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Korean Reunification in the 21st Century: Policy Legacies, External Factors, Nuclear Realities, and Emerging Voices of the New Generation

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Article

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Abstract

The issue of **Korean reunification remains one of the most significant unresolved questions** in contemporary international politics and East Asian studies. Since the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 and the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War, the two Koreas have evolved into sharply contrasting political, economic, and ideological systems. While South Korea emerged as a democratic and technologically advanced capitalist state integrated into the global economy, North Korea developed into a centralized socialist regime characterized by authoritarian governance, military prioritization, and nuclear deterrence. The persistence of division has transformed the Korean Peninsula into a critical site of geopolitical competition involving major regional and global powers, including the United States, China, Japan, and Russia.

This paper examines the historical evolution, historiographical interpretations, and contemporary debates surrounding Korean reunification. It argues that reunification should not be understood merely as a territorial or political merger, but as a multidimensional process involving ideological reconciliation, economic restructuring, identity reconstruction, and regional security transformation. The study traces the changing historiography of reunification from Cold War realist frameworks, which emphasized military confrontation and ideological competition, to post-Cold War liberal and constructivist approaches that focus on engagement, interdependence, identity formation, and peace-building mechanisms. In doing so, the article highlights how scholarly discourse has shifted from deterministic notions of reunification toward more nuanced interpretations shaped by globalization, nuclear politics, and regional strategic rivalry.

The paper **critically evaluates major reunification models**, including the absorption model inspired by **German Reunification, gradual integration through economic and cultural cooperation, confederation-based proposals, and the possibility of a long-term peace regime without immediate political unification.** Particular attention is given to South Korea's engagement strategies such as **Sunshine Policy** and **Nordpolitik**, which attempted to reduce tensions through dialogue, economic exchange, and diplomatic normalization. The article also explores the limitations of these approaches in light of **North Korea's nuclear ambitions**, recurring military crises, and shifting domestic political priorities in South Korea.

This study investigates the **structural obstacles** to reunification, **including economic asymmetry between the two Koreas, the humanitarian implications of integration, divergent political cultures**, and t**he strategic calculations of neighboring powers.** It argues that while sudden reunification through regime collapse remains a theoretical possibility, such a scenario could generate **severe instability, refugee crises**, and **regional conflict.** Consequently, the article contends that gradual and functional integration remains the most feasible pathway, although it requires sustained political commitment, regional cooperation, and a stable security environment.

By combining historical analysis, historiographical review, and contemporary policy evaluation, this article contributes to broader debates on nationalism, post-Cold War order, conflict resolution, and

regional security in East Asia. It concludes that Korean reunification, rather than being an imminent event, should be understood as a long-term and evolving process shaped by both inter-Korean relations and wider geopolitical transformations in the international system.

Introduction

The recorded history of Korea traditionally begins in 2333 BCE with the founding of Gojoseon by the legendary King Dangun, the son of Hwanung, who was believed to have descended from the heavenly deity Hwanin. From this early period until 1945, there is no historical evidence to suggest that the permanent division of the Korean Peninsula into North and South Korea was either natural or historically justified. Although Korea experienced periods of political fragmentation, including the Three Kingdoms Period and the Later Three Kingdoms Period, these kingdoms shared a common ethnic origin, language, and cultural heritage. At various times they competed for power, while at other times they were unified under a single Korean state.

The roots of the present day division emerged only at the end of the Second World War following Japan's surrender in 1945. The United States of America and the Soviet Union assumed control over the peninsula as occupying powers. Soviet forces entered northern Korea first and accepted the surrender of Japanese troops there, while the United States, whose forces were primarily engaged in Japan, arrived later to occupy the southern part of the peninsula. As no clear historical, cultural, or ethnic boundary existed to separate the two occupation zones, American military planners Colonel Charles H. Bonesteel III and Colonel Dean Rusk proposed the 38th Parallel as a temporary demarcation line. Drawn on a National Geographic map, this line ensured that Seoul, the Korean capital, remained within the American occupation zone. Although intended as a temporary administrative arrangement, the division ultimately evolved into the permanent separation of the Korean Peninsula. This period was also marked by significant global developments, most notably the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which demonstrated the destructive power of nuclear weapons and ushered in the nuclear age. These events profoundly influenced the geopolitical environment in which the Korean Peninsula was divided.

Some scholars believe that the United States could have asked the Soviet Union to withdraw from northern Korea after Japan's surrender in 1945. If necessary, the US could also have used limited military pressure. At that time, the Soviet Union was more interested in Japan and the wider Northeast Asian region than in permanently occupying Korea. The US had just launched the most powerful Nuclear weapon against Japan, so there was a good chance of success. However, the United States did not take such action. As relations between the two superpowers became worse, the temporary division of Korea gradually became permanent. The growing rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union led to the Cold War, and later the Soviet Union also developed nuclear weapons. The Korean War (1950–1953) began when North Korea tried to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force, an approach often called hard landing. After the war, many scholars and Korean leaders, especially from South Korea, suggested different ways to achieve peaceful reunification.

