



Article

Navigating the Complexities: Identity, Peace, and Unification on the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract

The geopolitical history of the Korean Peninsula has been shaped by the interplay between regional and global powers, resulting in lasting division and conflict. This article explores how the Republic of Korea has grappled with its identity in inter-Korean relations, emphasizing both the aspirations for peace and unification and the tensions of the conflictual relationship. The narrative examines the evolution of peace and unification discourses from the Cold War era to the present, highlighting how geopolitical and domestic dynamics have influenced educational frameworks and public perceptions of unification. Notably, the shifting consciousness surrounding Korean identity, marked by a transition from strong unification sentiment to waning enthusiasm among younger generations, raises critical questions about the future of unification policy. The declaration of “two hostile states” by North Korea further complicates these discussions, prompting a reassessment of strategies toward peaceful coexistence. To conclude, the article argues for a comprehensive peace and unification education—integrating cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution, and a commitment to universal values—to foster a viable framework for peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula amidst ongoing geopolitical challenges.

Keywords

Unification, Geopolitics, Global power distribution, Unification discourse, Unification education peace discourse

Introduction

The Korean Peninsula has been significantly affected by geopolitical circumstances. When we look back at the history of international tensions and conflicts in this region, we can find that the interactions between continental powers like China and Russia and maritime powers like Japan and the US primarily drove the experiences of the Korean people. However, more recent experiences have been complicated by various multilateral and complex international political

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issues. Furthermore, China's recent attempts to become a maritime power (Choi, 2021, p. 8) have only added to the complexity of the Korean Peninsula's geopolitical situation. In essence, every country can only partially avoid the geopolitical circumstances in which it exists, but some countries are more vulnerable than others, specifically the Republic of Korea (ROK). The division of the Korean Peninsula directly results from the multilayered conflict involving the two Koreas, the US, the former Soviet Union, China, and Japan, on a global scale.

The ROK was born amidst conflict, and its history is marked by periods of precarious peace intertwined with the geopolitical situation. Korea has faced the Cold War more intensely than any other country, which has solidified the 'division of the territory and nation' and prevented them from breaking free from the structural frame provided by geopolitics and international confrontation. As a result, nationalism and Cold War conflicts have overshadowed peace on the Korean Peninsula, a land that strives for peace above all else.

On the other hand, the sense of smallness and weakness that Korean people have not been able to shake off, combined with the feeling of national inferiority, has led them to express aspirations for tremendous power (Park, 2003; Park & Baik, 2013, p. 65), which operate as a factor that prevents them from being fully peace-oriented. The various desired identities by the governments of the ROK, including "middle power, middle but strong power, Northeast Asia balancer, the Korean Peninsula driver, and pivotal state," are examples of these great power aspirations and show that their attention was focused on securing security by actively articulating regional balance rather than being passive and pursuing universal peace.

At the same time, however, Korea has always emphasized peace-loving. Choi's (2009, p. 2) assertion that "We Koreans have always been a peace-loving people, and the idea of peace has been the basic foundation of Korean thought" reveals their attitude toward peace. Their consciousness, shaped by this binary opposition of Cold War conflict and peace, can be said to be a state of "idealistic orientation toward hopes and dreams intertwined with realistic awareness of the power (Lee, 2018, p. 8)."

What is undeniable is that for quite some time, a realist perception of power has dominated the thinking and behavior of Korean society, which is why it was not until the mid-1990s that peace emerged in the curriculum of Korean education (Kim, 2005, p. 237; Park & Shin, 2020, p. 2). However, this does not mean peace was utterly absent from the curriculum. The ROK government, established with liberation, has made it clear that its foreign policy should be oriented toward the goal of "international peace," even though the subsequent US-Soviet conflict, the onset of the Cold War, the Korean War, the armistice, and the persistence of the division of the Korean Peninsula (Park, 2021, p. 39).

Although the division of territory and confrontation with adversarial forces have brought attention to the importance of peace, they have also limited the discussion and education on the topic. The ROK governments have focused on overcoming the division rather than pursuing peace as a universal value for humanity. As a result, peace discourses often revolve around unification and reducing military tension to manage division rather than seeking peace as a broader concept. However, peace today is not just about overcoming the Cold War and division. It also involves responding to the growing diversity in society, striving for peace as a universal human value, and working toward global justice (Hong, 2021, p. 37; Kim, 2011, p. 229, 2017).

On the other hand, the country's division has fostered a persistent sense of separation among Koreans, which can be described as "division consciousness." This ongoing mindset has significantly influenced the national identities of both the ROK and North Korea and their relationship with each other. Additionally, the changing demographic composition of society, particularly with the passing of the first generation of separated families since the Peninsula's division, has altered attitudes toward unification. This shift has been manifested exceedingly by

North Korea, which has officially stated since 2023 that “the relationship between the ROK and North Korea is no longer one of kinship and homogeneity, but rather that of two hostile nations, two belligerents at war.”

