

## Toward a (Sub)-Regionalization of South Korea's Unification Policy – the Proposal of a Romantic Road for Gangwon Province

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70 years after the start of the Korean War, the Korean Peninsula is still divided, and a peace regime is not in sight. The hopes of 2018, a year full of exciting summit diplomacy starting with the Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang and culminating in terms of South-North relations in the Panmunjeom declaration of April 2018, have been dashed, and inter-Korean relations slid back to the familiar, but depressing pattern of stalemate and mutual recriminations. All initiatives taken as part of the Panmunjeom declaration, like the modernization and connection of railroad lines, are stalled or have failed. One reason for this might be that the approach taken for inter-Korean relations has always been highly centralized and focused on a few, large projects. These projects were prone to fail or were even, like in the case of the Iron Silk road, non-starters. The current debate to allow individual tourism is a reaction to overcome this centralized approach. Another important way to decentralize unification policies of South Korea is the sub-regionalization, i.e. the active involvement of provinces, counties and cities in unification policies. While there has been some precedent, like the mandarin shipments from Jeju province, the discretion for action by provinces or counties has always been very small. The Romantic road of Gangwon province, founded in 2009 and based on the German model of the Romantic Road (Romantische Straße), currently runs from Samcheok to Goseong, 240 km along the Korean East Coast. A prolongation of the Romantic road towards Wonsan or Munchon would fit into the North Korean tourism planning for the Wonsan-Kumgangsang special tourism zone, could be started with individual tourism from the South and could be a way to get provinces and counties more involved in unification policies, thereby making unification policies more resilient.

**Keywords:** Unification policy, Regionalization, Gangwon province, Romantic Road, Tourism

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## **I. Introduction**

In early 2020, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic turmoil and the shutdown of North Korea are relegating North Korea news to the back rows of international news. And the spike in tensions in May and June 2020, with the destruction of the inter-Korean Exchange office in Kaesong, made any progress in inter-Korean relations or rapprochement seemingly impossible. Even besides these events, North-South relations look bleak. The hopes of 2018 to enter a new area of improved relations were dashed by the failed Hanoi summit, and since then relations have been on an all too familiar, but unwanted downslide. Sunshine policy 2.0 seems to be over before it started, and it is difficult to see a positive swing in inter-Korean relations after the end of the pandemic scare. The North Korean leadership actively prepares the population for further coming hardships, which seems to indicate that no conciliatory policy is expected to take place for the time being.

All the large-scale projects and plans South Korea had for cooperation with the North are not only put on hold, but also have very few hopes to ever be realized: the Kaesong Industrial Complex will not open, nor will there be a renewal of the Kumgangsan tourism project; on the contrary, North Korea plans to remove all signs of South Korean involvement in Kumgangsan. The railway project, the only large-scale project discussed (or started) has stopped right after the initial opening and review, and family reunions, though an urgent issue due to the age of prospective participants, did not take place even once. And this is not only the result of unfortunate circumstances coming together, but it is rather part of a long history of failed large-scale projects. The problem, it seems, is the lack of feasibility of such projects given the absence of mutual trust. And this is even true for the least intrusive form of cooperation, the delivery of aid goods – neither before the pandemic, when the South Korean government repeatedly offered aid, including food aid, nor during the pandemic, when it offered medical aid goods. In both cases, North Korea rejected the South's offers. All cooperation

seems to be difficult. It is time for a new approach.

The situation seems to be a little better for private aid and private contacts, but these are still rare in Korea. Usually, all policy initiatives are initiated by the central government, even if projects are later carried out by private actors like NGOs. This has an important drawback for North Korea: all North-South relations immediately take the highest possible political importance and are officially approved by both sides on the most official level. This takes away the strategic ambiguity, or, more positively expressed, leeway, of the North Korean government. Also, given the highest level of approval on South Korea's side, there is no interest in small projects, but rather in big ones. Therefore, a lot of feasible, but small-scale projects never come to fruition, since the government decides on its prestige projects, like the railway connection. Clearly, these projects are then intensely in the focus of sanctions' deciding entities and governments, reducing the leeway for trying out new forms of cooperation considerably.<sup>1</sup>

Inside South Korea, there has been surprisingly little legal chance since 2018 to prepare for a widening of inter-Korean relations, despite all the positive rhetoric. Due to the unclear power relations in the National Assembly, before the National Assembly election of April 2020, and probably (due to) not willing to appear too focused on appeasement, the government did a few things to ease the preconditions for private initiatives or initiatives of the lower echelons of government. While since the advent of the Moon administration there has been generally a positive attitude and encouragement for more activities, like meetings between North and South Koreans, the formal procedures remain highly centralized and have not been eased. Given the overwhelming importance of national security, it is understandable that the hot iron of the National Security Law was not touched, though several improvements are warranted, but it is even more surprising for administrative procedures, which are entirely up to the government and

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1 It should be noted here that though sanctions are a legal instrument, they are by no means unambiguous.

do not need Parliamentary approval.<sup>2</sup> It would be an urgent and feasible task for the government to ease procedures, allow more individual decision-making power and increase the number of potential projects and methods of inter-Korean cooperation. In other words, a decentralization of South Korea's unification policy is urgently needed. This entails two things: first of all, decentralization means here a change of main actors, from the central government level to the local level (localization) and provincial level as well as civil society level. At the same time, this also means an empowerment of the aforementioned new actors, not only a delegation of power which in the case of need can easily be revoked. The form of decentralization here discussed needs to be permanent, and deliberate, not a means of desperation with a current situation, but rather a matter of principle.

