

Challenges facing the reunification of Korea

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Abstract

After the Second World War, the once-unified northern and southern halves of the nation of Korea had been under immense external pressure from the American-Soviet Cold War. As a result, the northern side had sided with the Russian communists, while the southern side had leaned into the United States' style of democracy over time. Despite multiple proposed ideas for unification, the increasing tensions between Russia and the United States had discouraged reunification, despite the Cold War's eventual end. Thus, various social, religious, economic, and military crises had multiplied within each country's borders. This paper will assess the challenges surrounding the reunification of North and South Korea and argue the following hypothesis: that with intentional diplomatic meetings and further assimilation of cultures, the two nations can reunite.

After the conclusion of World War II, the United States and the then USSR had set their sights upon Korea, due to its strategic geopolitical positioning. Wanting to maintain its strong political influence in the region, the USSR took hold of the northern portion of Korea and set up a communist regime in the area north of the 38th parallel. Noting this political shift made by the Soviet Army, the United States then directly supported the military government beginning to be formed in the now “South” Korea.

Because of the North’s high peasant and laborer population, communistic policies and procedures were popular¹. This made the class-based, collective calls of the State more appealing. On the other hand, however, the United States-supported regime favored democratic, anti-communist elements, which were no doubt influenced by the US’s containment policies. In a sense, the two Koreas were an experiment in which two completely different political systems are used, and a global audience gets to view the outcome of each of the systems. This experiment had been particularly interesting because, unlike the two halves of Germany, both governments had completely ended communication, and had not engaged in substantial conversation for the past 40 years. This isolation of the two halves had driven up mutual competition as well, as both sides were determined to prove that their ways of life were superior.

One of the ways where each side had attempted to demonstrate their supremacy over the other was through their newly different social structures and value orientations. Both sides greatly influenced by Confucianism, North and South Korea originally had a shared “value orientation which emphasized spirituality and humanism”². This led to individual Koreans to seek more spiritual growth rather than materialist values, and an increased interest in creating an idealist, utopian society. This meant that instead of seeking economic and military strength, the traditional Korean society placed loyalty, righteousness, and benevolence as the key ethical virtues which would shape their behavioral norms. The ancient Choson Kingdom established a social structure which, arguably, gave birth to the beginnings of North Korea’s authoritarian system. These social classes had been divided into four categories—the *yangban*, a scholar-official, the lowly-born *chung’in*, the skilled technicians, the *sangmin*, the commoners, and the *ch’onmin*, or the lowly at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Each of these classes were inspired by the hierarchal elements of Confucianism, which originally came in the form of the “sovereigns-ministers-fathers-sons”. Because of the weight that these values had on each of their social structures and legislative processes, it became easier and more likely for at least one of the newly split Koreas to create a supreme class for the others to be subordinate to.

Despite their unified cultural beginnings, North Korea had taken the class supremacy ideal of Confucianism to the extreme. In 1948, after the failed rule of Japan crumbled, Kim Il-sung became the founding father of North Korea, with help from the communist USSR³. When Kim rose, he campaigned on promises of justice for workers, and violent anti-Japanese rhetoric to unify the peasant population. After his ascension to power, however, North Korea had become “one of the world’s poorest nations, with widespread malnutrition”. Most of North Korea’s economic and labor sources are concentrated in mining, manufacturing, agriculture, and fishing,

¹ Sung-jo Cho and Lieven De Moor, “The Economic Integration Between North and South Korea: Lessons from German Reunification and European Integration”, *East Asia* 38, February 23, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09359-w>.

² Jin Jing Yi, “Commonalities and Differences between the Cultures of North and South Korea and the Unification of the Peninsula” in *Korea and Globalization*, ed. James B. Lewis and Amadu Sesay, (London: Routledge, 2013), 14.

³ “North Korea’s Power Structure”, Council on Foreign Relations, last modified June 17, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-koreas-power-structure>.

even though the fruits of said labor scarcely to the laborers. The reason why being that the *donju*, or “money masters” concentrate the wealth, arable land, and potable water to the elite classes—namely, the Kim family. These elites also have been known to engage in money laundering and trading illegally in the black market, particularly when the government was unable to provide sufficient food and water to its peasant population, causing various deadly famines.