This article explores how Korea’s attitudes toward peace and unification have evolved in response to changes over the years and how related discourses have adapted to education. It will first examine the identity of the relationship between the two Koreas through the lens of North Korea’s “hostile two-state” concept. Then, the article will review historical changes, assess the current state of unification consciousness among the Korean nation and its people, and identify significant factors that have influenced peace and unification education in Korea to date. Finally, it will address the direction peace and unification education should take in light of various challenges.

The Two Hostile States Claims and the Identity of Inter-Korean Relations

North Korea’s claims regarding the existence of two hostile states on the Korean Peninsula raise fundamental questions about the nature of relations between the two Koreas. Specifically, these claims lead to a debate on whether these relations should be considered a ‘state-to-state’ or a ‘special relationship aimed at unification.’

In general, ‘two separate states internationally but the special relationship as a homogeneous but divided nation’ is widely accepted when discussing the relationship between the two Koreas. For example, Jung (2024, p. 128) uses the term “1991 system” to argue that, following their simultaneous entry into the United Nations in 1991, the two Koreas exist internationally as separate states. However, after adopting the Basic Agreement in the same year, they maintained a special relationship designed to pursue unification rather than a conventional state-to-state relationship. The Basic Agreement defines this relationship as a “special relationship formed provisionally in the process of pursuing unification, not as a relationship between states.”

Thus, from this perspective, while the ROK and North Korea are recognized as two separate states in the international community (Jhe, 2015, p. 98), they are also seen as having a special relationship. This understanding has become widely accepted domestically and internationally. Consequently, ‘inter-Korean dialogue’ is not treated as diplomacy. The government departments responsible for such dialogue differ from those handling foreign affairs; in the ROK, the Ministry of Unification takes the lead, while in North Korea, it is the National Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Given North Korea’s recent promotion of the “two hostile states” concept, the previously accepted idea of a relationship that balances both statehood and a special connection is now being questioned. It remains uncertain whether North Korea will maintain its antagonistic attitude toward the ROK or unpredictably revert to the approach of “uri minjok kkiri” (our nation acting as one) suddenly soon. However, the current situation requires reevaluating our understanding of unification and inter-Korean relations. The shifting public consciousness regarding unification, combined with the passage of time and demographic changes, makes North Korea’s assertion of “two hostile states” a pivotal moment for reassessing our values and aspirations for unification and our perceptions of North Korea.

Here, we must seriously consider the concept of ‘Our Korean Peninsula,’ which encompasses not only the ethnic groups living on the divided land of the Korean Peninsula but also the Korean diaspora residing in various countries who maintain a strong connection to the Peninsula as a symbol of cultural identity should be pointed out. This expression includes newcomers and old inhabitants living on the Korean Peninsula.¹

The flow of perceptions and discussions on the concept of ‘Our Korean Peninsula’ led to debates regarding the constitutional values defining ‘peaceful unification’ in the ROK. The Constitution of the ROK states in Article 3 that “The territory of the ROK shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands,” and in Article 4 that “The ROK shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the basic free and democratic order.” Furthermore, the Preamble declares the mission for peaceful unification, with Articles 66 and 69 obligating the president to strive for the peaceful unification of the homeland. Thus, as long as these constitutional provisions remain unchanged, we must pursue “peaceful unification based on the principles of free democracy with the Korean Peninsula and its surrounding territories as our domain,” which this article envisions as ‘Our Korean Peninsula.’

A nation’s identity is shaped through a continuous and dynamic process, evolving with the times and circumstances. A state guides its national identity through education, cultural policies, and language initiatives. This intentionally crafted identity undergoes constant changes and adjustments through interactions with citizens. This identity becomes more solidified and refined through relations with other peoples and nations.

The two Koreas have undoubtedly been influenced by the overarching division structure that impacts their identity formation processes. This division structure exerts control and influence over everyone on the Korean Peninsula and those connected to it. While the goal of unification is evident, this dominant structure fosters a consciousness of division, leading to divergent attitudes toward unification. Division consciousness is a byproduct of the division structure that affects all connected to the Peninsula, creating a deep-seated psychological and collective tendency. The division structure and consciousness manifest through dual attitudes of oppositional thinking - accommodation or resistance to authority and dominant groups, often within one’s subconsciousness. Moreover, education in both the ROK and North Korea serves as a mechanism to internalize and systemize this division consciousness, thereby solidifying and perpetuating the division structure.

The national identities of the two Koreas are inherently relational. They have developed unique identities that coexist amid institutionalized conflict and cooperation within the division structure and consciousness framework. Politically and militarily, they maintain an adversarial relationship while simultaneously seeking limited cooperation in economic and cultural areas, reflecting a paradoxical dynamic. This paradox, shaped by the history of division, ethnic homogeneity, changes in the international political climate, and internal political conditions in both countries, is too intricate to be easily categorized as hostile or cooperative. It undergoes continual transformation, and when these complex factors are combined with leaders’ political goals, we witness an unprecedentedly contentious situation like the declaration of ‘two hostile states.’