However, decentralization still needs viable ideas. It is not enough for empowered provinces and cities or counties to offer economic benefit such as the central government, only on a lower level of government or from the private side (and probably with a lower budget). This is visible in the concept of "independent operators of aid policy," which is how the government designated Seoul, Incheon, Gyeonggi Province and South Chungcheong Province, and, since March 2020, also Goyang and Paju.<sup>3</sup> But, in the end, they are not independent, but rather designated to carry out policies of the central government, often funded mainly or entirely with funding from the central unification fund. In this paper we discuss one such new idea, which departs from the mere carrying out of central government projects, namely a regional tourism development project along the Korean East coast of Gangwon/Kangwon province, the "romantic road" of Gangwon/ Kangwon province, from Samcheok to Wonsan. It is based on an existing tourism development concept in the South and compatible with the plans in the North for tourism development. It does not involve the South Korean central government,

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2 For example, trip approval for South Koreans to the North still is usually made on the Vice Minister or even Minister level.

3 Yonhap News (Korea), "N. Korea's income from tourism half of that from Kaesong complex," January 11, 2015.

and also not the closely related actors of the South like Hyundai Asan. The second part of this paper looks at decentralized approaches to unification policy under Sunshine Policy, their success and shortcomings. The third section looks into German and international experiences with the romantic road and the foundation of the South Gangwon Romantic Road. The fourth part discusses the development of tourism in North Korea. The fifth part looks into the idea of the romantic road of Gangwon/Kangwon province, followed by a conclusion.

While the idea of decentralization is already a limitation in scope of feasible projects (namely not on the national level), also the discussion in this paper is limited to giving an additional idea for a diversification of inter-Korean relations. This does not devalue national-government level policies per se, but rather tries to supplement them with workable elements of a sub-national level strategy.

## **II. Decentralized Approaches to Unification Policy under Sunshine Policy – Experiences and Shortcomings**

During the time of the sunshine policy, there were attempts to decentralize the unification policy, as part of an unprecedented network of relatively dense relations. The first sector, in which this was most successful, probably, was agricultural cooperation. This reached from direct aid shipments to the North, in particular tangerines from Jeju province, to the building of hothouses (Goseong), sending of farm equipment (North Jeolla), fight against malaria (Gyeonggi) and forest pests (Gangwon).<sup>4</sup> This was in a time (mostly around 2005) when North Korea was just recovering from its most difficult economic situation, the famine of the 1990s, but had regained at least partially its state capacity regarding control of its population. Also, it was the time of economic experiments, in particular the post-price reform era. Additional aid

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4 see the overview at: Yong-Hwan Choi, “The Roles of South Korean Central and Local Governments in Inter-Korean Cooperation,” *North Korean Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2008), pp. 116-117.

including direct food aid was welcomed, given that the country had barely escaped a complete economic breakdown. And, five years of the Kim Dae-Jung administration had already created a certain amount of trust on the North Korean side to be able to proceed with these projects, which also included regular visits by South Korean experts. However, even in these heydays of cooperation, North Korea clearly tried to minimize contact between South Koreans and their own population. Also, direct cross-border contacts were mostly difficult. For example, model farms which were equipped by Gyeonggi province were not directly adjacent to Gyeonggi province. An exception was projects for Kaesong Industrial Complex, which were, however, not run by local or regional governments in the South, and the area of Kumgangsán, where a limited cooperation between North and South Kosong/Goseong took place. Among other, South Goseong provided hothouses to the North. However, even then local government to local government contacts were limited, with one meeting alone taking place between the district chief (*Gunsu*) of South Goseong and his Northern counterpart.

The second group of projects were sports events organized by local communities. These gave local or regional governments the chance to participate in inter-Korean relations. A well-known example is the Asian Games in Incheon, where a high-ranking North Korean delegation took place. However, these events were only “pseudo-local” or “pseudo-regional” since the North Korean side did not send any regional representatives, but national sports groups and functionaries to these events. Nevertheless, they offered a chance for diversification of actors on the South Korean side. This itself is meaningful, as said above, because it depoliticizes inter-Korean relations to some extent, and leads from high politics via sports politics ideally to civilian, non-political exchanges. However, the success was limited.

First, in North Korea, generally counterparts for regional or local action are not easy to be found. While there is a system of local administration, there is no local autonomy, and there is no autonomy in the North at all to engage in cross-border activities with South Korea. This means that from the Northern side, a central involvement is

inevitable. Still, if it involves, for example, the sports sector, this might be still on the Northern side a de-politization of activities. The lack of independent local actors will always be a constraint for policy initiatives, though it is not impossible to involve local actors together with a strong national partner.<sup>5</sup>

Second, those projects were most successful which were in tow with the two great national projects in the border area, namely Kaesong Industrial Complex, and in particular, the Kumgangsán tourism project. In the latter area, the land access alone meant that the local government on the Southern side was involved through construction projects etc., and here the most meaningful local involvement took place. But the close linkage to the national project also meant a limitation; an end to the national project, like in Kumgangsán in 2008 and in Kaesong in 2016, meant also the end of regional or local initiatives. It was not possible to decouple both of them. This paper argues that a lasting decentralization of not only single, delegated projects, but rather power, would allow decentralized projects to outlive at least partly national conflicts.