Historical Development and Unification Scenarios

From 1960 to 1987, during the presidencies of Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan, South Korea generally pursued a hard-landing approach to reunification, in which unification was largely envisioned as a victory of one side over the other. Both Koreas claimed to represent the legitimate Korean nation. Consequently, the dominant perception was that reunification could ultimately be achieved only through the decisive victory of one Korea over the other. The two Koreas were therefore engaged in an intense struggle over territory, ideology, political legitimacy, and their respective ways of life, while each sought to undermine or overcome the other.

In 1972, however, the two Koreas held a joint meeting and reached an important understanding on reunification. Both sides agreed to work jointly toward reunification without external assistance, guidance, or interference and to pursue the process through peaceful means. They also agreed to promote greater national unity within the Korean Peninsula. As part of this effort, they agreed to establish the **North-South Coordination Committee (NSCC)** to facilitate cooperation and coordination on issues related to reunification. However, subsequent tensions, including attacks and other hostile actions attributed to North Korea, contributed to the deterioration of inter-Korean relations and eventually derailed the dialogue. There couldn't be much progress until 1988. South Korean Presidents made some efforts to normalise relations with North Korea. Before that there were four broad scenarios.

Scenarios for Korean unification can be achieved through and the first two scenarios are generally associated with the hard-landing school of thought:-

(1) the collapse of the DPRK regime,

(2) military conflict between these two and winner takes it all

(3) with the help of South Korea a gradual political and economic changes in North Korea leading to peaceful integration, and

(4) maintenance of the status quo.

The last two are related to the soft landing theories. A soft landing, by contrast, is generally associated with the third and, to some extent, the fourth scenarios. It refers to a process in which the gradual and controlled implementation of selective economic reforms allows a command economy to acquire certain characteristics of a market economy without necessarily resulting in an immediate change of regime. For the reunification with the Korean government, they spent millions of sons to get some ideas and to pacify the North Korean regime.

South Korean strategies for Reunification

There are some major issues between these countries which need to be resolved, such as South Korean democracy versus North Korean communism, the legitimacy of South Korea versus North Korea's claim

to legitimacy and international recognition, Nuclear deterrence and the standing of the US army on South Korean land. To resolve such issues and to reunify the Korean Peninsula there are many theories given by the scholars. The main approaches are:-

1. **Hard Landing -**"The Hard Landing Theory conceptualises Korean reunification through the sudden collapse of one government, military confrontation, or the forcible absorption of one Korea by the other. This approach reflects the confrontational nature of inter-Korean relations during the Cold War, when ideological rivalry and competing claims to political legitimacy shaped unification strategies. However, South Korea's policy orientation began to change under President Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993), particularly through Nordpolitik, which emphasised diplomatic engagement and improved relations with socialist countries. This shift helped create a more favourable environment for peaceful coexistence and gradual integration, although the possibility of regime collapse or military conflict remained a concern."
2. **Soft Landing**- "The Soft Landing Theory advocates Korean reunification through gradual cooperation, dialogue, confidence-building measures, and peaceful integration based on mutual consent. Rather than relying on military force or the sudden collapse of the North Korean regime, this approach emphasises economic assistance, cultural exchanges, humanitarian cooperation, political dialogue, and the development of mutual trust. Its underlying assumption is that sustained engagement can gradually reduce ideological differences and create conditions conducive to peaceful coexistence and eventual reunification. Nevertheless, the process would remain economically costly, politically complex, and strategically uncertain, particularly given the nuclear issue, the economic disparities between the two Koreas, and the competing interests of neighbouring powers. From this perspective, reunification requires not only institutional and economic adjustments but also the gradual reconstruction of a shared Korean identity and a durable framework for peace."
3. **German Reunification Model** - The German Reunification Model refers to the peaceful reunification of East Germany and West Germany on 3 October 1990, following decades of political, ideological, and economic division during the Cold War. The German experience provides an important comparative framework for understanding the possibilities and challenges of Korean reunification. German reunification was facilitated by the end of the Cold War, the decline of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, growing public demands for political freedom, and the willingness of the leadership of both German states and major international powers to support a negotiated settlement. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 became a powerful symbol of the people's desire for unity and freedom. Ultimately, East Germany acceded to the Federal Republic of Germany under Article 23 of the then-existing Basic Law, with reunification formally taking place on 3 October 1990. "For the Korean Peninsula, this model demonstrates the importance of peaceful political transformation, public participation, international cooperation, and institutional preparedness." However, the German experience cannot be replicated directly because North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, maintains a highly centralised political system, and operates within a more complex regional security environment involving the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. Furthermore, the

economic disparity between the two Koreas and the potential humanitarian consequences of sudden political collapse make immediate absorption particularly risky. Therefore, rather than treating German reunification as a blueprint for the complete absorption of North Korea by South Korea, policymakers should examine its lessons critically and adapt them to the Korean context through confidence-building measures, economic cooperation, humanitarian engagement, and gradual political integration.

4. **Nordpolitik** - A policy introduced by President Roh Tae-woo to improve relations with the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries in order to create better conditions for dialogue with North Korea and to pressurize it by having good relations with the allies of North Korea. During this phase, the USSR forced North Korea to join the United Nations with South Korea. North Korea saw that its allies were developing good economic relations with South Korea and benefiting from those relations. Therefore, North Korea adopted a new policy known as the Juche ideology.
5. **Sunshine Policy** - A policy introduced by President Kim Dae-jung that promoted cooperation, economic exchanges, and peaceful relations with North Korea to encourage future reunification.
6. **Trustpoltik and Jackpot theory**:- Both theories are given by President Park Gyun-hye.

