect leverage over the DPRK, a long-term step toward unification, or a commitment to world peace. Whatever it is, Korean diplomatic efforts will be like a castle built on sand unless they can convince its people of the need and desirability of normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Second, policy efforts are needed to overcome stagnation. The ROK is currently at a standstill in normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba. What is the cause of this stagnation? Is the stagnation due to the conflict between the two countries, or is there a systemic factor preventing diplomatic normalcy or other unseen factors? Breaking the stagnation requires a commitment from the top decision-makers. In addition, not only must the ROK's diplomatic efforts persuade Cuban leaders, but they must also be backed by policy actions to support them. Sometimes, drastic concessions are necessary to achieve the goal.

Finally, the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba should not result in the isolation of the DPRK. Suppose the ROK government tries to isolate the DPRK or change the status quo on the Korean Peninsula by normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba. In that case, the DPRK will be forced to appeal to Cuba for support, and Cuba, in turn, will not readily agree to normalize diplomatic relations with the ROK out of concern for the DPRK. Moreover, any attempt to forcibly disrupt the status quo in Northeast Asia will not be welcomed by the neighboring countries of the ROK. Therefore, to prevent this, by implementing the cross-recognition policy once hired by the Roh Tae-woo administration, the ROK should accomplish diplomatic normalization between the ROK and Cuba by persuading the US and Japan to normalize diplomatic relations with the DPRK simultaneously. This will be evaluated as the completion of Nordpolitik and mark a significant milestone in the ROK's longstanding diplomatic efforts toward promoting peace in the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia, and the global community.

Funding: This work was supported by the Ministry of Education and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2020S1A6A3A04064633) and supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2023.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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