Such dynamics highlight the evolving nature of national identity and inter-Korean relations, emphasizing the need for ongoing assessment and redefinition of approaches toward peaceful coexistence and potential unification.

Chasing the Track: Periodic Review

The Korean Peninsula’s emergence in international politics was more a result of external forces than a voluntary act. It was swept up in the tides of modernity and imperialism, forcibly integrated into global public law and international relations. As a passive participant and a vulnerable nation colonized under the pressures of Western and Japanese imperialism, Korea could only aspire to peace, rather than war, as its primary external goal. During this period, the term “peace” was frequently featured in Korean newspapers, reflecting its modern significance

(Ha, 2002, p. 111).

Throughout Korea's history, the discourse on peace and unification has been closely tied to its international political circumstances. One critical aspect of Korea's foreign policy is its sensitivity to the international system, given its geopolitical significance in East Asia, which is home to major global powers. Consequently, the evolution of discussions and education regarding peace and unification in Korea has been shaped by shifts in the international system and by the governments in power.

To understand this evolution, it is important to consider the changing global balance of power and the timing of Korea's foreign policy decisions. The period from the establishment of the government to the present can be divided into four phases: The Division of the Peninsula and the Cold War (1948-1968), Détente and the Amendment of the Constitution (1969-1978), the New Cold War and Democratization (1979-1989), and the Post-Cold War Era with Civilian Governments (1990-present).

Division of the Peninsula and Cold War Period (1948 ~ 1968)

After the liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the division of the Korean Peninsula under Trusteeship, the ROK Government was inaugurated in 1948. Since its establishment, the ROK Government has upheld "international peace" as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy and a crucial aspect of its national identity. Koreans have historically taken pride in their peaceful nature. The Preamble to the Constitution emphasizes the importance of international peace. Rhee Syng-man, the first president of Korea, consistently stressed the need for the country's foreign policy to prioritize peace as its ultimate goal (Park, 2021, p. 42). However, due to Korea's division, the Korean War, and the Cold War, the country's foreign policy shifted to a more realistic approach, focusing on "peace through strength." Consequently, the ROK emphasized collective security measures, including alliances with the United States, the Mutual Security Treaty, and the Pacific Alliance, to achieve peace and security following the armistice.

The realist peace initiative, which highlighted collective security, was strengthened by the Korean War, leading to an increased reliance on force to secure peace. The push for armed unification and the eventual signing of the US-ROK alliance fostered the idea of achieving peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula through collective security. This realist approach became the prevailing sentiment in Korean society during this period. The notion that the ROK should secure peace by building up its domestic military power, solidifying the ROK-US alliance, and forming a collective security system like the Pacific Alliance in the Asian region (Park, 2021, p. 44) was widely accepted as a response to the military threat posed by communism.

The First Curriculum of National Education was introduced in 1955, during a time of heightened tension. Moral education became a means to promote anti-communist sentiments, which was reflected in a moral textbook that included anti-communism alongside anti-Japanese teachings (反共防日). This marked the first instance of anti-communism being officially recognized within the curriculum. However, anti-communism was prioritized over peace, which received little emphasis (Kim, 2005, pp. 231-232).

The Second Republic was abruptly cut short by a military coup led by Park Chung-hee, preventing significant progress during its brief tenure. Although Park criticized the previous government's corruption and ineptitude, his rhetoric on peace and foreign policy remained similar to those of his predecessors. This continuity can be attributed to the challenging circumstances of his time, as the country was deeply divided and facing the Cold War. Additionally, Park was bound by his "Revolutionary Pledge," which prioritized anti-communism and called for strengthening the nation's stance against it. Consequently, he adopted the realist peace initiatives

of his predecessors, and his proposal to build a “great Asia-Pacific community of peace, freedom, and balanced prosperity” (Park, 1968, p. 235) continued along these lines.

Korea’s foreign policy during this period exhibited a realist tendency to view communist powers, such as North Korea and its neighbors—the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union—as threats to peace. It promoted “military buildup, strengthening of the US-ROK alliance, and forming an Asia-Pacific collective security system to secure regional security” to achieve lasting peace. Furthermore, the Park Chung-hee government explicitly enhanced anti-communist education, as seen in the Second Curriculum enacted in 1963. The overarching goal of anti-communist education during this time was “to achieve unification and contribute to the common good of mankind by solidifying belief in democracy and defeating communist aggression” (Park, 1998, p. 98).

The Détente Period and the Amendment of the Constitution (1969 ~ 1978)

After World War II, the US held unchallenged and overwhelming power, but this began to decline with the revival of Europe and its re-emergence on the international political stage. The deterioration of the relationship between China and the Soviet Union opened the door for a rapprochement between the US and China. In this context, a détente atmosphere emerged, influencing Korea’s foreign policy and approach to unification.