Trustpolitik - Trustpolitik was the central North Korea policy of South Korean President Park Geun-hye. Introduced as a policy framework in 2011 and adopted by her administration after she became president, it aimed to build mutual trust between North and South Korea through a combination of dialogue, cooperation, deterrence, and adherence to agreements. The basic idea was that trust could not be created through concessions alone. Both sides were expected to honour their commitments, while violations would carry consequences. Thus, Trustpolitik attempted to combine engagement and cooperation with pressure and deterrence, rather than relying exclusively on either a hard-line or an appeasement approach.

However, the policy faced serious difficulties because North Korea and South Korea had very different perceptions of security, political legitimacy, and the future of reunification. Critics argued that the policy was too conditional and lacked sufficient incentives for North Korea to cooperate.

Unification Jackpot Theory - The “Unification is a Jackpot” idea was also associated with President Park Geun-hye. In 2014, Park argued that Korean reunification should not be viewed only as a financial burden or security challenge but also as a potential economic and political opportunity for the Korean Peninsula.

The concept suggested that a unified Korea could benefit from combining South Korea's advanced economy, technology, and infrastructure with North Korea's natural resources, land, and labour force, while also reducing the long-term costs associated with division. Park also emphasized improving the living conditions of North Koreans and reducing the social and cultural gap between the two Koreas. In simple terms we can say that trustpolitik: “Build trust first, reduce tensions, cooperate where possible, but maintain deterrence when necessary,” while Unification Jackpot is “Reunification should not be seen only as a cost; in the long term, it could create significant economic and strategic opportunities for Korea.”

1. **One Nation, Two States -** Under the “One Nation, Two States” model, North and South Korea would continue to function as separate political entities, each retaining its own system of governance, political institutions, economic policies, and domestic administration. However, both states would share a common national framework in which foreign policy and defence policy would be managed by a unified central authority representing the Korean nation as a whole. This arrangement could allow both sides to preserve their existing political identities while gradually developing a common national and strategic framework.
2. **Constitutional Monarchy Model -** A more unconventional approach could be the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in North Korea as part of a broader “Two States, One Nation” framework. Given that the Kim family currently exercises political authority in North Korea and that the country possesses nuclear capabilities, any realistic reunification framework would need to address the security concerns and political interests of the existing ruling elite.

Under this model, the Kim family could potentially be transformed from an absolute ruling dynasty into a constitutional royal family, with its authority restricted by a constitution and democratic institutions. North Korea could therefore retain its own state structure while becoming a constitutional monarchy within the broader Korean national framework. The monarch would serve primarily as a symbolic head of state, while executive authority would be exercised through constitutionally established democratic institutions. The continuation of the monarchy could initially be linked to the existing ruling family and its ability to provide a legitimate successor through natural succession. However, if the family were unable to produce a successor, the constitutional monarchy could be automatically terminated, with the state subsequently transitioning to a republican system. This model would undoubtedly face significant political, constitutional, social, and security challenges. It would require substantial changes to the present political structure of North Korea, while South Korea would also need to make considerable constitutional and institutional adjustments. Issues such as nuclear disarmament, military integration, human rights, economic disparities, citizenship, political representation, and the distribution of power between the two states would need to be carefully addressed.

Nevertheless, the model could provide a transitional framework in which political integration does not necessarily require the immediate abolition of existing institutions. Instead, it would seek to accommodate the interests of both Korea’s while gradually developing a common national identity and shared institutions. Its central objective would be to create a pathway from two separate political systems toward peaceful coexistence and, ultimately, a more integrated Korean nation.

1. **Protest from Within -** Another possible pathway toward political change in North Korea could emerge through protest from within the country, supported by reform-oriented or relatively moderate elements within the government. “This approach would involve ordinary citizens demanding political and social change while sections of the state apparatus gradually become willing to support reforms.” A similar pattern was visible in South Korea during the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. The popular protests against Chun Doo-hwan’s government in 1987, combined with changes within the ruling establishment and the role of Roh Tae-woo, contributed to the beginning

of democratic transition. The experience of South Korea between 1960 and 1988 demonstrates that democratic consolidation can emerge despite prolonged authoritarian rule. During the governments of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, many South Koreans faced political repression and uncertainty about their future. Nevertheless, students, workers, civil society groups, religious organisations, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens continued to challenge authoritarianism. These movements involved considerable sacrifices, but sustained public pressure eventually contributed to political reforms and the expansion of democratic institutions.

A similar possibility, although under very different circumstances, could theoretically emerge in North Korea. If a population is subjected to continuous fear, repression, economic hardship, and political pressure for an extended period, there may eventually be a point at which fear becomes less effective as a tool of control. Major crises such as natural disasters, severe economic difficulties, food shortages, or a pandemic such as COVID-19 could further expose weaknesses within the existing system and increase public dissatisfaction. In such circumstances, popular grievances could gradually develop into broader social movements. If these movements were accompanied by divisions within the ruling elite or by support from reform-oriented elements of the government, the possibility of political transformation could increase. Rather than relying on external military intervention, “protest from within” would therefore represent an internally driven pathway in which the people, together with reformist elements of the state, gradually challenge and ultimately transform the existing authoritarian system.