### **III. The Romantic Road of Germany and International “Romantic Roads”**

When West Germany experienced, after the devastation of the war and the post-war times, an “economic miracle” in the 1950s, the tourism industry began slowly to revive, among Germans themselves, but also with foreign tourists. Not a few of those were U.S. soldiers and their families stationed in post-war Germany, being relatively affluent. In 1950, local communities in the Southwestern part of Germany together opened the so-called “romantic road,” very loosely based on the old

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5 For example, in Hanns Seidel Foundation and environmental organizations like World Wildlife Fund in DPRK, projects on wetlands and nature protection carried out together with the Ministry of Land and Environment Protection also involve local wetland managers, locally-based bird reserve managers, and even occasionally access to local classrooms for awareness-raising activities.

Roman road in the area. For 350 kilometers (today all in all up to 413 kilometers) the road reaches from Wuerzburg to Fuessen, along the Bavarian – Baden-Wuerttemberg state border and includes a number of castles like Neuschwanstein in the Alps in the South and small, medieval cities like Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Dinkelsbuehl and Noerdlingen surrounded by old city walls, which were less destroyed than most bigger cities in World War II. The German Romantic Road soon became one of the biggest magnets for tourism in the southern provinces of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, featuring what many think of as quintessentially German scenery and culture.<sup>6</sup> Today, five million guests annually stay overnight in the area, and four to five times as many come as daily tourists to the area, securing around 15,000 jobs. The Romantic Road itself was not a new road, but rather a marketing tool to market various cities, monuments and landscapes, linked by existing roads. With increasing traffic these became bigger and bigger and later three times, in 2009, 2011 and 2016, the road was slightly changed, from the new less romantic three-lane highway to smaller roads in the neighborhood. Also, along the same road a trekking route and a bicycle road (“Romantic Road”) on a slightly less frequented route were added.

The German Romantic Road became an instant success with tourists and became synonymous with German city and cultural tourism. For example, in the mid-1990s, 93 percent of Japanese (in the ages when they could travel, so excluding very young and old people) knew about the German Romantic Road, and indeed signs on the Romantic Road were written not only in German, but also in Japanese. But also, in other countries like Brazil, it became a top German attraction. The business model of the Romantic Road was decentral: it was not devised by states like Bavaria, but by a voluntary initiative of cities, local administrations, and owners or caretakers of monuments.<sup>7</sup> Since 1985, in Dinkelsbuehl,

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6 For an extensive description see the official homepage (English version): <<https://www.romantischestrassen.de/?L=1>>. See also <<https://www.european-traveler.com/germany/top-sights-on-the-romantic-road-germany/>>.

7 For an analysis see Jurczek (1989).

there is an office of the Romantic Road financed by contributions of participating partners. Autonomy of the partners and flexibility is therefore a great advantage of the German model, but at the same time, the Romantic Road has to prove its usefulness to the partners year by year.

<Figure 1> The German Romantic Road



Source: The speedy turtle website

The German Romantic road was so successful that it was copied in other countries, too. Not surprisingly, these were the countries most impressed by the Romantic Road. In Japan, since 1982, there has been a Romantic Road.<sup>8</sup> In 1998, the Rota Romântica was opened in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> And in 2009, South Gangwon province opened “Nangmankado,” the South Korean variant of the Romantic Road. The “Romantic Roads” are, however, not the only ways to designate specific routes: scenic routes, tourist roads, tourist drive holiday routes or other touring routes exist in

8 For details of the “Romantic road” in Japan see *japan.travel*, <<https://www.japan.travel/de/travel-directory/romantic%20road%20Japan/>> (date accessed April 6, 2020).

9 For details of the Brazilian “Rota Romântica” see <<https://www.rotaromantica.com.br/en/>> (date accessed April 6, 2020).

many ways. In Germany alone, there are a number of thematic routes, for example, the German Wine Route (Deutsche Weinstraße), the German Fairy Tale Route (Deutsche Märchenstraße), German Porcelain Route (Deutsche Porzellanstraße), Upper Suebian Baroque Route (Oberschwäbische Barockstraße), German Cheese Route, Mountain Route (Bergstraße) or the Bertha Benz Memorial Route, following the route the first Benz car took in 1888 etc. The names already say something about the main attractions, which are culinary, scenic, historic or architectural. In Russia, the "Golden Ring of Russia" comprises cities in the North and Northeast of Moscow, important in the old state of the ancient Rus, the founders of modern Russia, including Rostov, Yaroslav and Sergiyev Posad. In the United States, there is one officially designated scenic route, the U.S. route 40 scenic in Maryland, but there are a number of "scenic byways" recognized for their archeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational, and scenic qualities, forest scenic byways and back country scenic byways. The Route 66, though originally a route of enormous economic importance through the U.S., also called the "mother route" or "road of America," became famous in novels and movies ("The Grapes of Wrath") and music ("Get your kicks on Route 66") and today, after the logistic function ceased to be important, is an area living from nostalgic tourism. In Europe, beside the German case, there are routes through the Dutch tulip fields, Scotland's Malt Whiskey, linking Norwegian fjords and Swiss mountains, but also a road to the monuments and places of the Allied victory in World War II (Liberation Route Europe). One difference from the German case of the Romantic Road is that most of these routes are designated by the national Ministry of Transport, not voluntary agreements of local authorities. It is important, once more, to stress that there is not one agreed-upon concept of a Romantic road, but that we speak here of a label for tourism, which can entail various organizational features (central government, provincial government designated, or existing through inter-city/county cooperation), various main attractions (cultural vs natural, modern vs traditionalist, catering to national vs international tourists etc.), and also being of different length and scope and thereby having a very different impact (from a purely local impact

on tourism, to a national one, like the German Romantic road has, due to its international exposure).

