

Growing Pessimism: South Korean Youth's Perceptions on Korean Reunification

Kaelyn Klatte

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kim Seung-kyung,
Indiana University Bloomington

ABSTRACT

The persistent division of the Korean Peninsula has caused scholars to observe that younger generations of South Koreans are becoming less optimistic about reunification. Past studies—most notably conducted by Hankook Ilbo, Hankook Research, Global Research, and Asian Institute of Policy Studies—have found that “Generation Z,” the population born between 1997 and 2012, is characteristically more pessimistic about reunification than older generations, and predict that this trend will continue. Studies have also found that young women are less hopeful of a reunification than young men. These past studies were conducted on a large scale through surveys and public polls. In order to achieve a more nuanced discernment on Gen-Z's attitudes, this research conducted ten interviews with South Korean Gen-Z nationals. Despite the small sample size, this study supports previously identified patterns among the youth. The study found that female participants are more skeptical, and that Gen-Z might support reunification under different circumstances. This study also found that Gen-Z holds a South Korean-centric national identity, viewing North and South Korea as separate entities. They feel no particular obligation to aid North Korea or work towards peninsular reunification. Instead, the interviewees felt that the South Korean government should devote its resources to other issues more pertinent to them. Most importantly, this study argues that Gen-Z is flexible in their beliefs and may support reunification if the circumstances were different.

KEYWORDS: Korea, Korean Peninsula, reunification, Gen-Z

INTRODUCTION

Over 30 years after the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Korean peninsula continues to find itself in the persistent throes of the Cold War. July 2023 marks the peninsula's 70th anniversary of the Korean armistice; August 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of peninsular separation. Tensions along the border between North and South Korea have continued to rise over the decades as Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un of North Korea has increased the country's military provocations, ballistic missiles testing, and military fortification (Snyder, 2022). On November 2nd, 2022 alone, North Korea had launched twenty-five missiles (Kim, 2022) and has admitted that such provocations were “practices for ‘mercilessly’ hitting South Korean and U.S. targets.” With over 70 years of ongoing warfare along the border, both countries have continued efforts to hone their respective military strength in this respect. In recent years, North Korea has maintained a strict border shutdown policy, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to refuse economic trade and reunification efforts from its sister country (Ministry of Unification, 2022). Furthermore, in January of 2024, current Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un erased the concepts of unification and *minjok*, a term used to describe the shared ethnicity of Koreans, from the North Korean constitution and demolished commemorative landmarks of reunification (Lee & Adams, 2024). From the Supreme Leader's actions, it becomes clear that North Korea views South Korea as a hostile state.

Kim Jong-Un's aggression toward South Korea may very well be damaging how South Koreans think of North Korea. Current events and contemporary experiences with North Korea are shaping the ideologies of young South Koreans. These individuals, newly armed with voting power, will be at the forefront of political, economic, and social movements in the future. They will be the ones pushing for—or against—the reunification efforts put forth by South Korea's government, the ones investing in economic cooperation with their sister country, and the ones leading social reintegration programs. It is important to study their perceptions of North Korea and reunification, as it may affect how South Korea proceeds with reunification efforts.

South Korean scholars already notice generational ideological differences regarding reunification. Duri, one of the interviewees for this project, stated that “the older generation definitely prioritizes reunification a lot more [...] especially those that have gone through the war. [To] my grandfather who passed away, [reunification] was his lifelong dream.”

This research pulls from a small sample size of ten South Korean students at Indiana University–Bloomington who have extensive knowledge on South Korean culture and politics. Thus, through the combination of background research and the participants' interviews, this research presents an important perspective on the issue of reunification. The paper explains the opinions that young South Koreans hold towards reunification and attempts to contextualize the concerns that today's South Korean youth have towards reunification. From this, future South Korean government administrations might better understand how to address reunification.

KOREA'S SEPARATION

It is important to understand the history behind Korea's separation to understand the persistent challenges of reunification. Although the Second World War in Europe was over in May of 1945, Japan's aggression in Asia persisted. Allied forces turned their attention toward the Japanese Empire and began pressuring Japan to end the war in Asia and retreat. Japan signed a peace treaty in September and made a sudden evacuation from its militarily occupied states—which included Korea—leaving these countries in political and economic shambles. For the next three years, unemployment levels in Korea were high as political instability and chaos shrouded the peninsula. Emerging political leaders engaged in violence, assassination, and corruption in the struggle for power (Robinson, 2008).

