

*NAKA 2015 Essay Competition:
"Roadmap Towards Peace in the Korean Peninsula"
Co-Winner*

Vying for Peace in War-Torn Korea

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Gwendolyn Brooks, an American author, once said “We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.” Korea remains the only divided country in the world; Koreans need to realize that they are stronger together and strive towards peace. While reunification in the Korean Peninsula remains a dream in the eyes of North and South Koreans, the dream seems impossible to achieve in the context of the strained relations between the conflicting sides. In an attempt to promote peace in Korea, we must invoke the need for unification in our Korean youth, we must expand current economic projects, and our South Korean government needs to adopt a less conservative approach towards North Korea. Following this roadmap will hopefully open the doors to harmony in the Korean peninsula.

Beginning of Division

Korea has been an independent nation for over 500 years, when the Chosun Dynasty gained power, until 1910, when Japan annexed Korea into its empire. After 40 years of Japanese rule, World War 2 broke out and Japan lost the prized peninsula. Koreans were relieved, believing that they would be liberated and able to rule themselves. However, they were disappointed to learn that they would be controlled by the superpowers of the Cold War. The peninsula was haphazardly divided along the 38th parallel, with the USSR taking the north and the US controlling south of the dividing line. The peninsula was inevitably influenced by the

superpowers, with the North becoming a communist nation, and the South adopting a democratic-capitalist system. Shortly after the divide in 1945, North Korea invaded South Korea in an attempt to spread the communist ideology. The U.S. entered the war and was able to keep North Korea from taking over the south. The war was paused with an armistice agreement in 1953, which led to the establishment of a demilitarized zone. Since then, relations between the North and South have been tense, with occasional moments of optimism that Korea will be reunited after 65 years of separation. While currently hope is not high due to nuclear threats, Koreans must not lose faith its people will be soon reunified through economic/political cooperation and mutual respect.

Reunification From the View of North Korean Citizens

It is hard to understand a complete view of North Korean civilian's opinions due to the prolonged isolation. However, we receive a glimpse of its perspective as a result of a recent survey held *Chosun Ilbo*. The researchers interviewed North Koreans who were temporarily in China and were intending to return to the communist country. The results of the survey are valid because the population was not comprised of defectors, but rather loyal civilians. When interviewed, 95% of the citizens believed that unification with the South is necessary for economic and social reasons (Feffer). However, the point of disagreement is focused on the process of reunification, and the extent to which South Korea will influence the peninsula. More than a third of the interviewed citizens saw that the unified Korea should adopt South Korea's capitalist economy and democratic government. On the other hand, nearly half of those asked about unification saw that the two Koreas should have an equal amount of influence: "through negotiations between the two Koreas on equal footings after reforms and an opening-up of the North"(Feffer). A majority of the South Korean population sees that reunification can only be

achieved through the collapse of North Korea's system. When South Koreans neglect the assumption that they will implant their government system on North Korea, then the North may be more willing to reunify because its ideals are not being destroyed. If North and South Korea adapt the former sunshine policy to create a mutual respect and cooperate through economic means, then reconciliation may not be so farfetched.

Economic cooperation between the North and the South

Inter Korean economic relations are focused in two main areas: tourism in the Guemgansan Mountains, and business in the Kaesong industrial complex. The earliest attempt to relieve tension, economically, between the two Koreas came when Jung Ju Young, the founder of Hyundai, established a tourist site at Mount Geumgangsan in North Korea. An average of 240,000 South Koreans have visited the site since 1998. The mountain served as symbol of peace between the two sides and brought in hard currency to North Korea. However, tourism halted in 2008 when South Korea restricted its citizens from visiting the site, after a citizen was brutally murdered by North Korean soldiers. (North Korea to Seize). Despite the murder, a majority of South Koreans hope that the site reopens, based on a survey conducted by the Hyundai Research Institute in 2012. If the tourist site is reopened to South Korean tourists, the economic relationship between the two Koreas can be recovered and tensions can allay. For example, after the tourist site closed to South Koreans, North Korea's dependence on South Korea decreased to 21%. As the economic ties with South Korea deteriorated, North Korea's dependence on China greatly increased to 70% (Inter-Korean Economic). If North and South Korea can negotiate a way to allow South Koreans to tour the mountains, then North and South Koreans can form a mutual alliance and become less dependent on foreign currency.