In the 1970s, Park Chung-hee introduced a realist discourse on peace and unification, marking a subtle shift from prior policies. A key moment in this change was the “Special Declaration on Foreign Policy for Peaceful Unification,” known as the June 23 Declaration, issued on June 23, 1973. In this declaration, Park announced the abolition of the Hallstein Doctrine, which had been the cornerstone of Korea’s foreign policy until that point and opened diplomatic relations with socialist countries possessing differing ideologies and political systems. He advocated for ongoing dialogue between the two Koreas without interference in each other’s internal affairs, pledging mutual respect. Park also stated that the ROK could join international organizations alongside North Korea. This marked the initiation of the “Northern Policy,” which flourished during the Roh Tae-woo government.

During this period, Korean foreign policy, previously constrained by a framework of “weak states, subordination, alliances, and the Cold War,” began to embrace a more liberal approach. This shift was symbolized by the June 23 Declaration, which raised the banner of “self-diplomacy that overcomes structural constraints.” Additionally, theoretical discussions in international politics were vibrant, with liberal perspectives such as functionalism, neo-functionalism, and complex interdependence theory gaining prominence (Park, 2004, pp. 19-78).

Signs of this change were evident in Park’s August 15 Declaration in 1970, which was influenced by the Nixon Doctrine, the US-China rapprochement of 1969, the North-South Red Cross talks in 1971, and the July 4 South-North Joint Communiqué in 1972. Park needed to offer a new direction to address the grievances of intellectuals and the general public, as he had solidified his long-term rule with the July 4 South-North Joint Communiqué and the Yushin (Revitalizing Reforms) constitution, which was implemented under the slogan of preparing for unification. To achieve this, he introduced a liberal discourse that moved away from a solely anti-communist foreign policy. The US-China détente and the initiatives of Korean leaders and policymakers directly influenced this shift. Consequently, Korea’s discourse on peace and unification during this time was characterized by a blend of realism and liberalism.

This sentiment was reflected in the Third Curriculum of 1973, which stated that the goal of the anti-communist segment was to “strengthen the determination to crush communist aggression and create a sense of mission to achieve ‘peaceful’ unification.” While the anti-communist

educational framework remained intact, peaceful unification emerged in response to the liberal peace discourse (Kim, 2005, p. 233). However, it is important to note that although the term ‘peace’ appeared together with unification, it primarily represented a ‘means for unification’ — that is, ‘unification by peaceful means.’ During this period, education still leaned towards ‘unification through the dismantling of communism.’

It is crucial to recognize that, with the potential for a more pluralistic approach to peace and security, Korea took steps in the mid-1970s to develop and promote a discourse on peace and unification encompassing realistic and liberal elements. This emergence of a liberal peace and unification discourse laid the groundwork for proactive policies toward the North. It facilitated new spatial and temporal conditions for Korea’s foreign policy following the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the collapse of communist regimes, and the conclusion of the Cold War.

The New Cold War and Democratization Period (1979 ~ 1989)

The Yushin regime came to an abrupt end, shattering the people’s hopes for freedom and democracy amidst the tragedy of yet another coup and the massacre of civilians. The world watched in shock as the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, marking the beginning of the New Cold War and the emergence of neorealism in academia and international politics, notably with the publication of “Theory of International Politics” by Kenneth Waltz in 1979. Despite widespread rejection of the new military rulers within Korean society, the global economic boom and the onset of the New Cold War enabled this military group to maintain its hold on power with minimal opposition.

Under the military regime, sustained economic growth provided the resources needed for its continuation. However, rising incomes also fueled a demand for political freedom and democracy, which ultimately contributed to the success of the civil revolution. Moore’s adage, “No Bourgeois, No Democracy” (Moore, 1966, p. 418), also applied to Korean politics, where the military’s response to student protests led to the end of the ‘gymnasium presidency.’

The Constitution of the Sixth Republic, which emerged from a fierce struggle that began on New Year’s Day in 1987 and culminated in direct constitutional reform through the June People’s Revolution, emphasizes international pacifism. Its Preamble explicitly states its commitment to “contribute to world peace and human coexistence.” Additionally, Article 5 declares that “the ROK shall strive for the maintenance of international peace and reject aggressive war.” These principles are fundamental to the Republic’s identity and will be upheld steadfastly.

Upon being elected president in a highly contested democratic election in 1987, Roh Tae-woo quickly announced a foreign policy that departed from his predecessor’s approach. Empowered by his directly elected position and the changing global landscape, Roh introduced the “Northern Policy” during his 1988 inaugural address, which was of particular significance (Roh, 1988). Yeom Don-jay, the presidential policy secretary, noted that the policy aimed to achieve several goals: establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula, creating conditions for unification, promoting comprehensive diplomacy, securing new economic partners, and dismantling Cold War barriers to contribute to global peace (Center of Diplomatic History Studies at IFANS, 2020, p. 118). This policy reflected a shift from the original focus on “North Korea, unification, and security” to “world, peace, and prosperity” in response to changing global systemic dynamics (Jung & Youn, 2021). Thus, Korea’s foreign policy prioritized peace as a universal value rather than merely as a means to achieve unification.