Romantic roads and other scenic or thematic roads are a result of the age of mass individual tourism, since they require tourists to have a car and the leisure and money to drive along a route and often stay overnight. Therefore, it is no wonder that these routes first gained importance in relative affluent countries like post-war Germany and Japan. South Korea's tourism even after the long decades of economic miracle developed slowly and more in the form of mass tourism, due to long working weeks and short holidays. This changed after the Asian crisis, when regional tourism initiatives flourished as a way to revive rural areas, for example, through local festivals. From 2005, Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea, a German political foundation working for the peaceful development of the Korean Peninsula, partnered first with Goseong County and from 2006 with Gangwon province for the sustainable development of the inner-Korean border area. One of the partners of this project was Prof. Dr. Peter Jurczek, professor of economic geography at Chemnitz Technical University. He first proposed in 2007 in a special lecture at the Korean Research Institute for Human Settlements (KRIHS) the introduction of a "Romantic road" along the Korean East Coast in Gangwon province. While the focus was South Gangwon province,<sup>10</sup> the prospect of closer inter-Korean relations was at that time very high and explicitly part of the concept. In 2008, the governor of Gangwon province, Kim Jin-Sun, visited the partner region of Gangwon province, Upper Franconia in Bavaria, and also parts of the German Romantic Road. Soon afterwards, research about the possibilities of a Korean Romantic Road in Gangwon-do started in the regional development institute and regional administration.

The German Romantic Road as well as the Australian Great Ocean Road, on the South-eastern coast of Australia between the Victorian

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10 Peter Jurczek, *"Raumplanung und Tourismusentwicklung - das Konzept einer 'Romantischen Straße' am Ostmeer (Spatial planning and tourism development - the concept of a 'Romantic road' at the East Sea),"* (Korea Research Institute for Human Settlements, Seoul, 2007).

cities of Torquay and Allansford, listed as national heritage, were taken as benchmarks by the provincial government of Gangwon. Clearly, comparisons easily can border on arbitrariness. However, the reasons Gangwon province chose these two comparisons were the fact that the first German Romantic Road was very established and successful, and the Australian Great Ocean Road was comparable in terms of landscapes (oceanic road). Their main characteristics were compared to the planned East Coast Romantic Road of Korea.

**<Table 1>** Comparison of the Romantic Road of Germany, the Great Ocean Road of Australia, and the Korean Romantic Road

	German Romantic Road	Australian Great Ocean Road	Korean Romantic Road of Gangwon Province
Location	Inland area	Coast area	Coastal area of Korea in Gangwon province
Total Length	350 (413) km	240 km	240 km
Core Theme	Middle age's cultural heritages	Beautiful nature views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The theme of the romantic road, around the 7<sup>th</sup> national road, is the nature views</li> <li>• Maximizing the strong point of clean resources in Gangwon province such as mountains, the sea, lakes, and caves.</li> </ul>
Assistant Theme	Beautiful nature (e.g. Alps)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural resources [core]+history/culture/traditional life+leisure+sports+resources[assistant]</li> <li>• Embossed the variety, practical use as an axis of tour-spending, commercializing the touristic resources</li> </ul>
Touristic Marketing	Historical cultural resources	History, culture, nature, leisure and so on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving the satisfactory through effective collation of accommodation/food/experience/shopping</li> </ul>
Center	27 middle or small size cities	6 cities + 17 touristic cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Samcheok-Donghae-Gangneung-Yangyang-Seokcho-Goseong</li> </ul>
Transportation	CarTour busBicyclewalk	Cars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Road for driving focusing on a private car</li> <li>• Considering local buses/ bicycle/ walk</li> </ul>

	German Romantic Road	Australian Great Ocean Road	Korean Romantic Road of Gangwon Province
Type of Tourist	Domestic and foreign	Domestic and foreigners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main target group is domestic tourists, but marketing some part for foreigners in the future</li> <li>• Solving the problem of East coast tourism by revitalization of the romantic road focusing on domestic tourists</li> </ul>
Spending of Tourist	Souvenir,Cultural facility, Accommodation & food,Various touristic commodities	Leisure and sports,Boutique shopping, Accommodation & food,Various touristic commodities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a special touristic commodity which can promote tourist consumption</li> </ul>
Website	<a href="https://www.romantischestrasse.de/">https://www.romantischestrasse.de/</a>	<a href="https://www.australia.com/en/places/melbourne-and-surrounds/guide-to-the-great-ocean-road.html">https://www.australia.com/en/places/melbourne-and-surrounds/guide-to-the-great-ocean-road.html</a>	-

Source: Own compilation based on Gangwon Province spatial planning materials

Ultimately, according to the regional planners, the Korean Romantic Road, dubbed “*Nangmankado*” in Korean, should not only be a road with beautiful vistas, but a new brand which inspires tourists to spend on accommodation, food, shopping, cultural experience and so on. The route, although following the large national street no. 7, often takes detours, in particular along the coast, on smaller roads, like the Romantic Road in Germany does. Signboards along the length of the road and specific signboards in Korean, English, German, Japanese and Chinese guide the way. Gangwon province invested 80.6 bn. KRW (that time around 45 mil. Euro) in the Romantic Road for 3 years and celebrated its opening in July 2009. The Korean Romantic Road had a very important difference to the German model: it was implemented top-down, and while originally a joint effort for marketing of the new route was pledged, in the end there never was anything of this

happening after the initial funding from the province was used. The Romantic Road of Korea became one of a multitude of tourism initiatives in Gangwon province, and while there was mass tourism to the coast, including also more use of the coastal route with increasing incomes, better facilities and especially the boom of pensions everywhere, as a precondition for more individual tourism, there was never an explicit argument to use the “Romantic Road” though the road has every right to this title with its spectacular vistas.