Unfortunately, these practices have only worsened in the modern age. With the rise of third generation of the Kim regime, Kim Jong-un, came a new development of economic policies. Each of these policies had been set in place to shift the centrally state-planned economy to a more liberal, incentive-based economy which would allow for slightly more economic freedom within the localities. Of course, this would not come without its restrictions, as certain, more ‘common’ industries like agriculture are given that freedom, while seafood is under strict consumption for the elites. These elites would still have the final say and extreme control over the trade, prices, and number of items within the market, as well as the formulation of impactful economic policies, including the value of their currency. This elite control in North Korea is a twist on traditional Choson beliefs, as it leans into the hierarchy that Confucius created, but mistreats and abuses its peasants with long work hours, starvation, and limited economic freedom. Using those traditional beliefs to preach a gospel of socialist collectivism, the Kim family and the elites of North Korea were able to shape the public consciousness into obedient workers whose suffering and unfortunate circumstances were ultimately for the common good.

In terms of the democratically led South Korea, they had chosen a capitalistic market economy, mirroring the West, as well as a parliamentary democratic political system rather than the authoritarian regime in North Korea. When adopting these new Western values, however, citizens had difficulty balancing them with their traditional Choson values. Because of the materialist pursuits that came with the economic freedoms of capitalism, physical possessions had clashed with their original spiritual pursuits, although they had not weakened their desires to seek enlightenment. Similarly, individual fulfillment through citizens’ financial freedom had not led to much of a decrease in collective societal values. Socially, those traditional qualities had continued to foster close familial dynamics. In 1960’s South Korea, the economic sector had experienced great growth, particularly in the industrial manufacturing industry. This led to immense social wealth and the creation of a decently sized middle class, in contrast to the impoverished peasant majority in the North. Amid the financial benefits the new country gained because of capitalism, the authoritarian undertones of the Choson culture had shown itself in the newly created political culture. In the 1990’s, South Korea had advertised its democratic country, despite having a dictatorial developmental state in the 1980’s. Unlike North Korea, the outcome of democratic, collective struggle led to the success of their political system. However, there still were various authoritarian elements embedded into their political system. Despite establishing a middle class, hierarchies were strictly kept and had often prevented Western-style upward mobility. Socially, elders were believed and taken more seriously than their younger, less experienced counterparts, despite having equal opportunity for jobs in the market. One area where authoritarianism had not had a grasp on South Korean society, however, was the growth of individualism. Because capitalism incentivizes individual competition in creative ways and strategy to gain more wealth, the focus was on the ‘I’ rather than the ‘we’, as a society. This is supercharged by the fact that capitalist societies encourage privately-owned industries rather than centrally planned economies, and each product is marketed and sold for the self-interest of the manufacturer or investor. With urbanization and higher populations in South Korea,

individualism and competition had soon become a part of everyday life, which supported their booming market economy.

Both countries, while economically on different planes, currently hold beliefs that were derived from the same traditional Choson culture. Each country takes and interprets different tenets of the ethically based ideology but finding points of commonality between the two cultural interpretations is *essential* for reunification. First, both countries believe in collective struggle and cooperation. While North Korea advertises a bastardized version which props of the desires of the elite at the expense of the workers, South Korea allows of citizens to engage in lobbying, social protests, and contacting representatives in Parliament to communicate their needs. This desire for cooperation should be central to the reunification of Korea because it would symbolize the joining of two states, and it would be of great benefit to both to shield themselves from major nuclear threats in the region, like Russia and China.

Next, the spiritual aspect of the Choson culture could be applied to the potential fall of the Kim family regime. Due to the heavy censorship of the North Korean press, worship of the now-leader Kim Jong-un, and the general emaciation of the population, it is apparent that the individual liberties of the people of North Korea have been stripped away. Due to their low status as peasants, they already had low morale and were unlikely to challenge the power of the Kim family especially with State-sanctioned propaganda playing daily. Although Confucius *does* speak to the power of the collective, it is unlikely that the continued abuse of the people by their government matched his original vision. By recognizing that the spirits of the people of North Korea are crushed and filled with fear, the reunification of Korea would allow for citizens to freely express themselves, purchase what they would like, and even be reunited with distant loved ones to reconnect to their previous ancient culture.