While tourism in North Korea has decreased, the Kaesong Industrial complex continues to serve as an integral economic facet for North and South Korea. The project, launched in 2003, exemplifies former president Dae Jung's policy of separating economics and politics, because while inter Korean political relations are decreasing over time, production in the complex is still growing. In a survey taken by Hyundai, a majority of North and South Koreans agree that the project should continue to grow, as it brings in approximately \$400 billion USD to the peninsula (Inter-Korean Economic). Because the complex is so successful, investment in the project must expand so that North and South Korea can have a greater chance to reconciliation through strong economic ties. In order to strengthen these ties, it must first be acknowledged that both sides will economically benefit from cooperation; the mindset that one side will collapse and be integrated into the other side needs to be neglected. Mutual respect and trust must be built the two Koreas. The North and the South must agree that business is business despite any political conflicts. For example, North Korea cannot halt relations at Kaesong, as it did in 2013 (North, South Korea Resume), because of political tension between the two sides. After trust is established, South Korea must encourage its small businesses to make investments in the complex. The North must reciprocate by relieving the many cumbersome customs policies, allowing continuous 24 hour access at the complex, and increasing communications so that the complex produces at its fullest potential. An integral step towards reconciliation in Korea is to establish and strengthen economic ties between the conflicting sides. As North and South Korea recognize the benefits of economic cooperation, doors will be opened for negotiations in other institutions.

Political Efforts to Promote Peace and Reconciliation-Sunshine Policy

Most of the progress towards reconciliation was done in the period between 2000 through 2007 when South Korean presidents utilized the sunshine policy. The first attempt to promote

peace between the two Koreas was in 1972, when officials from the North and the South outlined plans for reunification. However, the plan was overly optimistic and did not have a set of concrete guidelines that could be followed; thus the plan was soon neglected. Economic cooperation in the late 1990s encouraged Korean leaders to engage in the first inter Korean summit in 2000. The summit was largely made possible by President Kim Dae-Jung's Sunshine Policy. The policy is supported by three pillars: "zero-tolerance for aggression, renunciation of unification through absorption, and an active drive for reconciliation and mutual exchange"(Fas). By adopting this policy, Jung was able to create a stronghold where South Korea would not be threatened by the North, while creating a sense of ease with North Korea because each side's political ideologies would be conserved. As a result of the policy, Dae Jung was able to visit North Korea and meet with Kim Jong-il in 2000. At the meeting, the Korean presidents were able to sign the June 15 Declaration in which they vowed to promote reconciliation without the interference of foreign nations. The declaration allowed for greater economic cooperation through the establishment of the Kaesong complex. The meeting also set the stage for next summit in 2007. At the 2007 inter-Korean summit, former president Roh Moo-Hyun continued Dae-Jung's policy, and visited North Korea. At the meeting, the leaders "[agreed] to take steps toward reunification, ease military tensions, expand meetings of separated families, and engage in social and cultural exchanges" (Davenport). Unfortunately, North and South Korea were not able to fulfill these plans due to the inauguration of Lee Myung-bak in 2008. Myung-bak was more conservative than his predecessors, and enforced harsher consequences on the North. For example, the president would not give aid to the north until it disabled its nuclear program. This caused North Korea to retaliate by launching a test missile to prove its independence of the South. Myung-bak's harsh policies did not serve his purposes, as inter-Korean relations have

been tense during his presidency. If President Park Geun-hye is able to adopt a less conservative policy than her predecessor, then she may have a better chance at promoting peace in the peninsula.

Strategies to Promote Peace and Reunification

The road to reunification will be long and arduous. Currently, reunification does not seem probable with the great tension, however, with new strategies and efforts for peace, we can hopefully reduce tension and dream for a unified Korea. The process of reunification begins by creating better relations between South Koreans and North Korean defectors. After the South Korean mindset changes, the South Korean government needs to reestablish the desire for reconciliation among its youth population. Once the entire South Korean Population has a positive attitude towards North Korean citizens, South Korea must adopt aspects of the forgotten Sunshine policy to build a strong relationship with North Korea founded on mutual benefit. In addition to social and political efforts to reduce tension, economic strategies should also be used. Current projects, such as the Gaesong complex and tourism, need to be expanded such that North and South Korea can limit their dependence on foreign nations and act as a unified nation.