However, North Korea differs significantly from South Korea in the 1960s-1980s. The country's extensive surveillance system, restrictions on communication, political repression, and limited space for independent civil society make the emergence of large-scale organised protest considerably more difficult. Therefore, the South Korean experience should not be treated as a direct prediction for North Korea, but rather as an example demonstrating how sustained popular pressure, combined with changes within the ruling establishment, can contribute to political transformation. In theory, there was an absence of a strong middle class, which had been a major force behind protest movements in South Korea. During this period, economic development, known as the “Miracle on the Han River,” was also underway. Therefore, industrial workers and labourers also participated in the protest movements. However, North Korea lacks a strong middle class, and it does not have the same level of independent industrial workers’ and labourers’ organisations or civil society. We can see that all efforts were made by South Koreans only. At the same time the North only used it for the development of nuclear weapons. This can't be one sided.

North Korean approach

Similar to South Korea, North Korea has also been trying for reunification since 1948. Due to this effort, the Korean war of three years (1950-53) took place. They have their own issues, problems and terms of reunification. It can be argued that North Korea wanted something different from what South Korea was offering. (a) the U.S. military should withdraw from the Korean Peninsula, and Joint military exercises should be suspended, as North Korea perceives these drills as preparations by South Korea and its allies

for a potential attack on the North. (b) reunification talks should be conducted primarily between the two Koreas.

As North Koreans were always against the US military presence on the Korean land. The Kim regime is always careful about their political presence in the Korean political system. And finally they are very aware of their political state system. North Korea announced its policy pivot in 2019 as they left the Reunification theory from every possible place. However, the only time the US left the Peninsula was 1948 and after that North attacked South Korea and almost captured the whole Peninsula and only Busan was left in the hands of South and friend countries' army. There was a strong probability that the North could capture the South and it would have become a new Korean type of communist government.

The paradigm is changing in inter-Korean relations, particularly the shift from the long-standing goal of peaceful reunification towards the possibility of two separate Korean states. North Korea's changing policies and the decline of the shared national-unification narrative challenge the traditional framework of inter-Korean cooperation. This shift has significant implications for South Korean reunification policy, domestic public opinion, and the security dynamics of Northeast Asia, raising questions about whether peaceful coexistence between two separate states may replace reunification as the primary policy objective.

There is Always a Second Side of the Coin

North Korea understands that taking South Korea by force through a hard-landing approach is neither feasible nor necessarily within its current capabilities. They recognise that South Korea is no longer the same country it was in the 1950s. Over the decades, South Korea has developed a powerful economy, advanced defence technologies, and significant military capabilities. At the same time, the international community has been pressuring North Korea for decades, while extensive sanctions have contributed to severe economic hardship and suffering among the North Korean population. These circumstances have generated various theories about internal developments within North Korea and may have encouraged the regime to deviate from some of the policies pursued by its predecessors.

In late 2023 and 2024, Kim Jong Un announced a major policy shift in North Korea's approach toward Korean reunification. At the December 2023 Workers' Party meeting, Kim declared that reunification with South Korea had become impossible and increasingly characterized the two Koreas as separate and hostile states. In January 2024, he called for constitutional changes to remove references to reunification and ordered the elimination of institutions and symbols associated with inter-Korean reconciliation. North Korea subsequently demolished the Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification, commonly known as the Arch of Reunification, in Pyongyang. In October 2024, North Korean state media reported that the Constitution had been amended to define South Korea as a "hostile state," marking a significant departure from North Korea's longstanding policy of national reunification.

Due to the lack of direct dialogue and reliable information from North Korean scholars, much of the analysis of North Korea's position is based on its state-controlled media. Kim Jong Un's statements and

policies have therefore often been interpreted in the context of South Korea's reunification policies. From North Korea's perspective, these policies appear to focus primarily on reunification through the absorption of North Korea into South Korea, whether through a hard-line or a gradual approach within a democratic system. There is little or no discussion of preserving North Korea's communist political system or its existing political structure, both of which are fundamental to the current regime. Consequently, North Korea may interpret South Korea's reunification proposals as an indication that the ultimate objective is the collapse or dissolution of the North Korean political system. So we can see that there are some conceptual basic issues. Such as contrasting approaches adopted by North and South Korea toward national reunification. North Korea emphasises on a confederal arrangement and its revolutionary political vision, in contrast to South Korea’s evolving proposals for peaceful coexistence and gradual integration. So both have some ideological differences, mutual distrust, and competing security interests have repeatedly obstructed progress toward Korean reunification.

However, if there is no direct communication between the two neighbouring countries, even a simple misunderstanding could potentially escalate into a much larger conflict. Various actors, organizations, and non-state elements may have interests that could benefit from heightened tensions and instability. Such actors could attempt to exploit misunderstandings or provocative incidents and further escalate tensions between the two Koreas. Therefore, maintaining channels of communication is essential not only for pursuing reunification but also for preventing miscalculations and avoiding an unnecessary military confrontation. In this context, neutral countries such as India could play a constructive role in facilitating dialogue and confidence-building measures, given their longstanding diplomatic and humanitarian relations with both North and South Korea.

