



DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2021-23-2-225-232

Research article / Научная статья

Effects of a Threat and Alliance on International Cooperation: Comparison of Inter-Korean and Turkish-Armenian Railway Projects

Yongsung Cho

Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation

Abstract. The article examines restricting factors in international cooperation, drawing a comparative analysis of two cases on cross-border infrastructure projects: the Gyeongui railway line that connects North and South Korea and the Kars–Gyumri–Tbilisi railway line that links Turkey and Armenia. In both cases, states involved strive for the normalization of diplomatic relations and border openness as well as potential economic opportunities and national security. Nevertheless, neither Seoul and Pyongyang nor Ankara and Yerevan succeeded in building a sustainable cooperation framework. While the outcome is the same, independent variables in both cases are different. Firstly, two Koreas have been in a military confrontation for seven decades, whereas Turkey and Armenia never engaged in a direct conflict. Secondly, the configuration of alliances (South Korea and the United States and Turkey and Azerbaijan) weakens the decision-making on the troublesome infrastructure projects. Consequently, alliances are identified as one of the key factors that determine the mode of international cooperation.

Keywords: Cooperation, Railway, Alliance, Inter-Korean relations, Turkey, Armenia

For citation: Cho, Y. (2021). Effects of a threat and alliance on international cooperation: Comparison of Inter-Korean and Turkish-Armenian railway projects. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, 23(2), 225–232. (In Russian). DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2021-23-2-225-232

Угрозы и альянсы в международном сотрудничестве: сравнение межкорейского и турецко-армянского железнодорожных проектов

Енсон Чо

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,
Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация

Аннотация. В статье исследуются факторы, ограничивающие межрегиональное сотрудничество, путем сравнительного анализа двух кейсов: Транскорейской магистрали и участка железной дороги Карс–Гюмри, соединяющего Турцию и Армению. Нормализация дипломатических отношений и открытие границ необходимы для участников инфраструктурных

© Cho Y., 2021



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

проектов, посредством которых государства обеспечивают национальную безопасность и экономическое развитие. Кроме того, как зависимая переменная, вопросы сотрудничества не продвинулись ни в отношениях Сеула–Пхеньяна, ни Анкары–Еревана соответственно. Однако в обоих случаях наблюдается различие независимых переменных: 1) две Кореи непосредственно столкнулись с военным противостоянием в течение 70 лет, но вероятность военного столкновения между Турцией и Арменией относительно менее существенна, чем у Азербайджана и Армении; 2) альянс между двумя странами (Южной Кореи–США и Турции–Азербайджана соответственно) может ослаблять принятие решений по проектам сотрудничества. Следовательно, альянс определяется как фактор, который может повлиять на динамику международного сотрудничества. Выделены две значительные независимые переменные: альянсы и конфликты. Автор приходит к выводу, что в обоих случаях именно альянсы, которые Сеул–Пхеньян и Анкара–Ереван заключают между собой, являются причиной стагнации их инфраструктурных проектов.

Ключевые слова: сотрудничество, магистраль, альянс, межкорейские отношения, Турция, Армения

Для цитирования: *Cho Y. Effects of a threat and alliance on international cooperation: Comparison of Inter-Korean and Turkish-Armenian railway projects // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Политология. 2021. Т. 23. № 2. С. 225–232. DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2021-23-2-225-232*

Introduction

International infrastructure projects often symbolize cooperation among states. Once a new route is opened, the participants intensify their exchanges, creating stable and comprehensive cooperation systems around the infrastructure. As a part of this process, states tend to collaborate and coordinate their policies by bargaining and negotiations. If participants expect to benefit from projects and a high level of interconnectedness with their neighbors, they also choose to avoid conflicts or wars by mediating ongoing or potential disputes. Given that the interdependence in economic issues would affect other political issues such as security, a joint infrastructure project could inspire hardened opponents to seek a rapprochement.