In an effort to stabilize the Korean peninsula politically and economically, the Allied powers separated the peninsula at the 38th parallel. Western spheres of influence—headed by the United States—established democracy and capitalism South of the parallel, and Soviet spheres of influence established communism in the North. In doing

so, the United States and the Soviet Union hoped to simultaneously provide the sister countries with some sort of stability and prove the superiority of their respective systems. They had also created a Joint Commission—a political negotiation project with the goal of facilitating collaboration and rebuilding Korea as an independent state—so that the peninsula could ultimately reunify and choose whichever system of government they preferred.

In 1950, North Korea, backed by China and the Soviet Union, took advantage of South Korea's chaotic political environment and relative military weakness by launching an assault along the 38th parallel. Three years of war ensued, ending in a draw of arms. At the end of the physical conflict, Korea was once again split, only this time the new border was located farther North, past Seoul, than its original border along the 38th parallel. Many Korean soldiers on both sides died, and both economies were demolished (Robinson, 2008). Government corruption, labor strikes, economic distress, communist insurgency, and a lack of foreign aid hindered South Korea's ability to recover from the effects of the Korean War for the next eight years (Seth, 2013). Meanwhile, North Korea lay in ruins from U.S. bombings, having no infrastructure or “meaningful targets” left behind (Robinson, 2008). However, due to considerable aid from China and the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and 1960s, North Korea's socialist state under Kim Il-Sung flourished until the 1970s, after which the cessation of aid left its economy to stagnate (Zhihua et al., 2012). Still today, over 70 years after it started, the Korean War persists. Neither country has signed a peace treaty, and the border remains highly militarized.

REUNIFICATION POLICIES

Although the Korean War solidified the differences between North and South Korea, peninsular reunification has been an important topic for South Korean political candidates, foreign policy analysts, and scholars ever since. In December of 1991, the Koreas reached a pact of reconciliation and nonaggression (Lee & Hyug-Baeg, 2025). North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Il was the first to work towards peaceful unification. He developed the Three Charters for National Reunification, which encompassed his Three Principles for National Reunification, the Ten-Point Programme for Reunification, and the Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo shortly thereafter, in 1997 (Min, 2017). Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Il hoped to achieve peaceful reunification through diplomatic dialogue and wished for both Koreas to come to a consensus on what a unified Korea may look like despite differences in political systems, without the assistance or interference of foreign powers. He further detailed that unity should focus on shared nationalism and cooperation between systems, and reunification should gradually be implemented with a two-state solution where both states retain autonomy,

Former South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung then created the “*Sunshine Policy*,” largely based on *Ostpolitik*—the reunification process that West Germany adopted to reintegrate East Germany in 1998. Through this détente policy, the West German government focused on three major principles: the recognition of equal sovereignty and equality of both sister countries; the absence of force or threat in reunification; and the inviolability of respect for human rights and the border between East and West Germany (Hoffmann, 2023). *Sunshine's* three major principles included: that any armed provocation from North Korea would not be tolerated by South Korean diplomacy; that South Korea ensures it will not try to absorb North Korea, but that both parties have a say and a will in reunification; and finally that South Korea seeks cooperation with North Korea, economically, culturally, and diplomatically (Min, 2017). The *Sunshine Policy* mimicked both *Ostpolitik* and the Three Charters for National Reunification. *Sunshine*

was maintained until 2008, at the end of former President Roh Moo-Hyun's term, former President Kim Dae-Jung's successor. Both South Korean administrations met terms of the policy with great enthusiasm and benevolence. Some scholars ultimately argue that the policy ended in a failure, as humanitarian aid given by South Korea's government failed to discourage North Korean military and atomic provocations.

Some sort of reunification policy was maintained in following years, although none were as diplomatically generous as the *Sunshine Policy*. Former President Lee Myung-Bak proposed a reunification tax on businesses, corporations, and individuals in 2010 that succeeding administrations kept, but he dismissed the *Sunshine Policy's* process and generally held a tough stance on North Korean politics (Joon, 2011). His administration was the first to focus on the increasingly expensive cost of Korean reunification. Former President Park Geun-Hye proposed a reunification policy based on the German *Trustpolitik*, attempting to build North Korea's trust in their administration through industrial cooperation (KSB World Radio, 2015). She believed that reunification would bring about great economic advantages but would only be possible through mutual trust. Former President Moon Jae-In hoped to revive *Sunshine* and pledged to achieve reunification by 2045. Unlike his predecessors, Moon took a more cooperative approach towards reunification and stressed the importance of denuclearization negotiations (Edward & Lewis, 2019). One of his achievements included the establishment of an Inter-Korean Liaison Office, which aimed to help North and South Korea communicate. The office was established in 2018 and later destroyed by Kim Jong-Un in 2020 (Bicker, 2020).

