

Focus on North Korea

Introduction

On 16 – 17 November 2012, the New Zealand Asia Institute at the University of Auckland hosted an international conference of scholars from North America, Korea, Australia and New Zealand to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between New Zealand and the Republic of Korea. Titled “New Zealand, Korea and Asia-Pacific: From Distance to Closeness” and supported by the ROK Embassy in Wellington, the Korea Foundation and NZAI, the purpose of the conference was to examine the diminishing distance and increasing mutual interests between the two nations since the end of World War Two, a time when the Korean peninsula became divided into two ideologically opposed states in a changed international environment and New Zealand was beginning to reach out to non-European cultures and societies in its Pacific neighbourhood.

When in 1950 the Cold War erupted on the Korean peninsula in a bitter war both civil and international, New Zealand was one of the sixteen nations that joined the UN forces that fought alongside the South Korean army against the North and its allies.

So long as the Korean peninsula remains divided into two enemy states, New Zealand’s greatest political importance to South Korea seems to lie in security. Although traditionally and currently a strong ally of the ROK, New Zealand is unthreatening enough to the DPRK to engage in some positive ventures in the north and to provide a neutral ground on which improved understanding can be sought, if only for the time being at unofficial levels. The three articles on North Korea included in this issue of the NZJAS are contributed by participants at the conference and add precisely the expert information and insights on the domestic dynamics of the North Korean state on recent developments in the international context—the view from China and Australia in particular—that are needed to engage in any effective way in the region at any level.

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