The process of establishing a new transportation corridor is best understood through the prism of liberal institutionalism theories. As the European Union originated from a consensus of interdependence on coal and steel, expected mutual benefits from a shared transportation infrastructure could alleviate a conflict among states to some extent. However, the transportation infrastructure also could be regarded as an instrument for obtaining and increasing power, as Mackinder identified the railway as a particularly important force of change [Knutsen 2014:837]. A benefit from managing the infrastructure affects the economy, the basis for survival, and strengthening national power [Viner 1948:10]. Moreover, if the interdependence is asymmetric, it could increase security concerns. Nevertheless, efforts to deepen cooperation and willingness to accept the interdependence among the main actors and their allies are also requisite for resolving security conflicts. Yet, in a competitive framework, states often are reluctant to exchange essential information for cooperation to obtain strategic leverage, forcing themselves into a “prisoner’s dilemma.”

Such a “prisoner’s dilemma” is identified in both Northeastern Asia and South Caucasus. Despite alleviating tensions by normalizing diplomacy and conceiving joint projects, the so-called “high politic” military security, sovereignty, and territorial issues have led the actors and their allies to admit the possibility of cooperation. For example, North Korea has been maintaining its status in the international arena by fueling disputes with South Korea since the ceasefire agreement of 1953. Meanwhile, Armenia *de facto* established control over Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of Azerbaijan SSR after the ceasefire of 1994, but eventually lost the territories after the defeat in the Second Karabakh war in 2020.

Consequently, the normalization and suspension of the joint projects depend on the rapid changes in the security complex environment of Northeastern Asia and South Caucasus. On the Korean peninsula, South Korean railway infrastructure has been isolated like an “island,” being disconnected from the main logistic routes since the division of Korea in 1948. Similarly, the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railway connecting Turkey and Armenia has been suspended since their frozen relations due to the first Nagorno-Karabakh war [Davtyan 2017:93–94]. Even if the regional conflict continues without any tangible results, Armenian and Turkish leaders signed the Zürich Protocol in 2009, which stipulates normalizing diplomatic exchanges, opening borders, and restoring the cross-border infrastructure, including the halted route.

The article compares factors leading to a stalemate in the development of the two infrastructure projects. Northeast Asia and Southern Caucasus cases have similar dependent variables: the deadlock of railway projects, and alliances based on shared common security concerns. Therefore, the Turkish-Armenian case could be compared with the inter-Korean case, as Ankara and Yerevan considered border opening and infrastructure restoration as a way to normalize relations. The analysis consists of two sections. Firstly, relations among regional counterparts will be examined. Secondly, the focus shifts on relations between the key actors and their allies. The final section presents conclusions.

Theoretical basis and methodology

Nation-states promote security through peaceful cooperation among other states by establishing international institutions and seeking economic development. However, the nature of international politics is to compete and dispute with other countries to guarantee their security and strengthen influence over others. Despite international institutions, states bolster military force based upon economic power and ally with other countries against a potential threat.

First, the actors’ relations could be explained by Walt’s balance of threat theory. The concept captures four main factors that contribute to the regional counterparts’ perceptions of others as a threat: aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions [Walt 1987]. According to Walt, such a threat leads an actor to ally with other powers to resolve its security concerns.

This theory plausibly explains main actors' actions in both regions as location (geographical proximity), South Korea and Azerbaijan's economy (aggregate power), offensive capabilities (North Korean nuclear weapon) and offensive intentions (North Korean unification plan by war and engagement over Karabakh) agree with Walt's definition of threat. In the line with the theory, regional actors formed alliances: South Korea and the United States, North Korea and China, Turkey and Azerbaijan, and Russia and Armenia.

International institutions (e.g., the United Nations) also function as major actors in the region. As Keohane argues, interests between countries could change within international institutions, the international regime also could solve problems like states and their alliance [Keohane 1984]. However, international relations are an essentially anarchic system and have a hierarchical nature. The regional leaders and great powers maintain the order and tend to pursue "an open order that is favorable for them" [Baik 2003:18]. In such settings, alliance-building also plays a significant role. Even the members of the "Permanent Five" in the UN Security Council reflect the traditional ideological confrontation. Therefore, regardless of the regime a threat and alliance would affect the cooperation among the countries in dispute.