And, the Northern dimension of the Romantic Road, as a way to prepare for more cross-border tourism, never materialized. Indeed, already in 2008, the Kumgangsan project was halted after a South Korean tourist was shot there. For ten years a stalemate over the fate of the Kumgangsan project was only interrupted for very occasional family reunions. In 2018, there was short-lived hope for a revival of the project, as President Moon had pledged, but sanctions had become so stringent in the meantime that no opening was possible without a change or stark violation of sanctions. Neither was the path the Moon administration wanted to go. Being frustrated with a lack of progress, North Korea threatened to remove all South Korean facilities in late 2019. At the same time, North Korea’s domestic tourism policy greatly increased in importance, and the Kumgangsan area became a center piece of this strategy. In light of this, a tourism project not related to the central government relations, but rather formulated and initiated by independent actors, i.e. provinces, counties, tour agencies and individual tourists, could still succeed, where central government policies failed.

#### **IV. Tourism Development in North Korea - From Marginal to Centerpiece**

For a long time, tourism in North Korea was mostly confined to “ideological tourism,” by the so-called “Juche study groups” which came to worship the heroes of Juche, Kim Il-Sung and later Kim Jong-

II.<sup>11</sup> The whole entrance area of the “Juche tower” in Pyongyang is plastered with commemorative plaques of such Juche study groups, which is financed for participants in poorer countries, often developing countries in Africa, by North Korea itself. With the slow rehabilitation of the economy and increased trade, tourism in North Korea developed throughout the 2000s, in particular with China. However, it remained a minuscule industry: at its peak, maybe around 5,000 Western tourists visited North Korea each year, and maybe between 100,000 and 150,000 Chinese tourists, many of them only visiting for a day.<sup>12</sup> Still, these figures were not unimportant for North Korea and resulted in a sizeable revenue.<sup>13</sup> And, the more other industries were cut off from international trade, the more important the money became which could be earned by tourism, one of the few non-sanctioned industries. Plans for mass tourism were made alongside with the increase of special economic zones. The Kumgangsan special tourism zone was revamped and redesigned and merged with the whole North Kangwon coastal area as the Wonsan-Mt. Kumgang International Tourist zone. Additionally, tourism zones were prepared in Mt. Paektu, where currently a large construction project is undergoing in Samjiyeon, and also along the Yalu (Amnok) river. Tourism invariably went through one of the official tourist agencies, most importantly, the Korea International Tourism Corporation.

By the mid-2000s, Western tourism was a kind of “adventure tourism” to a system and country unlike any other in the world. While in the time of the Cold War, the demand for such tourism was (directed mainly toward the S.U.) mainly by the Soviet Union, now it was

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11 Yukang Wang, Van Broeck, Anne Marie and Dominique Vanneste, “International tourism in North Korea: how, where and when does political ideology enter?,” *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2017), pp. 260-272.

12 In comparison, South Korea saw more than 17 million inbound visitors in 2015, and more than 15 million in 2018. Almost half of them came from China until 2016, when the dispute about THAAD led to a stark decrease in Chinese tourists in South Korea.

13 According to Yonhap News (2015), Yoon in-Joo of the Korean Maritime Institute estimated a revenue of between 30-43 million USD, half of that of Kaesong Industrial Complex.

concentrated on North Korea, the last remaining state with an abundance of socialist realism in rhetoric, architecture, and culture. This was catered to by a few specialized Western travel agencies, with Koryo Tours the most well-known one, and Young Pioneers, the agency which brought Otto Warmbier into the country, the student who later tragically lost his life in a North Korean prison, the second-most well-known, albeit mostly for this tragic incident. This kind of tourism for a long time even seemed to be resisting the cycles of better and worse relations of North Korea with the rest of the world. However, the case of Otto Warmbier dealt it a blow from which it has not yet fully recovered. Tours included tailor-made tours, for example, for railway or airplane enthusiasts, bicycle tourism, etc.<sup>14</sup> It was a crucial way to convey the self-image of North Korea and more than a few journalists were participating, sometimes in disguise, in these tours. They were, however, never intended to become mass tourism.

Mass tourism was rather the concept of tourism for South Koreans in Kumgangsan, where Hyundai Asan built several hotels and all in all almost two million South Koreans and foreigners visited from 1998 to 2008. The 530 km<sup>3</sup> large special tourism zone featured restaurants and other facilities, like a branch of the Pyongyang circus and a spa. For the land and operation rights alone, North Korea earned around 500 million USD. Tourism was thought to open up North Korea, since it involved frequent people-to-people contacts.<sup>15</sup> When in July 2008 a South Korean 53-year-old tourist, Wang-ja Park, was shot twice while climbing over a fence, South Korea's demand of a joint inquiry was denied. By that time, inter-Korean relations had soured already, with the coming to power of President Lee Myung-Bak, who was much more skeptical of the

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14 If the right amount of money was paid, almost everything seemed possible: tailor-made tours even could include an extravaganza by participants of “Gumball 3000,” an outlawed motor car race for ultra-rich kids in Pyongyang in 2008, which was received by the Vice Culture Minister of the country, or a tour by Slovenian rock band Laibach, which plays with totalitarian symbolism and clearly mocked its counterparts in the North during a concert in 2017; see New York Times (2018).

15 Samuel Seongseop Kim, Bruce Prideaux and Jillian Prideaux, “Using tourism to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 34 (2007), pp. 291-309.