President Yoon Suk-Yeol took office in July of 2022, but was impeached from office in December 2024. The action came in response to his declaration of Marshall law, which he hoped to use against his political opponents. As President Yoon faces his impeachment trial, his administrative efforts are carried on by Acting President Choi Sang-Mok. The Yoon administration follows his three-step roadmap for reunification. Basing his platform on a long history of predecessors, he hoped to continue reconciliation and cooperation efforts with Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un. Where he somewhat diverged in thought, however, is that he proposes the establishment of a Korean Union similar to a “European Model,” where Korea is regarded as the same country with a singular federal government presiding over two unique systems, thus allowing for ideological differences in a unified Korea (O'Connor, 2022). The Yoon administration also stresses a one-market economic model and underlined the importance of addressing human rights issues in addition to the denuclearization of North Korea. Because of the nature of inter-Korean diplomacy, President Yoon had not released a timeline by which he hoped to achieve these goals. Yoon's policy reflects the theory of gradual integration where two countries expand economic cooperation to create convergence and interdependence between economies (Cho & De Moor, 2021). A prolonged integration will allow South Korea to prepare itself economically for the costs of reunification, spanning from debts that North Korea owes to China, to the investment into infrastructure and development across all fronts of the North Korean economy.

The applications of these policies can be seen in the Ministry of Unification's (MoU) annual whitepapers. The MoU is tasked with overseeing all projects related to North Korea, including tourism, transportation and infrastructure, cultural integration, legal foundations, assimilation and education of Korean defectors, demilitarization and denuclearization negotiations, inter-Korean economic cooperation, and reunification of separated families. The MoU also cites inspiration from the German reunification model and prioritizes ideas of pluralism, coexistence, and cooperation with North Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2022). Through the MoU's actions,

South Korea follows the Peace New Deal, an initiative to implement a peaceful inter-Korean economy to create a stronger, unified Korea.

Meanwhile, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un has begun to diverge from his father's and grandfather's reunification ideologies. Rising tensions along the demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea, alongside persisting political disagreements slowly gridlocked cooperative reunification efforts. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea implemented a strict border shutdown, which the country continued to maintain at the pandemic's resolution (Ministry of Unification, 2022). However, in 2024, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un publicly announced the demolition of the Three Charters for National Reunification, alongside any other unification initiative and memorabilia.

PUBLIC OPINION DATA

In 2020, a study published by a public opinion poll company, Global Research revealed a gender gap in South Korean Millennials' and Generation Zs' perceptions of reunification across a sample group of 1,000 participants (Kwon, 2021). The study showed that 63.2% of women and 46% of men were opposed to reunification. The study described this difference as being a result of gender status; while men believe they can "seize opportunities" through reunification, women seem to believe that their status could be "threatened" by reunification. Additionally, the poll found that 46.7% of young South Koreans believed that President Yoon's administration should focus on economic development and job creation during his presidency, as opposed to reunification (Kwon, 2021). Lastly, 31% of respondents viewed North Korea as being unrelated to South Korea. Of the Gen-Z participants, only 10% agreed that North Koreans share the same ethnicity, commonly referred to as *minjok*.

According to a poll from Hankook Ilbo and Hankook Research taken in December 2020, only 37% of Gen-Z respondents viewed Korean reunification as necessary, or as a requirement for peace (Shim, 2020). This poll had a sample size of 500 Gen-Z respondents. In 2023, a poll conducted by the Ministry of Unification with a sample size of 73,991 students, finds that 38.9% cited that reunification is "not necessary" while 28.3% of students were "not interested" in reunification. These figures mark an increase from 24.2% and 20.2% in 2020, respectively (Lee, 2024). A student at the University of Kansas had conducted similar interview-based research with nine participants (Keenan, 2020). Much like the Hankook Research, the results from this study stated that only 44% of respondents were in favor of reunification. Although a slightly older study, the Asian Institute of Policy Studies found that 7.2% of their sample group of 2,000 South Koreans in their twenties believed that reunification must be done as soon as possible (Kim, 2018). Meanwhile, 12% believed reunification was unnecessary, and a 56.9% majority said they would support reunification depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, 23.9% percent of respondents in their 20s at the time believed that reunification should not be rushed (Kim, 2018).

These figures may be explained by findings from South Korea expert and Ph.D. Emma Campbell. South Korean youth are making a conscious decision to accept a new "South Korean national identity" that rejects the concept of a unified Korean Peninsula (Campbell, 2011). Personal and South Korea-specific issues, such as education and jobs, took priority among the issues they cared most about. Support for reunification only arose if it proved a net gain for South Korea. Of the youth who support reunification, gradual reintegration was preferred over immediate reunification (Campbell, 2011). Each study above reveals an increasing apathy towards reunification, as well as a generational shift in Korean national identity.