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, the analysis follows the logic of the most different systems model and is based on cross-tabulation [Przeworski 1970]. First, it is assumed that the properties of each case do not affect the variance mode of the dependent variable. Then, from the population of comparative cases, cases with similar existence patterns of dependent variables are tracked according to the logic of the method of agreement, and then samples are randomly selected from among them [Kim 1995]. The dependent variable in this study is the same "stalemate in railroad cooperation," and the independent variables in the two cases were assumed to be different cases.

Analysis of the railway project cases: Relations between regional counterparts

The area where the inter-Korean railroads were disconnected became a demilitarized zone after the ceasefire agreement in 1953 and remained in its abandoned for more than 70 years. Similarly, the Turkish-Armenian border is closed by the Turkish government due to the war with Azerbaijan and the dispute over the Armenian genocide issue. As a result, South Korea became isolated in terms of ground transport routes like an island, and Armenia became a landlocked country with no exits other than Georgia and Iran.

Therefore, actors in the two regions identified similar geopolitical circumstances, and Seoul expected to have access to Trans-Siberian Railway, and Yerevan, as a part of the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), expected to connect to the route to Tbilisi. In the case of inter-Korean railroads, the Gyeongui Line and the North Korean section of the Donghae Line (Gamho-Jejin station) restoration was complete after the June 15th joint declaration in 2000, and the trial operation of the train on the new rails ended in 2007. Yet the South Korean

section of the Donghae line is still under construction. In 2014, the restoration of the facility to the Turkish border was complete, and the final sign of the government was coming up¹.

Facility restoration projects have been completed in both regions, but no infrastructure is operated yet. Both major actors in the regions have not resolved diplomatic issues including security tension, yet there are differences: First, in the case of two Koreas, behind the mood of reconciliation, such as the railway connection, construction of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and the Tour program to Mt. Kumgang, there have been security conflicts such as military clashes and nuclear tests; naval engagement in the region of the Northern Limit Line on the Yellow sea (2001 ~ 2002); the sinking of the corvette ROKS Cheonan (2010); and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (2011). Accordingly, in response to threats, tighter control over the situation and suspicion on Pyongyang's gestures of Seoul was inevitable.

In the case of Turkey and Armenia, on the other hand, the environment is relatively open compared to the two Koreas. Even though the border was closed, Armenian citizens can obtain a Turkish visa in Tbilisi. Ankara and Yerevan agreed on the normalization of diplomatic relations by correspondence between Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Armenian President Kocharyan in 2005. In 2008, Turkish President Gül watched the Turkish-Armenian football match held in Yerevan with Armenian President Sargsyan [Grigoryan, Khachatryan, Ter-Matevosyan 2018]. However, Ankara has adhered that resolving the Karabakh issue is the prerequisite of diplomatic normalization. But Yerevan has not ratified the Zurich Protocol and scraped it in March 2018, stating “hopes for new engagement”². Thus, unlike the inter-Korean case, despite the failure of “football diplomacy,” the human and material exchange is still valid between Turkey and Armenia. Thus, the degree of direct security threat is relatively low.

Relations among regional actors and their external allies

Turkish-Armenian relations are strongly affected by Ankara's relations with Azerbaijan, who is hostile to Armenia. Azerbaijan provides resources and serves as a transportation hub, crucial for Turkish economy. Turkish-Azerbaijani political and economic ties are so stable that the leaders of the two countries compare them to a “brotherhood”. That is why the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia triggered a dispute over gas supplies between Turkey and Azerbaijan in 2009. Thus, it is implied that the interdependence between Turkey and Azerbaijan is so

¹ Railway section from Gyumri to Turkish border ready for operation. ARKA News Agency. Retrieved September 8, 2020, from http://arka.am/en/news/politics/railway_section_from_gyumri_to_turkish_border_ready_for_operation/

² Abrahamyan, E. Armenia annuls Zurich protocols with Turkey, but hopes for new engagement. Retrieved March 23, 2020, from <http://www.neweasternpolitics.com/armenia-annuls-zurich-protocols-with-turkey-but-hopes-for-new-engagement-by-eduard-abrahamyan/>

substantial that the foreign policy of both states are determined by reciprocity and cultural similarity³.