Sunshine policy than his predecessor and had put all inter-Korean agreements on review. Afterwards, numerous negotiations failed to revive the agreement. In 2018, President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim Jong-Un agreed to restart the project, but a year later, North Korea ordered the destruction of all South Korean buildings and planned to reopen the resort on its own. In the case of the Kumgang tourism project, large cash payments to the North as well as constant tensions due to the direct contact of North and South Koreans in the sensitive military border area led to frequent conflicts, growing mutual distrust and finally the breakdown of the project.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, tourism with China was also intended from the beginning to be mass tourism, with a number of shorter tours, including one-day tours, and cheaper accommodation.<sup>17</sup> In Pyongyang, in 2019, new tourism agencies like “Pyongyang Kwankwangsang” operated beside the more established agencies, mostly catering to Chinese, and sometimes Vietnamese tourists. In the busiest trading port of China and North Korea, Sinuiju opposite Dandong at the Yalu river, one day tours are possible. Chinese tourists have lower quality expectations regarding accommodation than Western tourists, and also spend less money on average. For Chinese tourist groups, hotel costs in Rason are as low as 100 RMB (less than 15 USD) per night, due to pressure from Chinese tourism agencies and operators. Logistically, culturally and politically, it would be easiest to extend Chinese tourism. But even with Chinese tourists, larger groups bring the potential of more incidents like putting unwanted photos or video clips on social media. In this sense, tourism development between North Korea and the rest of the world is always in a state of tension: while on the one hand North Korea wants to extend tourism, on the other hand too much of an extension can easily result in disasters. This was the case of Kumgangsan tourism, and this was also

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16 South Korea under the presidency of Moon Jae-in obviously wanted to restart the project as a first flagship inter-Korean agreement; see JoongAng Daily (2019); however, it remains elusive in the current situation (Kim 2019).

17 Jie Yang, Liyan Han, Guangyu Ren, “China-to-North Korea Tourism: A Leisure Business on a Tense Peninsula,” *North Korean Review*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2014), pp. 57-70.

the case of Western adventure tourism, when Otto Warmbier became a prisoner of North Korea, and ultimately died.

North Korea did a lot in the reign of Kim Jong-Un to increase tourism.<sup>18</sup> Starting with the Mashikryong ski resort project, Kim Jong-Un initiated and personally oversaw several large-scale projects, including the rehabilitation of Samjiyeon at the highest mountain in Korea, Paektusan, the project of a spa resort in Yangdok, the creation of attractions in Pyongyang, and the large-scale tourism area in Kalma beach in Wonsan. Indeed, Yi et al. (2017)<sup>19</sup> speak of a "new paradigm of tourism." Ironically, while increased sanctions make tourism more and more attractive as one of the few non-sanctioned areas, it also became less and less feasible. While a lot of resources and efforts went into these projects, it is important to see that internal and external limitations on mass tourism could not be lifted. Mashikryong ski resort, for example, was opened in early 2014, but never had a single "successful" season: twice the country was closed due to pandemics, several years the geo-political situation was very tense, countries like the U.S. started to restrict travel to the North. To run such a large resort successfully, there should be thousands of visitors every day. In fact, there were mainly a few thousand every season – too few to make such a project pay off in economic terms. Even if visitors, most likely from China, would line up in travel agencies to go to the resort, there would be no way the North Korean government could bring them there. With one or a maximum of two airplanes a day and one train a day, capacities to bring in international tourists are extremely limited. Most importantly, the amount of staff needed to care for these foreigners, including supervising them, would be far too much for the North Korean authorities. There

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18 One might speculate that the upbringing of Kim Jong-Un in Switzerland, a country famous as an Alps destination, deeply influenced him in his view of the importance of tourism. Reportedly, he himself oversaw tourism projects like the Mashikryong ski area (more evidence that this was his likely role model); Dean J. Oullette, "The Tourism of North Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era: Propaganda, Profitmaking, and Possibilities for Engagement," *Pacific Focus*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2016), pp. 421-451.

19 Sangchoul Yi, Chang-mo Ma, InJoo Yoon, "A new paradigm for tourism development in North Korea" (paper presented at Advancing Tourism Research Globally 2017 international conference, Quebec City, Canada, June 20-22, 2017)

simply would not be enough loyal guides well-versed enough in foreign languages to welcome every visitor. This last aspect at least would not be necessary for South Korean tourists. However, additional precautions would be necessary to prevent them from understanding too much of what they see and what is going on. Not surprisingly, the North Korean position is very ambiguous, with some open invitations to individual South Korean tourists, and South Korean group activities in the North. In the last months of 2019, it also became clear that while tourism is a priority area, North Korea seems to have no interest in returning to its uneasy partnership with Hyundai Asan and the South Korean government, but at most only in individual South Korean tourists.

What are the reasons for the North Korean shift of attention to tourism projects? Certainly, the fact that tourism is one of the few sectors exempt from sanctions is a great plus in the eyes of North Korean leadership. Also, tourism development is linked to the image of modernization under Kim Jong-Un, with several of his major prestige projects (Mashikryong Ski resort, Kalma beach, Samjiyeon redevelopment, and Yodok hot spring) related to tourism. Finally, in clearly confined areas, tourism seems to be possible without too much interaction with the public of North Korea. This was the case with Kumgangsán tourism resort, and in planning, is the case for the Kalma beach resort. It is not a trivial question for North Korea, but of utmost importance: if a project is intrusive (like Kaesong Industrial Complex with the direct interaction of South Korean technology and people with the North is to some extent), or not (as for example Kalma beach is designed).