External Factors

North Korea's decision to send its troops to support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war can also be viewed from this perspective. Historical precedents demonstrate the depth of China-North Korea relations. During the Chinese Civil War and the subsequent conflict with Japanese forces, North Korean personnel provided support to the Chinese communist forces. In turn, China provided substantial military assistance to North Korea during the Korean War (1950–1953), including the deployment of Chinese People’s Volunteers following the intervention of United Nations forces. One possible interpretation is that Pyongyang is pursuing a “you help me today, and I will help you tomorrow” strategy. By providing military support to Russia, North Korea may be seeking to strengthen its strategic relationship with Moscow and secure Russian political, economic, technological, or military assistance in the future. Thus, its involvement in the conflict may not simply be an act of support for Russia, but also part of a broader strategy to secure long-term national interests and strengthen North Korea's position in the region. Conversely, if Russia were to withhold support from North Korea during a future crisis, it could undermine perceptions of the reliability of its commitments to its partners. This would also serve as a caution to states considering deeper military cooperation with Russia: they should carefully assess the risks of becoming directly or indirectly involved in conflicts initiated or prolonged by Russia, particularly when Moscow’s willingness to support its partners in a crisis remains uncertain. Such a development

could weaken Russia's position in global politics and undermine its credibility as a reliable strategic partner. This development was influenced, among other factors, by Russia's concerns over Ukraine's potential integration into NATO. Given Ukraine's geographical proximity to Russia, Moscow has regarded further NATO enlargement in the region as a significant concern for its broader security and strategic interests, although this interpretation remains contested by Ukraine and NATO members.

The Possibility of a Wider War on the Korean Peninsula

The ongoing wars in different parts of the world, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war and the conflicts involving Israel, Iran, and various Arab countries, demonstrate that contemporary warfare is increasingly shaped not only by direct military confrontation but also by external assistance to allied or partner states. Major powers frequently support their partners through military supplies, intelligence, financial assistance, humanitarian aid, diplomatic backing, and other forms of strategic support. In many cases, such assistance may be provided openly, while other forms of support can remain less visible.

The Russia-Ukraine war provides a clear example. The United States and European countries have provided Ukraine with substantial military, financial, humanitarian, and intelligence assistance, including air-defence systems, missiles, drones, ammunition, training, and economic support. At the same time, Russia has received varying forms of political, economic, technological, and military-related support from countries that oppose or seek to counter Western influence. North Korea's provision of military assistance to Russia has further demonstrated how conflicts in one region can become connected to strategic developments in another.

A similar pattern can be observed in the Middle East. The United States and European countries have provided significant political, military, and economic support to Israel, while Iran has developed relationships with a network of regional partners and armed groups. Other states have also provided different forms of diplomatic, economic, or strategic support to the parties involved. Consequently, modern conflicts cannot always be understood simply as wars between two countries; they increasingly operate within wider networks of strategic partnerships and competing geopolitical interests. This raises an important question regarding the Korean Peninsula. If an armed conflict were to break out between North and South Korea, it is highly likely that the United States would provide substantial assistance to South Korea under its existing alliance commitments. The more difficult question concerns the possible responses of China and Russia. Would they provide military, economic, intelligence, technological, or logistical assistance to North Korea? Under what circumstances might such assistance remain indirect, and under what circumstances could either country become directly involved?

The Korean War of 1950-53 provides an important historical reference point. China eventually intervened directly in support of North Korea, while the Soviet Union provided important assistance, including military equipment, training, advisers, and other forms of support. However, the strategic environment of the twenty-first century is fundamentally different from that of the 1950s. North Korea now possesses nuclear weapons and increasingly sophisticated missile capabilities. Russia has also developed a

substantially closer relationship with Pyongyang in recent years, while North Korea's military cooperation with Russia during the Russia-Ukraine war has created an additional dimension to their strategic relationship.

North Korea's assistance to Russia is particularly significant because it demonstrates that Pyongyang is no longer merely a passive recipient of military assistance from larger powers. It has itself become a supplier of military resources and personnel-related support in an ongoing international conflict. This raises the possibility that a future conflict on the Korean Peninsula could involve a much more complicated network of external actors.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to assume that Russia or China would automatically enter a future Korean war on North Korea's side. Their responses would depend on a number of factors, including the circumstances that triggered the conflict, the scale of the fighting, the possibility of U.S. or allied forces approaching their strategic borders, the nature of North Korea's military actions, their broader relations with the United States, and the risk of escalation to nuclear confrontation. Another critical question is how the United States and its allies would respond if Russia or China provided substantial military assistance to North Korea without directly entering the war. Would Washington and its allies attempt to interdict such supplies? Would they increase military assistance to South Korea? Would sanctions and diplomatic pressure be used instead of direct military action? More importantly, could attempts to restrict external assistance transform a regional conflict into a broader confrontation involving several nuclear-armed powers?