STUDY METHODS

This study was built on information gathered through archival research—using government policy documents as primary sources and books or articles as secondary sources—and interview-based research. To collect a purposive sample of South Korean youth, the study sets qualifications that my participants should meet. Primarily, the study seeks to talk to young South Korean citizens ages 18 to 29. The study's participants were selected on a snowball sampling basis. Due to an existing language barrier between the researcher and participants, the interviews were conducted in English, at times with assistance from a translator.

The sampling composes of ten students at Indiana University Bloomington; five males and five females (Figure 1), all Korean citizens who properly fall into the age range (Figure 2). All participants are legally South Korean citizens; only one had never lived in South Korea but reported visiting often (Figure 3). Of the five men, four had already served or expect to serve in the South Korean army (Figure 4). Three of the participants self-identified as left-leaning, and one as right-leaning, with respect to South Korean politics (Figure 5). The rest of the participants identified as independent.

Figure 1: My Study's Total Gender Distribution

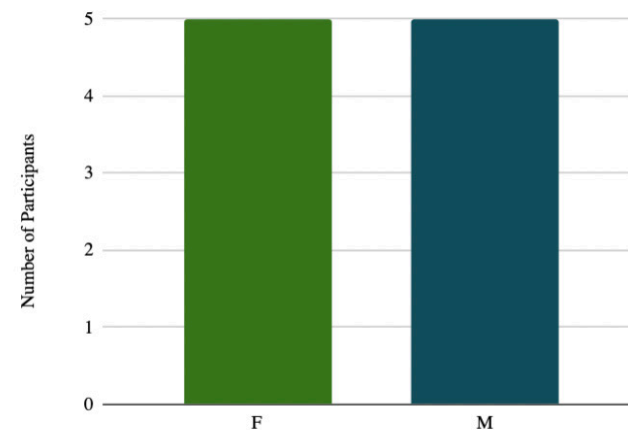


Figure 1. Participants' Total Gender Distribution

Figure 2: My Study's Age Distribution

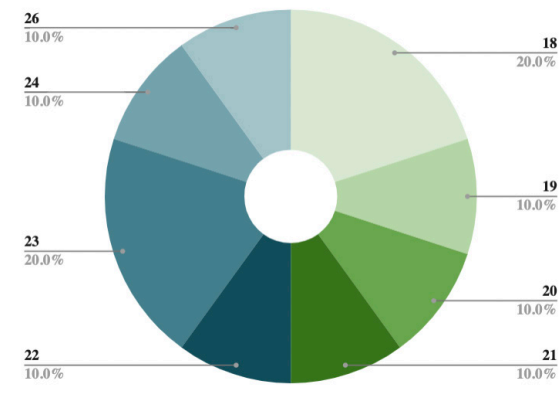


Figure 2. Participants' Age Distribution

Figure 3: My Study's Distribution of Years Lived in South Korea

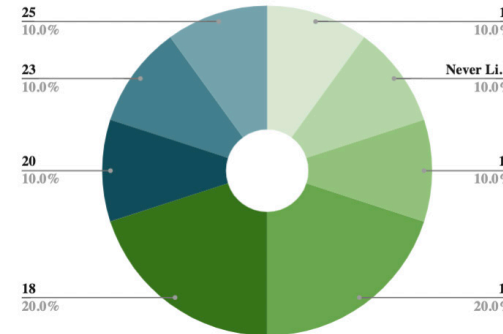


Figure 3. Participants' Distribution of Years Lived in Korea

Figure 4: Completed Military Service Among Participants

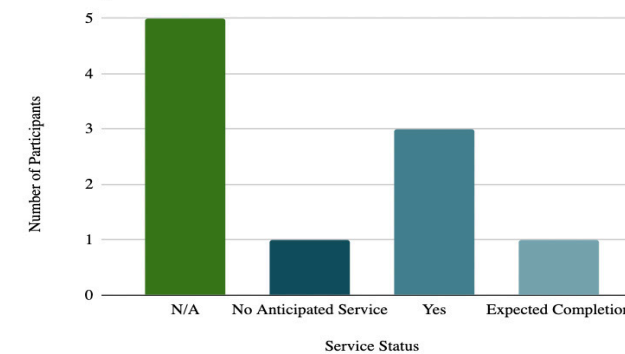


Figure 4. Completed Military Service Among Participants

Figure 5: My Participants' Self-Reported Political Leanings

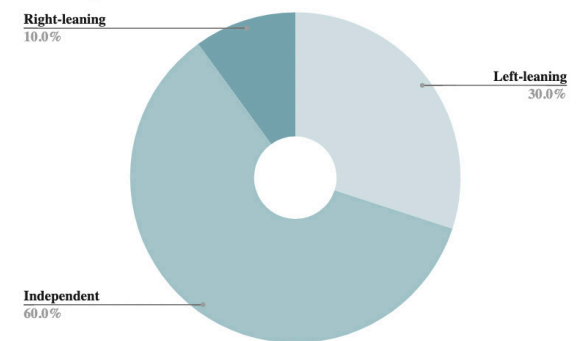


Figure 5. Participants' Self-Reported Political Leanings

The researcher developed a set of questions and conducted fifteen to twenty-minute interviews with each participant, although some interviews lasted up to 40 minutes. Most participants preferred in-person sessions, but the researcher also made accommodations for Zoom sessions. To gain basic demographic information, the researcher asked each participant for their age, political leaning, and how long they had lived in South Korea. The researcher asked participants if they were hopeful for successful inter-Korean cooperation and reunification, based on former President Yoon's 3-step plan:

"The South Korean government, under the Yoon administration, worked on a 3-step plan toward complete reunification: reconciliation and cooperation, establishing a Korean Union, and finally reuniting the Korean Peninsula. Based on this information, how hopeful are you about a Korean reunification?"

The researcher asked follow-up questions to gain a more in-depth understanding based on their responses. Similarly, the study aimed to understand any possible reservations that the youth might have of President Yoon's "unified Korea" model:

"The South Korean government, under the Yoon administration, planned on creating a unified Korea based on the "European Model," with two separate systems and two localized governments under one federal, Korean government. Based on this information, what are your reservations about the effectiveness of a unified Korea (i.e.: the cost of reunification, competing cultures, political gridlock, etc)?"