To begin reunification, the South Korean government needs create a better system to deal with North Korean defectors. There more than 25,000 North Korean defectors in South Korea (Strother). While the living conditions are better in the South than they are in the North, defectors still face great discrimination from the South Korean population. Lee Ming Young, a defector was “looked down upon and distrusted because of [her] association with the regime in Pyongyang” (Strother). Many South Koreans see North Korea as the enemy, and often times do not distinguish between the oppressed North Koreans and the North Korean government. If

South Koreans change their mindsets towards the refugees and stop degrading North Koreans, then inter Korean relations may be improved because Koreans change the notion that they are enemies and are actually a unified population. To inspire this change of attitude, South Korea needs to encourage more institutions that can help bridge the gap between North and South Koreans. An example of such an institution is the “People for successful Korean Reunification,” run by South Korean volunteers, which offers humanitarian aid and education to refugees and creates “an environment where Koreans from both sides of the peninsula can interact” (Strother). These institutions serve as centripetal forces in Korea, allowing North and South Koreans to recognize their similar cultures and ethnicities. By recognizing the great similarities that we share, we can dismiss the small cultural gaps that have formed during the separation and reinstill the lost vigor to become a unified people.

While many are striving to promote peace between North and South Korea, it is not expected Korea will be soon reunified; optimistic professors hope that Korea will be reunified in the next twenty years. For this reason, it is of paramount importance to inspire the younger South Korean generation to reunify, because the issue will be lying in their hands. In a survey conducted by Seoul National University, only 49% of university students believed unification was necessary, while 67% of citizens over 50 years thought it necessary (Branigan). This drop in public interest may be due to the fact that younger generations do not have living family members in North Korea, so they are not driven by humanitarian motives. Additionally, younger generations are looking at the unification while only focusing on the financial burden it may cause. They do not consider social, political, or cultural reasons to reconciliation with North Korea. To help persuade the young Koreans of the benefits of reunification, South Korea must initiate communication between Northern defectors and young South Koreans. This

communication will hopefully allow young Koreans to recognize the humanitarian and social issues through personalized anecdotes. Additionally, pro unification organizations should try to reach out the Korean youths by sparking healthy debates on unification and encouraging students to research the issue. For example, NAKA serves an integral role in inspiring Korean American youth to learn about the costs and benefits of reunification, rather than to disregard the issue and accept the status quo. The efforts made by these organizations keep the dream of unification from fading into the past.

The most important aspect of the process requires the acknowledgement that Korea will not be reunified by the collapse of North Korea, but rather, will be reunified through cooperation and mutual exchange. Many believe that Korea may only be unified through the systemic collapse of North Korea. This is not a favorable option because this process will most definitely include violence and it will drown the North Korean population into even more poverty and humility. Additionally, if South Korea fills in the political vacuum after the north collapses, reunification will be much more expensive. Currently, the cost of reunification is estimated to be \$80 billion USD assuming North Korea's economy is stable (Kim). If North Korea collapses, the financial burden on South Korea will be much greater. Because of this, South Korea needs to adopt some aspects of the lost Sunshine policy, chiefly the belief that North Korea will not be absorbed into the South. Aspects of the sunshine policy do need to be reformed because while the policy did encourage greater communication; it gave the North too many appeasements. For example, Dae Jung's policy bribed North Korea with \$200 million dollars to participate in the 2000 inter-Korean summit (Claim Bolstered). The policy needs to be less naive; it must ensure that North Korea will reciprocate to South Korean acts. The redesigned policy must reestablish communication in the peninsula while making sure that each party has an equal responsibility to

encourage reunification. When South Korea adopts this stricter sunshine policy, the North and South Korea will have an equal authority to vie for peace.

Once relations in Korea are more peaceful as a result of the initial social and political programs, North and South Korea must consider expanding economic projects so that they can act as a unified front in the global economy. Before the Koreas can invest in more projects, they need to establish economic trust. This trust is acquired when North Korea guarantees that politics will not interfere with economics. Hopefully North Korea will make this guarantee after social and political attitudes are uplifted through the redesigned sunshine policy. After trust is established between the conflicting sides, North and South Korea need to invest and expand in more economic ventures such as the Gaesong complex and North Korean tourism as aforementioned. The growing investments will serve as centripetal forces, allowing the countries to neglect their war positions and strive for a common goal.

Closing statement

As we progress into the future and start to accept the eerie status quo, the world's dream of a unified Korea is slowly slipping away. We are obliged to save our country from destroying itself. We can do this by limiting discrimination, encouraging youth to take on their patriotic responsibility, adopting more liberal policies, and expanding economic cooperation. Through the use of these strategies, we can only hope to glimpse Park Min-jin's dream of "running around with [North Korean] children" (Branigan) in the school play yard.

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