Some may argue that North Korea is within its own right within the Choson tenets because of his strict upholding of the hierarchal system, but, fundamentally, North Korea's version of hierarchy goes against the natural order which the Choson dynasty created. Because North Korea only really has two classes—the elites and the commoners, it erases the well-paid skilled technicians and educated scholars who were the backbone of the dynasty, which allowed for the society to thrive for hundreds of years. The Kim regime, by running North Korea with shoddy agricultural and fishing jobs, had done the populace a great disservice because they had all limited the talent and individual spirits of their people. This is particularly true with the strict rules that the regime has for religious liberty. During the Great Famine, there had been an influx of North Korean refugees to northern China, which had led to their subsequent conversion to Christianity because of the presence of Christians who were willing to help them⁴. Because there were American missionaries who lived in between North Korea and China for the purpose of evangelism, impoverished and starving North Korean refugees were the perfect demographic to evangelize to. The North Koreans, however, actively sought out these churches to provide food, water, and shelter. The church, found in Yanji, China, was the largest church in the area, with

⁴ Tim Chang, Ph. D., “The Rise of Christianity in DPRK from 1995 to the Present: A Study of How DPRK Christianity Developed under Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un and the Preeminent Role of the Great Famine”, *Liberty University*, accessed January 18, 2023, https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/ap/w-59584e83/?url=https%3A%2F%2Flibertyuniv-my.sharepoint.com%2Fpersonal%2Fmsprentice_liberty_edu%2FDocuments%2FAttachments%2FChangNorthKoreaArticle.docx&data=04%7C01%7Cpcazeau%40liberty.edu%7Cf09da617f12740fd25b508d98a8c5b5e%7Cbaf8218eb3024465a9934a39c97251b2%7C0%7C0%7C637693157735517494%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWlJoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ikk1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=jZxG5XsN8I%2FK6b%2F13fNchVgomlkCzO%2BSx%2Bc1HkSCDLM%3D&reserved=0.

about five thousand members, most of which were ethnic Koreans. This provided a supportive community for North Koreans, which are vehemently prohibited because that would distract from total and complete dedication to the State. As Chang, a missionary who had evangelized in Yanji China, expertly explains that “North Koreans have been told that they should be loyal to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and now Kim Jong Un”, because they had supposedly “provided them with everything” and protected them from their so-called “enemies”. However, the Great Famine had become a moment of reckoning for the citizenry because they had recognized that their basic needs were not provided for them, despite the endless propaganda fed to them by the North Korean state. They had realized that they were told lies. As a result, many North Koreans who had fled dedicated their lives to Christ and denounced the Kim regime. Because of the extreme authoritarian nature of the regime, Christians in North Korea are executed for even being in possession of a Bible. Consequently, North Korean Christians must be more strategic in their evangelism, which leads to a form of double consciousness because they must seem like they are compliant to the regime outwardly, while they internally are depending on Jesus Christ to survive another day under the repressive regime. The extreme hold that North Korean elites attempt to have on the minds and hearts of the people ultimately stunts economic innovation, since competition and freedom of expression drives new investments (as seen in South Korea) and creates ingenuine patriotism, as that respect for their leader is created out of fear.

It is obvious that both countries have immense cultural, economic, and social differences. With those differences in mind, the United States had made some pushes toward reunification through minor diplomatic action. Overall, the U.S. always had been more concerned about nuclear deterrence in East Asia and the Korean peninsula than reunification, despite South Korea being one of its allies. The first U.S. president to speak publicly about Korean reunification was George H.W. Bush. When Bush delivered his speech to the National Assembly in 1992, he stated that the United States would “support a peaceful unification”, despite not having much of a specific course of action⁵. There were various critics who thought that Bush’s statement “reflected a lukewarm American attitude to Korean reunification”. By 2000, though, the United States had taken a more serious approach in seeking Korean reunification. When South Korea’s Kim Dae-jung administration instated its “Sunshine Policy” in 1998, it sought to actively promote reconciliation between the two countries, which ultimately would be beneficial for both for two reasons: the first being that the agreement would prevent North Korea from developing and using nuclear weapons to use on the South, and the second being that the South would be able to slightly close the economic gap between the two through trade, as the North was moving toward quick economic decline. The first inter-Korean summit in 2000 made great progress—both had agreed that reunification would be in their economic and military interest. Yet, despite these agreements, no solid steps had been created to reunify. However, this summit was still a significant step in the reunification effort.