Likewise, the researcher asked any necessary follow-up questions. To focus on the interview in real-time, the researcher decided to record each interview with the participants' consent. Each voice recording was transcribed, compiled into a meta database, and analyzed to identify any patterns between interviews. The study assigns each participant a pseudonym so that they may keep their anonymity, while still making use of their statements. By tracking the names, the paradoxical nature of participants' answers may be identified more clearly, in support of the study's findings.

STUDY RESULTS

Overall, nine participants had a negative perspective of Korean reunification and cited not believing it to be possible. Similarly, six participants did not think that the benefits of reunification outweigh its risks. Four participants felt that North and South Korea were better off separate, while six participants stated that Korean reunification, eventually, would be necessary. Interestingly, this study also observed a gender gap in perceptions of Korean reunification among its small sample size. Four of the five female participants did not support Korean reunification, while only two of the five male participants did not support Korean reunification. Similar to Global Research's findings, the female participants were more likely to acknowledge safety concerns regarding reunification, whereas the male participants were more likely to find reunification economically beneficial.

"I think reunification is – right now it's not a good idea, because it's – first of all, it's going to be very harmful to women. Women already are constantly under threat by South Korean men, and plus North Korean men... I don't feel safe" (Hae ♀).

"There are a lot of problems that we have to overcome, but if we're able to overcome these problems as a country, then there's huge potential for benefits" (Jung ♂).

"We have a huge gap in [economic power], so to be realistic [...] I just want them to end the war" (Ji-Ho ♀).

Hae pointed towards gender inequalities in South Korean society as major factors of female distress. Reunification, she argued, may expose South Korean women to North Korea's regressive gender norms and corrupt legal systems, and could therefore harm South Korean women. Jung, on the other hand, noted that reunification can bring potential economic benefits, which the study discusses later.

Nearly all the participants voiced concerns about the economic

and financial costs that Korean reunification would require. Participants pointed toward South Korea’s struggling economy, high unemployment, and difficulties in labor markets among youth. Similarly, each echoed the sentiment that the cost of reunification would be “burdened by [young] South Koreans” specifically. Some believed that reunification may provide South Korea with long-term financial benefits, while others prioritized South Korea’s short-term financial needs.

“South Korea has zero future in terms of the next one hundred years [...] I think North Korea has to be the solution. It’s a risky endeavor, but I think that it’s the only future possible. We have to take the risk” (Jung ♂).

“In economic terms, there will be supplemental aid from South Koreans to North Koreans. So, all of the support would come from the wallets of the South Koreans and [...] maybe South Koreans will ignore or discriminate against North Koreans because they are in poverty, and also like they will live by the aid of the South Koreans” (Da-Eun ♀).