This creates a dangerous escalation dilemma. A conflict initially limited to the Korean Peninsula could potentially develop into a wider confrontation if external powers became directly or indirectly involved. The presence of nuclear weapons makes this possibility considerably more serious than during the Korean War of 1950-53. Even if the major powers sought to avoid direct confrontation, miscalculation, accidental escalation, or attacks on military assets belonging to another nuclear-armed state could produce consequences far beyond the original conflict. For this reason, North Korea's nuclear capability has become an important element of the strategic balance on the Korean Peninsula. From Pyongyang's perspective, nuclear weapons can be viewed as a means of deterring external military intervention and increasing the potential costs of regime-change strategies. At the same time, the existence and expansion of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities create significant security concerns for South Korea, Japan, the United States, and other countries.

The central question, therefore, is not simply whether Russia, China, or the United States would support their respective partners in a future Korean conflict. The more fundamental question is **how far such support could go before indirect assistance transformed into direct confrontation among major powers**. The experience of the Russia-Ukraine war and conflicts in the Middle East demonstrates that contemporary wars can rapidly acquire international dimensions through military assistance, intelligence sharing, economic support, and strategic partnerships.

The future of the Korean Peninsula will consequently depend not only on relations between North and South Korea but also on the broader strategic calculations of the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and other regional actors. Preventing a future Korean conflict from developing into a wider international or nuclear confrontation will require effective deterrence, communication between major powers, crisis-management mechanisms, and diplomatic channels capable of functioning even during periods of severe tension.

The Korean Peninsula therefore represents one of the most consequential potential flashpoints in the contemporary international system. Its nuclear dimension, the US-South Korean alliance, China's geographical and strategic interests, Russia's increasingly close relationship with North Korea, and the lessons emerging from the Russia-Ukraine war together suggest that any future conflict would have implications extending well beyond Korea itself. There are some important reasons which emphasize remaining nuclear power to Korea even after the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Nuclear Deterrence and a Reunified Korea

The Russia-Ukraine war provides an important context for discussions about the future security architecture of a reunified Korea. From this perspective, one possible argument is that a unified Korean state should carefully reconsider whether it should completely abandon its nuclear capabilities after reunification. This argument is based on the security environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula, where a reunified Korea would exist alongside major military and nuclear powers, including Russia and China, while Japan is also a major regional power and the United States maintains a substantial military presence and security commitment on the peninsula.

The experience of Ukraine is frequently cited in debates over nuclear disarmament and security guarantees. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited a significant nuclear arsenal but subsequently surrendered its nuclear weapons under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. In return, Ukraine received security assurances concerning respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom were among the signatories. Despite these assurances, Russia later violated Ukraine's territorial integrity, most notably through the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion launched in 2022. The Ukrainian case has therefore generated renewed debate about the difference between security assurances and credible security guarantees, although the circumstances surrounding Ukraine and Korea are fundamentally different.

From the perspective of a future unified Korea, this experience could strengthen the argument that nuclear weapons may serve as a form of strategic deterrence. The basic proposition is that a state possessing a credible nuclear deterrent may make potential adversaries more cautious about initiating a direct military confrontation because the cost of escalation could become extremely high. For a reunified Korea, this consideration would be particularly significant given its location between several major powers and its proximity to nuclear-armed states.

At the same time, the international community has consistently supported the goal of denuclearising the Korean Peninsula. A reunification settlement would therefore face considerable pressure from the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and other states to establish a nuclear-weapon-free Korean Peninsula. Such an arrangement could potentially reduce regional tensions and strengthen international confidence in the reunification process. However, from the North Korean perspective, complete nuclear disarmament could also be viewed as a potential loss of its principal strategic deterrent. The possession of nuclear capabilities could strengthen Korea's strategic autonomy and deterrence posture, potentially reducing its vulnerability to external political and security pressures from neighbouring states and other major powers.

There are several possible pathways through which Korea could retain its nuclear status. One possible negotiating approach, therefore, would be for North Korea to propose that the nuclear issue be addressed as part of the constitutional and security arrangements of a unified Korea rather than being treated as a prerequisite for reunification. Under such a framework, the future status of Korea's nuclear capabilities could become a subject of multilateral negotiation involving the major regional and global powers. The unified Korean state could seek legally binding security arrangements, reciprocal arms-control measures, non-aggression commitments, and mechanisms for international verification.

This does not necessarily mean that a unified Korea must permanently retain nuclear weapons. Rather, the central argument is that nuclear disarmament should not be assumed automatically as the price of reunification. The future Korean government would need to assess its security environment, the credibility of international guarantees, and the strategic balance in Northeast Asia before deciding whether to retain, reduce, or ultimately eliminate its nuclear capabilities.

Thus, the Ukraine experience can be used as one argument in favour of treating nuclear deterrence as a central component of the security debate surrounding Korean reunification. However, Ukraine also demonstrates that nuclear weapons alone do not guarantee national security, and the Korean case would require a broader combination of credible alliances, conventional defence capabilities, diplomatic agreements, economic interdependence, and regional security mechanisms.

