

Building the Road to Korean Reunification

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Korean Reunification Essay

After over 150 meetings that spread over two years and seventeen days, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953 causing a ceasefire between South Korea, backed by the UN, and North Korea, which was supported by the Soviet Union. This agreement led to the end of fighting between the nations, the creation of guidelines that detailed the exchange of prisoners of war, and the construction of the demilitarized zone that separated South and North Korea. While serving as a temporary measure to end the fighting, the agreement was not actually a formal binding peace treaty that declared the end of the war. To this day, the Korean War is still not officially over. Currently, the relationship between South and North Korea fluctuates like a tug of war with either side unwilling to compromise. Many dialogues between the South and North have taken place, but none have led to lasting change. With the recent historic meetings of President Moon-Jae In, Chairman Kim Jong-un, and President Trump, many Korean people are filled with hope of the prospect of lasting change and the reunification of the peninsula. However, in order for this prospect to become a reality, all the countries involved in the Korean War must take an active role to reach a consensus on the means of denuclearization, there must be a long-term plan for economic integration, and South and North Korea must find a way to bridge the gaping cultural gap between them.

The first step on the road to reunification is for all the countries involved in the Korean war, including the United States, to come to terms with the means of denuclearization. Only then can the Korean War be concluded officially. All the parties involved realize the importance of denuclearization, however, their ideas on how to denuclearize differ. North Korea has begun taking steps to denuclearize, closing down the Punggye-ri nuclear test site to an audience of Western journalists. They also agreed that they would shut down the Yongbyon nuclear facilities if America took comparable measures to accommodate them. Additionally, North Korea wishes

that both Koreas can dismantle border posts, reconnect railroads, reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex and establish a permanent meeting place for separated families. However, in the current state of foreign affairs, the Trump administration has refused to accept an official peace declaration and wants North Korea to first halt its nuclear program. The chance of this sudden denuclearization is close to zero. North Korea has been investing in their nuclear program since the late 1900s, and the citizens of North Korea view the program as a legacy of Kim's father and grandfather, cementing it as a source of pride and a national treasure. Meanwhile, from Kim's perspective, the nuclear program and his missile stockpile serve as an insurance policy. Given the longstanding precedent of America establishing militaristic spheres of influence, such as in the Middle East after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Moammar Gadhafi, and the Taliban leadership, Kim knows that he has to have the military strength in the form of nuclear weaponry to stand a threat to America, and therefore be on the same level during negotiations. For America to progress in negotiation, they will need to give North Korea incentives and reassurances so they feel protected. Thus, the American government should prioritize drafting a long-term framework with various steps that account for the possibility that North Korea will try to find loopholes and violate the terms of denuclearization, as in 1994 and 2007. Only then will denuclearization, even gradual progress, be possible.

Another problem that blocks the road to reunification lies in the economic disparity between South and North Korea. The second summit between Kim and Trump in Vietnam recently in 2019 offered hope to North Korea of a reprieve from economic sanctions if they could come to an agreement on how to denuclearize. However, negotiations collapsed, leaving Kim with nothing to show and returning home empty-handed. Following the summit, North Korea expressed their frustration towards Moon Jae-In, the President of South Korea, through

warnings to change their mediation tactics. Currently, the North's economy is becoming increasingly crippled as a result of the coronavirus limiting foreign trade, further emphasizing the implications of failing to secure economic ties during the summit in Vietnam. In an effort to raise tensions with South Korea and pressure America, the North blew up an inter-Korean joint liaison office. This blast shattered the uneasy peace in Korea that had lasted for two years, ending the legacy of amity between Kim and Moon. It also reflects Kim's statement that he was going to treat South Korea not as a partner for reconciliation but as an enemy. If that is truly his intention, this is a large setback in the process of reunification. However, this situation offers insight on effective negotiation tactics. It is clear to see that North Korea is in desperate need of economic aid, but they are unwilling to make the first move to denuclearize. However if the North were to make promises to disarm their nuclear stockpile, America could lift economic sanctions, such as the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the Trade Act of 1974, the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, and the Export Administration Act of 1979 that would allow for the possibility of major loans and grants from the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development that the North desperately needs to recover. Without a way to motivate North Korea, negotiations between America will remain at a standstill, and if a resolution is not reached soon, Kim may escalate the tensions further. For America to avoid conflict with North Korea, they should create a step-by-step plan for denuclearization that involves the freezing of testing, dismantling of infrastructure, and the disarmament of their nuclear stockpile. At each stage of this process, America should offer a reward, in the form of foreign aid or the lifting of sanctions, to incentivize North Korea to move forward in the process of denuclearization. Due to the weakened economic state that North Korea is in due to the coronavirus, they are likely to

cooperate, making this give and take a win-win situation for America and North Korea that will help accelerate the denuclearization process.

While South Korea is the 11th largest economy in the world, boasting large tech and engineering firms, North Korea, with a primarily agrarian economy, has a GDP less than 1% of the South. Due to this stark difference, merging the two economies would have disastrous consequences. Experts from Seoul believe that a German style reunification—an absorption of North Korea on South Korea's terms—will be the most effective method. However, if Germany serves as a lesson from the past, the process of reunification may take much longer and be very costly for Korea. Currently, Germany is still paying for the costs of reunification. Workers in Germany are required to pay a solidarity tax of 5.5% of total income to the east, with reunification estimated to cost two trillion dollars. In the year of reunification for Germany, people in the west made two to three times as much as their eastern counterparts. Meanwhile in 2020, South Korea has a GDP per capita 18 times that of North Korea's. Even if reunification were to take place, it would take many generations for North Koreans to reach the same standard of living as their South Korean counterparts. In order to minimize the fallout of economic integration, North Korea should first focus on rekindling marketisation and trade within their economy prior to reunification. Despite local commerce being illegal, North Korean citizens have developed hundreds of markets known as *jangmadang* in order to survive. In addition, the majority of trade takes place with China which is controlled by conglomerates that are close to and loyal to the party. In order for North Korea's economy to recover, Kim should legalize local trade, adopting a more capitalistic infrastructure and find new trading partners apart from China which can be accomplished by complying with American negotiations which would lead to the

alleviation from economic sanctions. This negotiation would be beneficial for both Trump and Kim and would lead to more economic growth on both sides.

Apart from the tangible aspects that can be solved on the road to reunification, there lies a multitude of mental and emotional struggles. Currently, some 33,000 North Korean defectors live in South Korea. Life is difficult for this group unaccustomed to the hyper-capitalism of South Korea. They struggle to fit in with their accents and smaller physical size, and face discrimination from South Koreans. As a result, most of them can't find jobs, live below the poverty line, and sometimes return back to North Korea. To bridge the cultural gap, both South and North Koreans must be educated about each other's culture. The South must understand the years of propaganda and brainwashing that the North was subjected to, making them unable to choose for themselves. While the North must adjust to the fast-paced, competitive, and modern environment that is South Korea. Additionally, a massive affirmative action program needs to be put in place to give North Koreans job training, education, and opportunities required to assimilate into South Korean society.

As a second-generation Korean-American brought up in America, I am sad to see the current disconnect between South and North Korea. After decades of conflict with no resolution, it is apparent that change is needed in order for reunification. I hope that through negotiations of denuclearization, economic integration, and healing of the cultural gap between South and North Korea, all the countries involved in this process can acknowledge one another's perspective and settle their differences in order to secure enduring peace. This act of reunification serves as a signal of freedom and a defense of democracy that will ensure that millions of Koreans around the world will grow up to see the true potential of a united Korean peninsula and feel a stronger sense of pride knowing that their homeland has come together once more.