“Once we open the barrier of the peninsula, a lot of foreign investment companies can invest more money. [...] We have to consider the long-term things. In the long term, I believe, we can get a lot of benefits from [reunification]” (Ji-Won ♂).

“There are not many youths who can afford the tax for reunification costs” (Nabi ♀).

Words such as *zero*, *risky*, *discriminate*, *poverty*, and *afford* imply the negative connotations that South Korean youth feel towards reunification. They interpret it as a burden upon themselves and others that therefore may not be worth the sacrifice. Meanwhile, *invest*, *long-term*, *benefits*, and *have to take the risk* show that others view reunification as a potentially positive process that would benefit South Korea as a whole.

The majority of the participants believed that South Korea should focus on other issues, including their own political climate, feminism and equality, and economic growth, alongside the previously discussed labor market and education system.

“Reunification is going to be expensive, and right now, we live in the world of the 4th industrial revolution. So, everyone is focusing on A.I. and IOT kind of stuff, and we should be investing money in those kinds of technology. But, if we reunify with North Korea, then we have to spend all of our money rebuilding them” (Hae ♀).

“The youth are suicidal because it’s really hard; everything is so harsh with competition, and like young people can’t really – they’re working hard because their parents said that if you work hard, you’ll achieve everything you ever want, but in the reality it isn’t so. They get [...] depressed about that. I hope – as a 20-year-old South Korean, I hope the government focuses on the issues that are going on in our age, like the education system and the employment issues” (Ji-Ho ♀).

“Korea’s economy isn’t in the best shape, there’s huge, um, youth unemployment, there’s huge stress levels among the youth” (Jung ♂).

“All we care about now is moreso economic improvements than we do family reunion. I think it’s better to clear out just the problems within our own country, like gender inequality” (Hwan ♂).

These participants used phrasing to communicate their concern about South Korea’s current climate by introducing concepts such as suicide, stress, unemployment, and a lagging industrial revolution. The focus on issues specific to South Korea reflects the same idea of a new national identity which rejects the concept of a Korean Peninsula that Campbell’s thesis found. Rather than feeling an obligation to reunify

with North Korea due to ethnic ties, these statements show that some youth view South Korea as a separate entity with its own, more salient issues to resolve.

A few participants agreed that reunification, or at least increased cooperation within the Korean Peninsula could have economic benefits. These participants recognized a key feature of the Ricardian economic model; that international trade and investment will ultimately benefit all parties involved economically (Ikenberry & Grieco, 2002). They echoed what scholars have argued about how a proper reunification will return peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula and make it more attractive to investors. Reunification will require significant expansions of the Korean market, and the return rate of the investment could be high (Eberstadt, 1997).

“If both Koreas implement the European model [...] more South Korean companies will start investing in North Korea. So that would be a huge benefit for South Korea” (Jae ♂).

“If we were to get the reunification of [the] Korean Peninsula, we could just grab an opportunity from that. So, Samsung construction, or Hyundai construction, [allows us to] go into North Korea to develop a lot of unused lands. So we can make job employment. Also, once we open the barrier of the peninsula, a lot of foreign investment companies can get into the Korean peninsula to invest more money” (Ji-Won ♂).

“With the good part, [reunification] would entice more growth in the opportunity to get a job, including in South and North Korea. So in the economical perspective, it might create more chances and opportunities to make new markets in Korea” (Nabi ♀).

Here, statements include concepts of opportunity, foreign investment, and growth to underline the positive long-term effects that gradual reintegration may provide to the Korean peninsula. Both Ji-Won and Nabi believed that proper, gradual reintegration may solve some of the unemployment problems that South Korea observes and ultimately may lead to economic growth.

Participants were asked to summarize their generations’ thoughts on reunification and outline what they believe are key details in the opinions of their generation. All ten participants agreed that the South Korean youth have a pessimistic view of reunification. The reasons they gave included a lack of cultural ties or shared identity between the youth of North and South Korea, a struggling South Korean economy, steep costs of reunification, a lack of hope and belief in the process, as well as reunification not being on the popular agenda of the younger generations.

“We don’t really want reunification right now. We’re not that hopeful, I guess, compared to the older generation” (Hwan ♂).

“I think the costs outweigh the benefits at this point” (Su-Ho ♀).

“I hope it happens in the future, but it will be difficult. So, I don’t think it’s the right time or status quo to focus on reunification right now” (Ji-Ho ♀).

“I definitely know a lot of kids my age would just prefer the way things are. But since then, a lot of kids just grew up in South Korea, and that’s really all they’ve known, I guess, so they don’t feel as strong of a connection, or the need to, you know, reconnect, and become one whole Korea” (Duri ♂).