## **V. Towards the Romantic road of Gangwon (Kangwon) Province**

The project should be meaningful, but non-pivotal (i.e. not so crucial that a failure of one project would symbolize the failure of rapprochement itself, like it was in the case with the symbolic destruction of the inter-Korean exchange office in Kaesong in June 2020). It should be initiated at the local and/or provincial level and include

independent business and individual actors (tourists). These need to be empowered to make individual decisions, which are - beside a general legal framework - not subject to case-by-case review by a central government body. An extension of the Romantic road in Gangwon province to the Northern part of the province would be such a project. First, such a project should start explicitly as a provincial project, i.e. not a project proposed by the central government. Naturally, in the preparation for such a project, consultation with the central government is inevitable, but design, finances, and proponents should be all clearly and visibly Gangwon people, addressing their fellow countrymen across the border. Here, we talk about the way the project should be presented. Ultimately, a re-financing of the project through the Korean Unification Fund is likely, and ultimately, it is absolutely certain that the North Korean response would be given not by anyone local, but follow a central decision – but it is nevertheless important that such a project should be initiated and implemented on the regional level. As for the addressee in North Korea, it would be advisable to try to connect not with the regional North Kangwon people’s committee, though this is the direct counterpart of the South Gangwon provincial government, but rather with the Committee responsible for the Wonsan-Kumgangsan tourism zone, which has a greater political leeway.

Second, the project proposal could focus on cooperation for developing tourism projects for the Kumgangsan-Wonsan tourism zone, without making it a cross-border project from the beginning. Cross-border projects properly speaking, where North and South Koreans would work together on both sides of the border, are extremely unlikely. Though there might be a time when selected North Korean officials could be invited to travel the South Gangwon Romantic Road to get an idea about tourism development in the South, this will in all probability not be the case in the beginning of the project. Rather, a focus should be on the development of a North Korean tourism road project, along the East Coast, without necessarily a direct reference to linking the South and North Korean road, which would have much bigger policy implications. The two roads could rather develop “in tandem,” without

being linked in the beginning. Later on, a joint designation might be possible. Some examples show that this is not entirely impossible – for example, the joint designation of “*ssireum*” (Korean wrestling) as world cultural heritage, or cooperation, though not yet finally crowned with success, with China and South Korea on designated Yellow Sea tidal flat areas as world natural heritage.

Third, how should the initial contact be made? Time and again, it was shown that “announcement diplomacy,” where South Korea presents big plans in the local media, is the worst way to go forward. Instead, a quieter approach is necessary. For example, a tour of North Korean officials along the German Romantic Road, co-organized with a German partner, could lead to the establishment of relevant contacts, either directly in the zone, or with one of the North Korean tourism organizations, and could then lead to a first meeting of both sides. Such an indirect, trilateral approach to cooperation is much more promising. An initial proposal from the South Gangwon side could focus on the possibility to send visitors to North Kangwon, through the road rather than by airplane. Such an approach would not need to be focusing on Kumgangsan. On the one hand Kumgangsan is logistically the most easy and logical starting point for South Korean tourism to the North. On the other hand, however, focusing on Kumgangsan would invariably bring the question of the involvement and the assets of Hyundai Asan there, and it would immediately catapult any decision to the highest political level. Instead, a focus on other tourism areas in North Kangwon, like Kalma beach after its opening or Mashikryong Ski resort, to name a “summer” and “winter” alternative, could avoid this politicization. Tourism then could happen not as truly individual tourism by individual cars, which North Korea in all likelihood would not accept, but at least as tourism by competing bus companies, without another strong chaebol monopoly partner. An even “softer” approach could be the proposal for joint programs on eco-tourism, like bird watching tourism in the migration period of spring or autumn, for small selected groups, as a kind of trial for a later expansion of tourism. All these proposals could work for promotion of tourism in North Kangwon alone, and later could be integrated into a joint tourism project.

Already the development of two separate, but geographically close tourism roads could have a symbolic meaning – as for example, the current designation of the “Asian Highway No 1,” which also is not truly connected, but still a symbolic designation.

**<Figure 2> The Korean Romantic Road**



Source: Own compilation using Google Maps

Quite naturally, existing North Korean tourism attractions in the area would be integrated into this “Romantic Road of Kangwon,” starting with Haekumgang and Samil-po, to the beach areas of Wonsan and beyond. Already today, North Korea tries to create advertisement for these areas, like in the Tripadvisor or Google Travel pages. The area is already, as seen in the newest North Korean tourism maps, of great touristic importance. But, a comprehensive advertisement could enhance the value of the area.

Under current international conditions, in particular sanctions, any form of tourism promotion would have to be an encouragement of individual tourism by South Koreans rather than group tours organized

in the old style of Hyundai Asan to a selected resort. While it is not clear if North Korea would agree to such tourism in the short run, definitely the plans for the Kalma beach resort, for example, are plans for South Korean tourists. Interestingly, while there is a certain acknowledgement of the potential benefits of tourism for inter-Korean relations, there have been no steps taken by the South Korean government to change the laws governing inter-Korean relations, in particular the National Security Law, to allow for individual tourism to the North. This does not inspire North Korea a lot in pushing for tourism cooperation. One way would be the change of the regulations governing contacts with North Koreans from a positive list to a negative list, in which just certain forms of contacts (like espionage) are outlawed, and everything else is possible. Another issue which would have to be discussed on the central government level would be the opening of the border for tourists. For example, the transportation of tourists by airplane to Kalma airport would be feasible.