The success of the Seoul Olympics and the collapse of the Cold War ignited a sense of national pride among Koreans and a pursuit of universal human values. Subsequent governments have embraced a liberal discourse of peace and unification as a policy framework. This discourse, seen

in the post-Cold War era, took root during the Détente period, evolved during the New Cold War, and flourished in the post-Cold War environment.

The Fourth Curriculum enacted during the Fifth Republic sought cultivating “healthy, capable, self-reliant, moral, and aesthetic individuals” to build a democratic, highly industrialized, culturally sound, and unified homeland. The Fifth Curriculum, introduced under Roh Tae-woo’s government, rebranded “anti-communist education” as “unification and security education,” yet peace remained elusive. During this time, peace and unification education transformed due to the extreme Cold War climate and regime competition. However, it ultimately failed to adopt a forward-looking approach toward North Korea or It is widely believed among liberal peace researchers that the emergence of peace discourses advocating “peace by peaceful means” began in the late 1980s. These discourses were distinct from conventional security dialogues (Koo, 2008, pp. 105-107). The 1980s saw a shift from neorealism to neoliberalism, highlighting the possibility of “cooperation under anarchy” (Oye, 1986) and underscoring the importance of international organizations and institutions. Both neorealist and neoliberal perspectives significantly influenced the foreign policies of various governments, including the ROK.

The Roh Tae-woo government’s Northern Policy represented a forward-looking approach toward North Korea and the global community. This policy led to the signing of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement and simultaneous membership in the United Nations, sparking the rise of liberal discourses on peace and unification. The collapse of the Cold War and the onset of globalization generated expectations for international cooperation and a more interconnected world. In this climate, even realist scholars became engaged with liberal approaches.

After Roh Tae-woo’s presidency, Kim Young-sam successfully facilitated a peaceful regime change through democratic elections. In his inaugural address, Kim announced a shift in North Korean policy, stating, “the world is moving toward an era of peace and cooperation, not confrontation,” and emphasized that “no ally is better than a nation” (Cheong Wa Dae, 1993).

However, North Korea’s nuclear provocations undermined these optimistic statements. During his inaugural 100-day press conference, Kim firmly stated that he would “not shake hands with anyone with a nuclear weapon.” He then spent the remainder of his term addressing the North Korean nuclear issue. By the end of his presidency, the ROK faced a foreign exchange crisis and had to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). During this challenging period, the previously active discourse on peace and unification, which had thrived in the context of globalization, diminished in prominence and was only supported by a few, given the pressing reality of North Korea’s nuclear development.

Upon taking office, the Kim Dae-jung government prioritized economic revival and fostered an atmosphere of reconciliation and partnership with North Korea through the Sunshine Policy. These efforts culminated in the inter-Korean summit in June 2000, during which the Kim Dae-jung government maintained a proactive and friendly approach toward North Korea.

The Roh Moo-hyun government inherited and further developed the North Korea and East Asia policies established by Kim Dae-jung, adopting a liberal peace-oriented agenda. When Roh Moo-hyun took office in 2003, the global landscape was highly volatile following the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the bipolar system diminished the US’s ability to maintain its dominance as the sole superpower. Major players on the Korean Peninsula—namely the US, China, Japan, and Russia—were engaged in a complex balance of power while searching for a new order in Northeast Asia. In this context, the ROK began to shed its long-standing identity as a weak state dependent on the international system and emerged as an active participant, aspiring to serve as a balancer in Northeast Asia.

At his presidential inauguration on February 25, 2003, Roh Moo-hyun stated, “Fellow citizens, for a long period of time, we have lived on the periphery. At times, we were forced to endure a

history of dependence, unable to determine our own destiny. However, today, we stand at the threshold of a new turning point. An opportunity has arisen for us to take our place as the hub of Northeast Asia. We must seize this opportunity” (Cheong Wa Dae, 2003). This marked the introduction of the “Northeast Asia Balancer Theory,” which aimed to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and promote shared prosperity in Northeast Asia through the ROK’s active role as a balancer. This theory spurred the rise of peace-oriented discourse within Korean society.

During this period, researchers focused on building peace and order on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, primarily influenced by the North Korean policies of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments. The discourse around peace and unification, along with the policies related to the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, is considered to have been harmoniously implemented by the ROK during this time (Park, 2021, p. 57).

The relationship between the ROK and North Korea experienced significant changes during the decade of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments. However, these transformations were disregarded mainly, halted, or abandoned with the onset of subsequent conservative governments. North Korean policy under the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments remained pragmatic and realistic.

Despite advocating for dialogue and cooperation as the foundation of its policy toward North Korea, the ROK struggled to implement this approach effectively. Consequently, the country maintained a confrontational relationship with North Korea, which hindered efforts to foster discussions on peace and unification.

It is important to note that anti-communist education was officially removed from school curricula in 1992. This decision was a direct response to significant changes in the global Cold War landscape, such as diplomatic normalization with communist countries, the simultaneous admission of both Koreas to the United Nations, and the signing of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement. Full-scale peace education for elementary and secondary school students was introduced during this period.