“I honestly don’t think many people support the process of reunification because they lost their trust in it” (Jae ♂).

In general, each participant noticed their peers’ apathy towards reunification as being a common trend in Korean society. Just as scholars have found via in-depth research and polling, the participants

agree that Generation Z has a negative or indifferent attitude towards North Korea and reunification. Hwan, however, makes an important point that was noticeable throughout the research: it is not necessarily that Gen-Z does not want reunification at all, but they most certainly do not want reunification right now, for their own varying reasons. Duri’s statement reflects the new nationalist identity that Campbell discovered. Gen-Z has only ever known South Korea as a separate entity from North Korea and thus do not feel a strong sense of obligation towards reunification.

The researcher also asked participants if they felt an ethnic tie to North Koreans. Although participants acknowledged that they were of the same ethnicity as North Koreans and that both North and South Korea shared a common history, culture, and language, the separation between the two countries has greatly impacted this relationship, making it easier to distinguish between and separate North and South Koreans. It’s worth noting that the few participants that reported feeling an ethnic tie stated that ultimately, both North and South Koreans have a duty to help one another.

“Now, we kind of consider North Korea as a separate country, but with the same ethnicity” (Jae ♂).

“I think we feel quite similar, because we use the same Korean, but the accent is different. Sometimes I see North Korean news, and they wear the same hanbok, traditional clothing. I think there is no difference in the old culture, before the separation, and the same history, but after the separation there is getting bigger and bigger differences” (Ji-Ho ♀).

“Ever since North Korea and South Korea established their own political systems, they diverged so much, and they’re just so different” (Su-Ho ♀).

“We were separated [for too long], and the world changed too fast, and they [...] are not open to any countries, so it would be really hard to empathize with them” (Nabi ♀).

These quotes show the same conflicting national identities presented by Campbell: on one hand, South and North Korea are separate countries with a shared language, and thus, national identity is tied to from South Korea alone; and on the other hand, both South and North Korea form the Korean Peninsula, which creates a shared ethnic and national identity. Although each participant understands that North and South Koreans share the same ethnicity, they overwhelmingly supported a South-centric, national identity.

Finally, each participant described their overall perspectives of Korean reunification and decided how important it was to them. Most participants had a negative overall perspective of Korean reunification; they were not hopeful of its success, nor could they see it happening anytime soon. They did not believe that any of the administrations could facilitate reunification even if it were possible today, and have not noticed any significant improvements in the inter-Korean relationship. Seven participants did not think that Korean reunification was important to them right now; only three believe that reunification is an important process.

“I don’t see a reason why South Korea is wasting so many taxes on offers they’re not gonna pick. So I don’t see any right time of reunifying” (Hwan ♂).

“We have to make a lot of sacrifices to manage reunification, and I think [the governments] are procrastinating it. It is really important [for Korea], but personally, it is not important” (Da-Eun ♀).

“I think [reunification is] really important to me, and I hope it happens in the near future, because, to me it seems like the only viable path for Korea’s future in the next couple 100 years” (Jung ♂).

“I am 0% hopeful. Reunification is much more complicated because [Korea]

has been separated for such a long time” (Jae ♂).

“Unlike previous generations, the division of Korea is not part of my memory. It’s just what I’ve heard. And so, I don’t feel this earnest push [...] to support, um the governments’ endeavors. South Korea right now already has a lot going on with domestic political issues, so if reunification does happen, would that make things worse?” (Su-Ho ♀).

“I’m very hopeful to get reunification” (Ji-Won ♂).

“North and South Koreans think too differently. I think we need more time to get to reunification” (Nabi ♀).

The use of *wasting*, *worse*, and *sacrifices* implies that Hwan and Da-Eun do not support current reunification policies, if they support reunification at all. On the contrary, Jung considers reunification to be Korea’s *only viable path*, believing that North Korea would be able to resolve South Korea’s birth and economic issues, and South Korea would be able to develop North Korean infrastructure. Ji-Won is hopeful for reunification while Jae is not, citing conflicting political interests between North and South Korea despite wishing it were possible. Whether reunification was important to them *right now* did not necessarily imply that reunification would not be important to them later. Although some participants who do not think reunification is important do not wish for reunification at all, others have described reunification as an important task for the Korean peninsula to undertake in the future.