Nuclear reality in the Modern times

The Korean Peninsula occupies a highly sensitive geopolitical position, surrounded by major powers such as China, Russia, and Japan, while the United States maintains a substantial military presence in South Korea. These states possess significant nuclear capabilities, and China and Russia maintain close strategic relations with North Korea. Recent conflicts in the Middle East have also demonstrated the potential vulnerabilities faced by states closely aligned with major powers. For example, during periods of heightened US-Iran tensions, US partners in the region, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, have faced security threats and attacks attributed to Iran or Iran-aligned actors. Although the circumstances differ significantly, this experience raises a broader question regarding the security implications for South Korea of its alliance with the United States. In the event of a major US-regional

confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea could potentially face increased security risks as a principal US ally in the region.

South Korea should consider developing nuclear weapons, if necessary, as it has the technological and industrial capabilities to do so within a relatively short period. Such a capability could potentially strengthen deterrence against the direct threat of a nuclear attack from North Korea. South Korea has made significant efforts to engage with North Korea; however, North Korea's policy has often been based on a “wait-and-watch” strategy. North Korea has benefited from these engagements in various ways, and it has also been alleged that some of the financial assistance provided by South Korea was diverted toward the development of North Korea's nuclear program. However, it's very clear that no big power is going to like this idea. Even South Korean policy is to de-nuclearize the Korean Peninsula for years. So, this is going to be very hard to change after reunification. However, Major powers generally seek to preserve the existing regional balance of power and may resist developments that could significantly alter the prevailing strategic status quo. One of the major obstacles to Korean reunification is the concern of the surrounding and major world powers, which may be reluctant to accept a reunified Korea retaining North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. A nuclear-armed unified Korea could significantly alter the strategic balance in East Asia.

Some New Ideas

The involvement of the U.S. President Donald Trump has, at times, further complicated the situation on the Korean Peninsula through controversial comments and statements regarding the U.S. role in the region. North Korea has historically responded very sensitively to statements and actions that it perceives as threatening or disrespectful. Such rhetoric can increase tensions and make it more difficult to establish trust and maintain constructive dialogue with North Korea. Therefore, a more cautious and diplomatic approach from the United States could be beneficial for reducing tensions and creating a more favourable environment for future peace talks with North Korea.

In older times, during wars, both sides sometimes sought to avoid mass casualties by selecting and sending their best soldiers to engage in single combat to determine the outcome of a battle and save many lives. Similar efforts cannot be completely ruled out in the present scenario. In some historical conflicts, small groups of soldiers would target the highest-ranking general or king during a war in an attempt to end the conflict as quickly as possible and save the lives of thousands of soldiers. Such possibilities cannot be completely dismissed in the present scenario. Perhaps South Korea or the United States could also consider targeted killings of Kim Jong Un or members of his family as a means of avoiding mass casualties on the scale of the Korean War. If South Korea were to succeed in removing the North Korean leadership, North Korea could potentially become a leaderless state, making it easier to gain control over the northern part of the peninsula. There might be no immediate replacement for the leadership because the Kim family has historically prevented other political figures from developing enough power to challenge its authority. North Korea also remains deeply distrustful of the intentions of the United Nations because of its role during the Korean War. China's concern will be heavy inflow of

refugees after the Reunification. At the same time Japanese will be afraid of Korean nationalism and US concern about securing nuclear weapons. Pritchard (2005) argues that Korean reunification would have significant implications for the United States and the broader Northeast Asian region. The reunification process would affect regional security, the balance of power, and the strategic interests of major powers, particularly the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea. Therefore, achieving peaceful reunification would require diplomatic coordination and careful consideration of the future of the US military presence and the security structure of Northeast Asia.

Generation Z and the Changing Perception of Korean Reunification

The passage of time has significantly affected the collective memory of the Korean War and, consequently, public attitudes toward reunification. Most of the generation that directly experienced the Korean War has either passed away or reached an advanced age. As a result, the personal and emotional memories associated with the division of the Korean Peninsula are gradually fading. Younger generations in South Korea, who have no direct experience of the war or separation from family members in North Korea, tend to view reunification less as a historical or national obligation and more as a potential economic and social burden.

For many young South Koreans, immediate concerns such as employment, housing, education, economic inequality, and career opportunities are more pressing than the question of reunification. They are also increasingly aware of the enormous financial resources that would be required to modernise North Korea's infrastructure and reduce the economic gap between the two Koreas. The prospect of reunification therefore generates concerns about higher taxes, increased public expenditure, and competition for limited economic opportunities.

Another significant concern is employment competition. South Korean young people already face considerable competition in the labour market. They may fear that, following reunification, the integration of North Korean workers and students into South Korean society would create additional competition for jobs, university places, and other social opportunities. Thus, for a section of the younger generation, reunification is no longer viewed primarily through the emotional lens of one nation and one people, but through practical questions concerning economic costs, employment, social integration, and future opportunities. This generational transformation is one of the important factors contributing to declining enthusiasm for immediate Korean reunification. Gen Z’s response would likely be shaped by economic, social, and generational considerations rather than by a simple rejection of reunification: Two possible scenarios may be considered.