Peace education emerged in the mid-1990s as a replacement for anti-communist education. It is closely associated with unification education, focusing on addressing structural violence, contradictions, and conflict resolution within Korean society through an active concept of peace. This approach encourages students to learn how to coexist peacefully with themselves and others in real-life situations rather than merely acquiring theoretical knowledge about peace (Jung, 1999, p. 25). This focus is particularly relevant given the increasing number of multicultural families in Korean society.

In his article, Lee (2002, pp. 429-432) discusses the delayed onset of peace movements and education in Korea. He attributes this delay to the suppression of peace advocacy as a dissident activity during the Cold War and the effects of division and dictatorship. He also highlights a lack of social interest in peace, noting that people were primarily focused on addressing immediate daily challenges and aspiring for democracy. When peace featured in social movements, it was often treated as a strategic tool to achieve specific goals rather than being valued for its intrinsic significance. However, with the collapse of the Cold War and the success of civil revolutions, the justification for the institutional and ideological repression of peace movements and education diminished. This shift underscored the need to transform the culture of violence and the divisive, competitive structures that reinforced it. As a result, peace concepts were integrated into education, and social activities aimed at promoting peace became more actively organized.

Peace is a universal value significant for everyone, regardless of origin or era. However, the understanding of peace varies depending on the time and place in which it is discussed. To ensure that peace is both practical and effective, it must be paired with an awareness of the power

structures governing that specific context. Given the contextual nature of peace, it is constantly evolving and should be continuously imparted to society through education. As Dewey (1916) aptly stated, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” The same idea applies to peace; it must be renewed with each generation, with education as the key to achieving this renewal. Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that while peace is universal, its context significantly shapes its interpretation. Therefore, any approach to peace must consider both its universal and specific aspects.

The inauguration of the Moon Jae-in government presents an excellent opportunity to prioritize peace. Moon Jae-in has clearly stated that his focus is on peace rather than unification. This was articulated during his speech at the Körber-Stiftung in Germany on July 6, 2017, where he proclaimed, “I clearly state the following: we do not wish for North Korea’s collapse and will not work toward any kind of unification through absorption. Neither will we pursue artificial unification. Unification is a process in which both sides seek coexistence, co-prosperity, and a restored sense of national community. When peace is established, unification will someday be realized through an agreement between the South and the North. What my Administration and I would like to realize is only peace.”

In this manner, the Moon Jae-in government has clarified its “3-No” policy: not to cause North Korea’s collapse, not to pursue absorption unification, and not to seek artificial unification. The “3-No” approach implies that the ROK respects North Korea as a partner for reconciliation and cooperation rather than viewing it merely as an obstacle to unification, indicating that the ROK is not solely focused on territorial integration (Shin, 2021, p. 200).

In his 2018 New Year’s address, Moon emphasized the importance of peace and unification, stating that his priority was to address the North Korean nuclear issue and establish lasting peace during his term. The emphasis was placed on achieving peace rather than immediate unification. Under Moon’s government, unification education was renamed as peace-unification education. This approach aims to create a peaceful framework that does not seek to absorb or artificially unify the two Koreas forcibly.

The foreign policy of the Moon government shares similarities with the Northeast Asia Balancer Theory of the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration, as revealed in his congratulatory speech for the August 15th anniversary in 2019. Moon emphasized that Korea is the only nation in the world surrounded by four major powers. Historically, being humble and powerless has made the Korean Peninsula vulnerable to becoming a battleground for these great powers. However, with strength, Korea can become a nation that connects the continent and the oceans, leading the order of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia (Cheong Wa Dae, 2019). Nonetheless, one might argue that the “peace and prosperity” advocated in this speech aligns with “peace and prosperity” as a universal human value, especially since the premise of “peace and prosperity” depends on “if we build a strong nation.”

Overall, the Moon government has prioritized peace over unification. This attitude has allowed peace discourse to take precedence over unification discourse in Korean society, and the name change reflects this shift. In August 2018, the government released a revised version of the unification education guidelines, titled *Peace·Unification Education: Directions and Perspectives*. This marked a clear transition from the previously dominating focus on “unification” education to a new emphasis on “peace·unification” education. Therefore, it can be said that today’s educational paradigm has shifted from “anti-communist, security, and absorption-oriented” unification education to “peace, reconciliation, and coexistence-oriented” peace education.

The Changes of Unification Consciousness: What is to be Taken?

Since the division of the Korean Peninsula, Korean society has undergone significant demographic changes. Most of the first generation of separated families from the Korean War, as well as those who directly experienced it, have passed away. Consequently, the perceptions of contemporary Koreans who did not experience the war have shifted considerably. The current views on unification are markedly different from those immediately following the division.