Moreover, Azerbaijan has not joined the CSTO, and Turkey, a NATO member state, prefer to resolve the Karabakh issue as individual states tied by the alliance, whereas Russia and Armenia, the counterpart affiliated in the Karabakh problem, solve problems in the way of the institutions such as CSTO and the OSCE Minsk Group as well as bilateral alliances. To sum up, it suggests that Ankara-Baku relations display an alliance in a classical realist context. Turkey would be “entrapped” in a tangible or potential conflict of the region by Azerbaijan’s intention.

Of course, inter-Korean relations, Pyongyang-Washington relations, and the UN Security Council Factor are important for resolving Northeast Asian security issues [Suh, Lee 2018]. However, the ROK-the U.S. alliance is a significant factor. It affects not only inter-Korean relations but also resolution determined by the international regime. The sanctions were adopted 11 times due to North Korea’s nuclear missile test, starting with No. 1695 in 2006 and the latest No. 2397 in 2017. Of these, sanctions No. 2270 in 2016, that included severe restrictions on banking transactions, are evaluated as the strongest determination⁴.

In December 2019, the US State Department dismissed a resolution requesting an exemption from sanctions on the Trans-Korean railway project by China and Russia and road projects, stating it as “premature.” It would be relevant to UN Security Council Resolution No. 2375 adopted in September 2017. According to the resolution, all joint ventures with North Korea have been prohibited. However, there is also an exception that if the SOC does not generate profits, it could be promoted with the approval of the Security Council⁵. Afterward, Cheongwadae mentioned the idea of activation of inter-Korean railroad projects and joint prevention of Covid-19 epidemics with Pyongyang on April 28, 2020, yet the U.S. State Department expressed concern on Seoul’s intention, stating that denuclearization progress is a prerequisite of supporting inter-Korean cooperation⁶.

Hence, both infrastructure issues are determined by the interests of their allies. Particularly, in the inter-Korean issue the determination of international institutions – the Security Council resolutions – is a *de facto* reflection of Washington’s intentions. Inter-Korean and Turkish-Armenian railroads are identified as “a threat” to allies’ interests. From this point, attempts to normalize

³ Azerbaijan Criticizes Turkey Over Gas Prices, To Seek New Routes. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from https://www.rferl.org/a/Azerbaijan_Criticizes_Turkey_Over_Gas_Prices_To_Seek_New_Routes/1853890.html

⁴ U.N. Security Council unanimously adopts harshest-ever sanctions on North Korea. Yonhap News Agency. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20160302010552315>

⁵ China, Russia propose lifting sanctions on North Korea including Trans-Korean railway project YTN. Retrieved September 15, 2020, from https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0104_201912171458012552 (In Korean).

⁶ Gov’t to resume Construction of Cross-border railroads. The Chosun Ilbo. Retrieved September 15, 2020, from http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/04/21/2020042102438.html

relations through cooperation between hostile counterparts would be undermined by their allies.

Table 1

Comparative analysis model: Summary of the case studies

TYPE	VARIABLES		SOUTH AND NORTH KOREA	TURKEY AND ARMENIA
Independent variables	Threat perceptions	Type of threat	Direct (<i>de jure</i> mutual government disapproval)	Indirect (mutual recognition of sovereignty)
		Non-governmental interaction	Restricted (almost prohibited)	Free
	External relations	Relations characteristics	Realist Check and Balances	Realist Check and Balances
		System's weight of Role	institution <- alliance	institution <- alliance
Dependent variables	Slow progress in the infrastructure cooperation			

Source: made by author.