In particular, a direct way through the border, as in previous times with Kumgangsán tourism, would be an important step for a more peaceful border area and for more inter-Korean contacts. A second step then could be the offer to jointly improve the road, which for now is still a dirt track (as are most of the roads south of Wonsán), by paving it and by creating signs for the touristic road, the "Romantic road of Kangwondo." Existing resort areas, like near Sijeungho, could be rehabilitated to cater to more demanding South Korean tourists. Similar to the development of Kumgangsán resort, a lot of different options were possible: model pension villages, seafood restaurants, joint renovation of temple areas, together with Buddhist organizations, etc. All of this, however, would not be possible under the current sanctions regime. Therefore, another political track of negotiating either exemptions on a regional rather than topical basis, or a solution to the nuclear standoff, would be necessary. But it would be a wrong attitude, as it is taken often by South Korean government organizations, simply to defer plans until after sanctions are lifted. A good program would rather show, through small and feasible steps, that sanctions exemptions or

relief would indeed result in bigger change. And it would signal, in conjunction with political initiatives at the center for exemptions or change of sanctions, that South Korean initiatives are serious, not merely window dressing.

As a last step it (the road) could bring closer official ties between the two parts of Gangwon: Meetings on the working level, on issues like tourism, transportation, border issues and so on. Ultimately, a system of sister cities could develop: Gangneung-Wonsan, Goseong-Kosong, etc. The romantic road could then be part of a network of institutions slowly changing the nature of the DMZ on the way toward unification.<sup>20</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion: Decentralized Unification Policy as an Additional Iron in the Fire**

Regionalization will not be a remedy for all the problems of inter-Korean relations. But it can be a reasonable and meaningful addition to current approaches. The main international and national problems, i.e. the nuclear crisis, the sanctions standoff, the inter-Korean tensions due to systemic competition cannot be resolved by regionalization or localization. But both regional and local initiatives could offer additional ways to approach North Korea. And, a lot of initiatives planned at the local and regional level, which have never made it until now to national level negotiations, would fit well within such a policy. In the case of Gangwon province, localization could, for example, include two more projects to be pitched to the North Korean side: in the realm of sports diplomacy, the long-existing idea of a “peace Marathon” from the old “summerhouse of Kim Il-Sung” at Hwajinpo lake in Goseong county, a former missionary's home that later belonged to the North Korean

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20 Peter Jurczek, “Konzeptionelle Überlegungen zur Entwicklung und Gestaltung der Demilitarisierten Zone (DMZ) im Falle eines vereinigten Korea (Conceptual considerations of the development and design of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in the case of a unified Korea),” *Kommunal- und regionalwissenschaftliche Arbeiten online*, no. 19 (2009), pp. 1-21.

leader after the Korean war, could be recycled and fit into the proposed regional or local cooperation. And in the field of environmental cooperation, cooperation in nature protection for seabirds along the coast of Goseong/Kosong could be strengthened by a joint application for the designation of the area as an IBA according to the terminology of Birdlife International.<sup>21</sup>

While such initiatives are basically independent from the idea of the Romantic road of Kangwon proposed above, there is a connection: given the isolation of North Korea, it is much more difficult to even propose projects North Korea is interested in if a framework for such a work is not pre-existing, like a meeting of officials, etc. Only to postulate a certain idea in the South Korean media will not lead to its realization; on the contrary, it often is already the death blow for any project.

For a unification policy on the central level, regionalization or localization would not mean to idly wait until something emerges on the regional or local level. On the contrary, important preconditions have to be nationwide: a true decentralization of unification policy would have to vest decision power away from the unification ministry into provinces and cities. Currently, all projects need central approval, with the exception of certain cities along the border which have a greater leeway.<sup>22</sup> While giving up decision power in favor of regions and local communities is important, a further step would be the modernization of the National Security Law. This touches upon one of the biggest taboos in contemporary South Korean history. Admittedly, without a solid Parliamentary majority supporting the issue it could not be done. However, it is surprising, how often Korean politicians of different

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21 IBAs are places of international significance for the conservation of birds and other biodiversity, recognized world-wide as practical tools for conservation, distinct areas amenable to practical conservation action, identified using robust, standardized criteria, and sites that together form part of a wider integrated approach to the conservation and sustainable use of the natural environment (see Birdlife International 2020). According to joint research by Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea and Birds Korea, both parts of Goseong, North and South, fit these criteria (Moores et al. 2018).

22 To prevent abuse, still a full documentation of such transfers could be required.

parties, from left to right, invoke the example of German unification, and how rarely they see that among the differing preconditions were some which cannot be influenced by South Korea, like the different geo-political environment, but some, which can be influenced, like the much more relaxed German attitude on German-German meetings and cooperation in the civilian realm, from family meetings to academic cooperation and even business cooperation. This would be the change from a positive list of approved contacts to a negative list, allowing all contacts between North and South as long as they are not damaging South Korea's legitimate security interests.

Also, there would be a necessary change to sanctions rules. Currently, it looks very unlikely that the nuclear standoff will be resolved anytime soon. As a beginning, therefore, a kind of *de minimis* rule, which allows projects lower than a certain threshold, could be politically pushed by the central government. This would allow small-scale projects - the maximum size of which would have to be debated within the UN system, but could maybe be as small as 10,000 or 20,000 USD - to take place regardless of sanctions, allowing money to be moved for such projects and items purchased, e.g. for small-scale energy or water projects, tourism support, etc.<sup>23</sup> While not changing geo-political pressure, it could allow regional or local projects to take off. And this might be exactly the kind of trust-building activity now missing, which could then create a greater push also for ever-bigger projects on the national level.

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23 Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, p. 171.

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