Today, many individuals prioritize their personal lives over the goal of unification for the Korean Peninsula. An increasing number of people display an indifferent attitude toward unification, believing there is little connection between personal life and national unification. Numerous surveys have corroborated this perception (Kim et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2020, 2021).

The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University conducts one of the most comprehensive studies on the Korean people's unification consciousness. The Unification Consciousness Survey has been conducted annually since its inception in 2007. The results from the 2024 survey reveal a significant change in the Korean public's attitude toward the need for unification over the years.

When asked about the necessity of unification, only 10.9 percent of Koreans believed it was "very necessary" in 2024, down from 34.4 percent in 2007 (where 29.4 percent responded "somewhat necessary"). The proportion of positive responses has more than halved. At the same time, the percentage of those who believe reunification is "not at all necessary" has more than doubled, increasing from 2.4 percent in 2007 (with 12.4 percent responding "not necessary") to 7.2 percent (with 27.7 percent responding "not necessary") in 2024 (Kim et al., 2024, pp. 30-34).

These findings provide valuable insights into Korea's future of peace and unification education. Historically, discussions on peace education in Korea have been closely tied to unification education. Scholars such as Chu (2003), Kim (2006), Oh (2018), Park (2012, 2018), Shin (2021), and Yu (2019) have examined this relationship. Since Korea's division, the terminology surrounding unification education has evolved, with the terms changing several times: "anti-communism education → security education → unification through breaking down communism education → unification and security education → unification education → peace-unification education" (Park, 2020, p. 100). From the beginning, peace-unification education has been closely interconnected, as peace plays a vital role in emphasizing the unification process; prioritizing peaceful methods is essential for its implementation.

The discourse surrounding peace and unification in Korean society is also related to realizing a "peace culture." This involves addressing and eradicating the long-standing military and violent cultures in Korea while establishing an active concept of peace. It emphasizes addressing the various layers of violence in Korean society rather than merely seeking to maintain peace (Chu, 2003, p. 116). Peace is taught as a nonviolent way to resolve conflicts that arise from diversity, enabling individuals in conflict to engage in dialogue and compromise to peacefully resolve disputes (Park, 2009, p. 173).

Peace discourse is linked to peace ethics as well. It should encompass components such as "knowledge, attitudes and values, and skills" based on "the absence of violence, nonviolent conflict resolution, tolerance, caring, justice, respect, and cooperation" as prerequisites for human survival (Park, 2020, pp. 114-115). Moreover, peace discourse should be designed to ensure a permanent peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula, secure mutual respect and cooperation between the two Koreas, and promote peaceful conflict resolution in a multicultural society.

However, in Korean society, peace discourse remains intertwined with ideological confrontations and policy theories related to the two Koreas, complicating open discussions. This is due to security being the overriding concern in the relationship between the two Koreas since

the armistice. Peace is not only discussed in relation to security and war deterrence but has also become a highly politicized concept within the context of this confrontation (Kim, 2011, p. 229). Today's peace discourse is influenced by the historical confrontation between North Korea's plans for unification and the ROK's "peace first, unification next" attitude. Additionally, the complexities surrounding the replacement of the armistice with a peace agreement and internal societal conflicts further complicate discussions about peace.

In this context, a critical perspective on our views regarding peace can be found in the concept of comprehensive peace education, as defined by Reardon (2021). This approach to education for global responsibility in the nuclear age is all-encompassing, covering all levels and domains of learning, and draws on knowledge from various disciplines as a lifelong process. Reardon suggests that peace education should rest on four essential dimensions: an integrated and holistic approach that centers around the whole person within the global order, awareness of the human context and interconnectedness, ecological and global considerations, and an organic and developmental perspective. Reardon's argument underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting differences at the core of the peace concept, alongside the significance of global order and justice.

To promote global peace, comprehensive peace education should prioritize the unification of the two Koreas by emphasizing their shared roots and kinship. This education should cultivate attitudes and behaviors that encourage acceptance of differences and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, it should be a natural and gradual process that integrates the interconnectedness of humans, the environment, and the Earth.

When considering what peace education should entail, we must reflect on the following arguments. Maria Tecla Artemisia Montessori believed that politicians should prevent war while educators must establish peace (Duckworth, 2008, p. 39). If we agree with this perspective, our approach to peace education must not merely aim to "change" but to fundamentally "transform" society.

Achieving 'peace and unification' on the Korean Peninsula requires understanding the intricate interactions among various factors in the Northeast Asia chessboard of global politics, including changing conditions and potentials and the significance of sustainable development, global justice, and the global environment.

North Korea's Declaration of 'Two Hostile States' and the Future of Unification Policy

During the Ninth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of North Korea, held from December 26 to 30, 2023, Kim Jong-un characterized the relationship between the two Koreas as "no longer a relationship of kinship or homogeneity, but a relationship of two hostile nations—two belligerents at war" (Rodong Sinmun, 2023/12/31). This statement clarified that the hostile two-state concept has become the national doctrine of North Korea.