The researcher would like to make an important distinction here between this research and others cited in the literature review. Other, larger studies are only able to scrape the surface of their participants’ opinions through generalized statements, whereas this interview-based study revealed the complexity of the issue of reunification. Notice how some of the statements from these participants are paradoxical. The participants of this study generally acknowledged both positive and negative aspects of reunification and seem to hold relatively conflicting opinions. Nabi’s interview best reflected this anomaly, as she would express her disapproval towards reunification while still being able to acknowledge the benefits that a unified Korea might bring. Her interview, as well as the interviews of every other participant, reflected a paradox of thoughts towards reunification. This shows that these complex issues are not easily summarized by mere statistics, as opinions can be influenced or changed due to different circumstances. It seems that Gen-Z does not want reunification right now for their varying reasons, but is able to consider, and is actually hopeful for, its possibility under better conditions.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study are striking. Interest in and the perceived importance of reunification seem to follow an ever-decreasing trend. The interviewees in this study described South Korean youth as being increasingly “impartial” or “de-sensitized” to Korean reunification. A large number seem to think reunification should either gradually occur later, under better circumstances, or not at all. Furthermore, a majority of participants’ statements reflect the idea of a new nationalist identity that rejects peninsular unity. They believe that the future of South Korea should be focused entirely on South Korea. Future leaders, policymakers, and tax-paying citizens of South Korea believe that other issues, such as high unemployment levels, research and innovation, education, mental health, and equality should take priority in Korean society. This generation was not brought up during the Korean War, nor did they live through its aftermath. They have only ever known the Korean Peninsula as separated, and thus, can only

imagine it separated.

It is imperative to understand that in whole, young South Koreans are becoming more disinterested in reunification and feel weaker ties to their Northern counterparts. In due time, these young adults will become leaders in their respective careers, and if the current trend continues, many will advocate against Korean reunification. Each participant in this study stressed the disparity between North and South Korea, citing that during the 70 years the Korean peninsula has been divided, this disparity has only grown. Any more time, they say, and the separation may become irreparable. Whether indifferent or disturbed by this belief, South Koreans understand that reunification should not be impeded; the longer they wait, the more costly reunification will become, and the less likely newer generations will want it to occur. To this point, each participant agreed that gradual economic and cultural-exchange initiatives should be taken to ease reunification.

It may be in acting President Choi's best interest—as well as that of his successors—to further motivate young South Koreans toward supporting reunification, if this remains to be the administration's goal. Although there are many ways that policies can achieve this, a good method would be to address the concerns that the youth have. This generation, which has few ties to North Korea, emphasizes the political and cultural clashes between both Koreas, the massive costs becoming a potential burden to an already-struggling generation, and the current climate of South Korean society. However, they are not all innately opposed to reunification; they simply want to see the quality of their own lives improve before turning focus towards North Korea. South Korean policymakers must take the opinions of this generation into account and understand the logic behind their thought processes, so that they can properly address Korean political policies and reunification in the coming years.

This study aims to advance scholarly knowledge on the generational divide on Korean reunification and shed some light as to where Generation Z stands on this issue. However, past studies failed to showcase how complicated this issue is, and how many Gen-Z youth hold conflicting views: on one hand, they may not want reunification right now, as they believe there are more important issues to focus on, but on the other hand, they may support reunification under better circumstances. The study implies that there may still be hope for reunification to occur. Readers, scholars, and policymakers will better understand the convictions that the youth have towards reunification by using these contextualized quotes from real, Generation Z South Korea citizens.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

All correspondence should be sent to the first author: kklatte@iu.edu.

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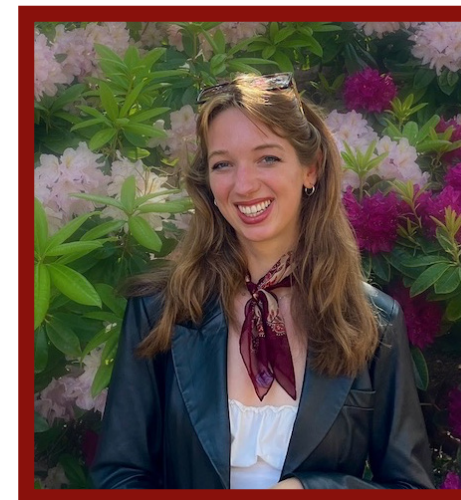
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



kklatte@iu.edu

Kaelyn Klatte

Kaelyn Klatte is a senior double majoring in International Law & Legal Institutions and Economics, with a minor in German Language. Her German heritage and familial ties to the East-West Germany divide inspired her research on the persistent divide in the Korean peninsula. As an aspiring diplomat, she is passionate about foreign relations and the global economy. In preparation of her career goals, she has amassed proficiencies in five languages and has interned with the U.S. Department of Commerce at the U.S. Embassy Berlin. Upon graduation, Kaelyn will continue her education at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences, pursuing a Master of Science in International Political Economy. Kaelyn hopes to continue similar research at LSE.