Conclusion

As in the Table 1, in sum, the two Koreas view each other as direct threats and partners. Both governments *de jure* still do not recognize each other, and thus non-governmental exchanges are restricted or prohibited by the national laws. However, neither Seoul nor Pyongyang completely abandon the cooperation rhetoric, recognizing that a rapprochement will improve their national image and bring approval ratings through economic benefits in a domestic political context. On the other hand, Turkey recognized the sovereignty of Armenia, and exchanges between the two countries are diverse and develop actively. However, official diplomatic efforts had a limited impact, because political elites on both side use troublesome legacies of the Armenian genocide and the conflict over Karabakh to gain popular political support and boost their ratings rather. Such politics is more popular than the issue of opening borders, including the Kars-Gyumri railway.

At the same time, the dynamics of conflict and cooperation between South and North Korea as well as between Armenia and Turkey are inevitably affected by their external alliances. In the case of Northeast Asia, South Korea's alliance with the United States plays a decisive role. North Korea's negotiations with the United States and the resolution of the UN Security Council on North Korea are also significant. However, Seoul has withheld its final decision on cooperation with Pyongyang, accounting for the Seoul-Washington alliance. The regimes such as the OSCE Minsk Group also take part in solving problems in the South Caucasus region, yet their input is relatively insignificant in comparison to bilateral and multilateral regional alliances of the individual actors. The Turkish-Armenian

dispute could be defined as an “indirect threat”, yet Turkey would be affiliated with and involved in the Azerbaijan-Armenian clash because of its close ties with Azerbaijan.

Considering these diverse independent variables, what factor caused the similar outcome? As the analysis demonstrates, “external relations” (see Table 1) determine dependent variables, as actors in both cases fundamentally pursue their interests through the principle of checks and balances. Even in the face of tangible or potential military clashes, the increased interdependence will bring economic growth and lead to the decline of security threat. However, all parties involved as well as their allies are reluctant to choose cooperation because such a choice will undermine the predictable benefits of the existing status quo. Ironically, an alliance built for guaranteeing national security would deter cooperation for peace among nation-states. Parties and allies are not free from the nature of international politics, where actors suspect even allies to survive.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 01.02.2021

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 12.02.2021

References

- Baik, Chang-Jae. (2003). Hegemony and international political economic order: A critical evaluation of hegemonic stability theory. *Review of International and Area Studies*, 12(1), 1–20 (In Korean).
- Davtyan, V. (2017). Transport and logistic situation in the South Caucasus: Railway wars. *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, 61(7), 93–100. DOI: 10.20542/0131-2227-2017-61-7-93-100
- Grigoryan, A., Khachatryan, K., & Ter-Matevosyan, V. (2018). Armenia-Turkey border opening: What determines the attitude of Armenians? *Caucasus Survey*, 7(1), 25–43. DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2018.1499298
- Keohane, R. (1984). *After hegemony*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kim, Ung Jin. (1995). Methodology: Research strategies and design in comparative political inquiry. *Cross-Cultural Studies*, 2, 89–116 (In Korean).
- Knutsen, T. J. (2014). Halford J. Mackinder, geopolitics, and the Heartland thesis. *The International History Review*, 36(5), 835–857. DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2014.941904
- Przeworski, A. (1970). *The logic of comparative social inquiry*. NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- Suh Bo-Hyuk, Lee Moo Chul. (2018). Status of sanctions against North Korea and prospects for mitigation. *KINU Policy Study Series*, 18(3). (In Korean).
- Viner, J. (1948). Power versus plenty as objectives of foreign policy in the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries. *World Politics*, 1(1), 1–29. DOI: 0.2307/2009156
- Walt, S. (1987). *The Origins of Alliance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

About the author:

Yongsung Cho – Postgraduate of Faculty of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University, Russia (e-mail: mirinae2929@gmail.com) (ORCID: 0000-0003-4032-9727).

Сведения об авторе:

Енсон Чо – аспирант факультета международных отношений Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета (e-mail: mirinae2929@gmail.com) (ORCID: 0000-0003-4032-9727).