On January 15, 2024, in a corrective speech during the 14th session of the 10th Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea, Kim Jong-un took further action by ordering the introduction of a 'territorial clause' that had not previously existed in the North Korean Constitution. He also instructed the complete removal of concepts such as 'unification, reconciliation, and kinship' and eliminating symbols associated with inter-Korean exchanges (KCNA, 2024/1/16).

The Monument to the Three Charters of Fatherland Unification was the first monument to be demolished following Kim Jong-un's order. This monument, which symbolized the era of Kim Il-sung, represented the ideals concerning unification. Its destruction signals Kim Jong-un's

intention to abandon his ancestors' vision on the subject. This removal was soon followed by the dissolution of several organizations that facilitated dialogue and cooperation with the ROK, including the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, the Bureau for Ethnic and Economic Cooperation, and the Mount Kumgang International Tourism Bureau. These actions indicate that North Korea seeks to maintain its relationship with the ROK as a hostile two-state relationship rather than as a unique bond based on ethnic ties.

The current situation, in which North Korea openly rejects concepts of “nation” and “unification” while advocating for “hostile two-state relations,” calls for a fundamental reassessment of inter-Korean relations. We now face a critical decision: Should we dismiss North Korea's claim of a ‘two-state’ reality, emphasize that the two Koreas are fundamentally the same people, and advocate for ‘relations based on special ethnic ties and the goal of unification’? Or should we acknowledge North Korea's assertion and choose to live separately as ‘two different (hostile) nations’? This potential dynamic shift fundamentally challenges our perceptions and attitudes toward unification and unification education, necessitating careful reflection and decision-making.

Since the division of the Korean Peninsula, unification has been viewed as a natural and undeniable national goal, consistently reflected in our policies and education. However, as division's history has extended and society's demographics have evolved, our perceptions and attitudes toward unification have shifted. Notably, with the passing of most of the first generation from the time of division, the sense of ethnic homogeneity has diminished. Additionally, the rise of a multicultural society has sparked discussions regarding the necessity of social integration in our approach to unification, especially concerning potential conflicts between North and South Koreans after unification.

Conversely, North Korea's assertion of a “two-state” reality—emerging amid changing perceptions among the Korean people regarding territorial unification—presents an opportunity to fundamentally rethink our unification policy and the educational efforts surrounding it.

Conclusion

The geopolitical situation on the Korean Peninsula and its division have hindered the free flow of discourse on peace and unification in Korean society. The connection between peace and unification discussions has complicated the situation, as observed in the unification education curriculum. Consequently, peace education in elementary and secondary schools was only earnestly implemented after the mid-1990s in Korea. However, peace education has yet to establish its own status, as it has always been linked to unification education. As a result, the emphasis on peace as a universal human value has been relatively weak.

It has been nearly a generation since the introduction of peace education and over 70 years since the armistice. To overcome division and geopolitical challenges, the ROK has proposed the ‘Northeast Asia Balancer Theory,’ the ‘Korean Peninsula Driver Theory,’ and the concept of being a ‘global pivotal state’ to assert itself as a leader or pivotal actor in the regional order. As a medium-sized country with significant influence, Korea's efforts to lead the region and chart its own course should be recognized. Its claims will be more legitimate and credible if they align with the pursuit of universal human values.

Years have passed since the end of the Moon Jae-in government and the beginning of the Yoon Suk-yeol government. What is the current government's stance on unification and peace? According to the 120 National Tasks announced by the Yoon government, the national goals include normalizing inter-Korean relations, promoting a peaceful Korean Peninsula, safeguarding

liberal democratic values, and contributing to global prosperity. They aim to be a pivotal nation that supports freedom, peace, and prosperity in the world through sound diplomacy and security. However, the Ministry of Education (National Tasks No. 81 through 85) does not include “unification” among its objectives, and “peace” is notably absent from the tasks of the Ministry of Unification (National Tasks No. 94 and 95) (The Government of the Republic of Korea, 2022). Some believe “peace-unification” has been replaced with “peace-prosperity,” suggesting that “unification” is no longer Korea’s primary or immediate goal. While unification remains a top priority, the government considers peace and prosperity more crucial, which was intensified by North Korean claims of ‘hostile two states.’

Amid ongoing strategic competition between the US and China, the persistent war between Russia and Ukraine, the rise of right-wing politics in major countries, the rigid diplomatic stances of powerful nations, and a stagnating global economy, discussions of a second New Cold War are emerging. This situation is likely to affect conversations and education on peace and unification within Korean society. North Korea is taking advantage of the shifting power dynamics in world politics to assert its concept of “hostile two states,” which complicates the discourse on peace and unification.

Despite these challenges, pursuing global justice and peace remains crucial during these uncertain times. The Republic of Korea (ROK) must continue to uphold universal human values and collaborate with global civil society to achieve peace, unification, and prosperity. Comprehensive education on peace and unification, which fosters a strong national identity, can serve as a guiding light as the ROK navigates the challenging path toward these goals on the Korean Peninsula, with unification being a welcome outcome in the process.

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Conflicting interests

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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