First, the initiation of a reunification process could trigger a Gen Z-led movement in South Korea, particularly in response to concerns over the substantial economic costs and social implications associated with reunification. At the same time, younger South Koreans may distinguish between supporting peaceful coexistence and accepting immediate political reunification. In many Asian

countries, protests by generation Z are taking place. However, all were different in nature. Their goals were different, ways were different. North Korean Gen-Z also should protest against the current regime so they can see a new era of a new Sun. Surveys conducted by the Korea Institute for National Unification in 2021 showed that only 58.7 percent of South Koreans believed that reunification was necessary. Many surveys and interviews indicate that the younger generation, particularly Generation Z (Gen Z), is not very interested in the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Similar findings have emerged from various data-collection efforts.

Traditionally, four major arguments have been used to justify the reunification of the Korean Peninsula:

- Reducing the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula;
- Creating economic and technological synergy by combining South Korea's advanced technology and capital with North Korea's labour force and natural resources;
- Alleviating the suffering of separated families who have remained divided for generations; and
- Restoring the historical, cultural, and national unity of the Korean people.

However, the youth of South Korea are unable to connect strongly with the latter two outcomes. They increasingly perceive North Korea as unfamiliar and as an enemy. They are also less supportive of providing economic aid to North Korea. Unlike the older generation, they do not necessarily consider North Koreans to be "one of their own." Some young people support reunification because it could reduce the threat of war. However, a significant proportion of young South Koreans around 55–67 percent in some surveys consider reunification unnecessary. Some believe that even if reunification were to occur, it would involve enormous economic costs, which is a reasonable concern. They prefer reunification to take place only under favourable conditions and believe that the process should not be rushed. Klatte (2025) examines the growing pessimism among South Korean youth regarding Korean reunification. The study highlights concerns about the economic costs of reunification, social differences between North and South Korea, and the potential burden on South Korea's younger generation. Many young people no longer consider reunification an urgent national priority, focusing instead on domestic issues such as employment and economic stability. Youth attitudes toward reunification are changing, reflecting a shift from historical nationalism toward practical economic and social considerations. One other study says South Korean youth's perceptions of North Korea and Korean reunification, highlighting the growing influence of pragmatic considerations over traditional national identity. It explores how young people's views are shaped by security concerns, economic costs, and the perceived benefits of reunification. It suggests that younger generations increasingly approach reunification cautiously, prioritising South Korea's economic stability and future prospects over the historical ideal of a unified Korea.

This does not necessarily mean that Gen Z is completely opposed to reunification. Rather, many young South Koreans appear to favour a gradual, conditional, and carefully managed approach. They are concerned that a sudden reunification could place an excessive economic burden on South Korea and create difficulties in **employment, welfare, education, housing, and social integration**. Therefore, they

tend to favour reunification only when favourable political, economic, and security conditions have been established.

Conclusion

The problem of the Korean Peninsula in the East Asian region is one of the core areas that could potentially trigger a larger war in the world. A future Korean war would not necessarily remain a conflict between North and South Korea. The existing alliances, North Korea's growing military cooperation with Russia, China's strategic interests, and the presence of nuclear weapons could create pathways for wider international involvement. Nevertheless, external support would not automatically mean direct military intervention by the major powers. Their responses would depend on the circumstances of the conflict, their strategic interests, and their assessment of escalation risks.

The central challenge, therefore, would be to prevent a regional conflict from becoming a confrontation among nuclear-armed powers. North Korea's nuclear capability may strengthen its deterrence, but it also increases the stakes of any crisis. Ultimately, the security of the Korean Peninsula will depend not only on military deterrence but also on effective communication, crisis-management mechanisms, and diplomatic efforts capable of preventing miscalculation and uncontrolled escalation. There are several probable futures for the reunification process on the Korean Peninsula. One perspective suggests that, given the current situation, the reunification process seems unlikely to begin again, particularly through the soft-landing approach. Another perspective argues that the issue of reunification should be addressed through a hard-landing theoretical process. Finally, considering the views of Generation Z and the current situation, the high costs of reunification for North Korea under Kim Jong Un, including the potential for casualties and war, may outweigh the benefits of reunification. Therefore, maintaining the status quo may be the most practical option and should continue the dialogues for reunification.

Nevertheless, it would be beneficial to keep the channels of communication open, even if reunification is not an immediate objective. Maintaining dialogue could help establish and preserve good-neighbour relations between the two Koreas. The history of the Korean Peninsula has already demonstrated the devastating consequences of prolonged hostility and confrontation. The future of the two nations should not be determined solely by the conflicts of the past. Reunification of the Korean Peninsula has long been a dream of the Korean people. However, the situation is changing rapidly, as the younger generation is less interested in such critical issues and is more focused on their own daily lives and concerns. They are also afraid of war and believe that, if reunification can help prevent future conflict, they would still be willing to support it.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was not applicable to this study because it did not involve human participants.

Author Contribution

This manuscript is a single author research work, and I, Dr. Vinay Kumar, have independently undertaken the research, conceptualization, analysis, writing, editing, revision, and final review of the entire manuscript. I take full responsibility for the intellectual content, arguments, interpretation of evidence, citations, and final version of the article.

Data Availability

This study is based on secondary data obtained from publicly available academic publications, policy reports, institutional surveys, and official documents relevant to Korean reunification. The sources used in the analysis are cited in the manuscript and listed in the references, with publicly accessible links provided wherever available. No original dataset was generated for this study. The supporting documentary sources are publicly accessible through the cited publications and institutional repositories.

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Footnotes

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