With unification, there would inevitably be some disadvantages. One would be the issues that arise with South Korea’s allyship with Japan and the United States. Because of North Korea’s communist politics, China would be more interested in maintaining relations with the unified Korea once both countries are integrated. On the same token, China would dislike the possibility of the continuation of the Korea-United States alliance, which could potentially strengthen after reunification due to the success of a democratic political system in the South. Furthermore, Russia, whose border is also shared with North Korea, which would dislike Korea

⁵ Tong Kim, “Future vision for a unified Korean peninsula: A U.S. Perspective”, ed. Tae-Hwan Kwak, Seung-Ho Joo (London: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315598895>.

becoming allies with either China or the United States due to its heightened tensions with both countries. China's preference, however, is to have North Korea remain as a "traditional buffer", while the South becomes a neutral party during China's competitive disputes with the United States. Less realistically, China would prefer to have the reunified Korea as an ally and refuse to have much more of a relationship with Japan and the United States. Overall, China's main objective is stability in East Asia rather than reunification, it is mainly within their interest to maintain control in the region. The clearest roadblock to the reunification of Korea would be the laundry list of internal differences between the two countries.

The best way to reunify Korea would be to begin in the South, with the North's compliance being central, of course. Secondly, the support of the surrounding countries would be essential for a reunified Korea, as without their support, it would be an inevitable failure with potential military intervention and economic sanctions to ensure the crumbling of the new country. It would be in Korea's best interest to also prove to the surrounding countries that they would *gain* more than any potential losses. In addition, both North and South Korea must have more serious discussions to remedy their rocky past. They, also, should work to move toward nuclear dismantlement, which North Korea is less enthusiastic about, even after Trump's unprecedented meeting with Kim Jong-un in the 2018 summit which had originally signaled the beginning of more friendly relations between North Korea and the United States.

The economic beginnings of a unified Korea would bear the burdens of a fiscally irresponsible and impoverished North Korea. Due to the absence of commercial banks because of the reliance on the central banking system, financing and internal investment has been virtually impossible, stunting the economy's growth. In 2009, North Korea had "revalued its currency", which effectively stripped all its citizens of their private assets⁶. This, in turn, rapidly increased the prices of goods and widened the gap between the elites and peasant workers. This financial gap would make it difficult for the unified Korea to implement South Korea's current monetary and exchange rate policies because it would continue to disproportionately affect ex-North Koreans. If the new Korea were to create a single currency, the risk of foreign exchange and sudden devaluation of cost would be averted. However, with future recessions and other economic shocks being completely plausible realities, it is essential that both nations engage in a currency union, like the EU's Euro, with one another *prior* to unification to avoid the immediate decline of the new economy. When EU states had done the same with the Euro, consumer prices had only increased by 2.1% per year in the first decade on average, keeping living costs within EU member states relatively affordable. In addition, the Euro had remained the second most-widely used currency after the US dollar, and it had kept its value stable—a reality that North Korea currently cannot achieve on its own. Once the currency stabilizes, Korea would then become a stronger trading partner to its allies, creating a stronger network of economic prosperity among a variety of nations. In sum, economic integration, while absolutely challenging, will bring great rewards to the people and region.

Militarily, the new Korea would expect demilitarization of unprecedented caliber along their shared border. The North and South are currently attempting to heal from a bitter rivalry, and that is abundantly clear by how heavily armed the Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ) is, as it

⁶ Sung-jo Cho, Lieven De Moor, "The Economic Integration Between North and South Korea: Lessons from German Reunification and European Integration" *East Asia*, February 23, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09359-w>.

is the “most heavily armed territory in the contemporary world”⁷. Along that area, South Korea has a total of 750,000 troops, while North Korea has a whopping 1.25 million troops. Together, the troops would total over 2 million soldiers, ranking close to the United States military in sheer size. The combined force of both armies would be critical to protect themselves from potential security concerns. South Korea, as of 2005, has been a NATO country, which places the responsibility more militarily developed countries, such as the United States, responsible to protect them in case of an attack, as per Article V of the treaty. Russia and China are not only nuclear powers, but unstable ones—with threats of miscalculation in the East China Sea over fishing boats and ongoing cybersecurity threats by Russia, a unified Korea would be able to protect itself on land, and navigate decently well by sea, if the new state were to provide the proper training resources to do so.

Overall, the reunification of Korea had been a topic of conversation between the two nations for decades, while very little planning was done economically, militarily, culturally, or politically to actualize it. In strictly abiding by the Agreement on North-South Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Cooperation, and Exchanges while no longer creating hard-liner policies against each other, North and South Korea’s people will experience the unity that their Choson ancestors would have desired. In addition, fiscal and military strength would make both formidable actors in the region, able to protect themselves from nuclear threats and saving the United States’ resources so that they could then turn their focus to greater matters.

⁷ Nicholas Eberstadt, Judith Banister, “Divided Korea: Demographic and Socioeconomic Issues for Reunification”, *Population Council*, September 1992, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1973656>.

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