THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN THE KOREA REUNIFICATION PROCESS: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article attempts to understand the source of the reunification process in the Korean Peninsula. This is descriptive qualitative research using secondary data and utilises constructivism approach that offers norms and identity as the source of international relations. In addition, this article also using realism theory since the two countries often using hard strategies. In this preliminary studies found that the failure of Korean reunification is due to the difference of interest combined with the complexity of political identity between the two countries. Therefore, this is an important topic to examine at least to understand the construction of identity during the reunification process.

Keywords: South Korea, North Korea, Reunification, Identity

Background

The development of international politics has always been intertwined with conflicts. Bernard Mayer aptly states that conflict arises:

> *"...from the competition for resources and power, from the structures of societies and institutions people create, from the inevitable struggle between classes"* (Mayer, 2010).

One of the international conflicts that has been on-going is the crisis between North Korea and South Korea. This particular interstate conflict first arose on June 25, 1950 following the outbroke of Korean War. The conflict, which then developed into an open war (an armed conflict), gained a widespread international attention and was feared would result in the massive casualties and extensive sufferings of civilians of both states. This prompted the United Nations (UN) Security Council to pass Resolutions 82, 83, 84, and 85 in 1950 (Cumings, 2011). Nonetheless, a permanent resolution to the conflict with an amicable result has yet to be achieved up to present. The uneasy truce that is the result thus far still poses many potentials of violence erupting in the region, particularly the border areas. Despite this ongoing conflict, the two Koreas still managed to conduct a few diplomatic interactions (Edwards, 2003).

Hence, this paper attempts to shed light on this issue of North Korean-South Korean reunification efforts. Therefore, this article seeks to answer the questions "how the role of identity in the Korea Reunification?"

Literature Review

The study of reunification as part of conflict resolution is indeed the less popular topic of International Relations compared to the more popular issues such as nuclear proliferation, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, border disputes, roles of international organizations, national security, etc. One such study of reunification as a form of conflict resolution is the one conducted by G. Ulferts in his paper "North Korean Human Rights Abuses and Their Consequences" (Ulferts & Howard, 2017). They suggest that North Korea is a state that consistently refuses intervention and humanitarian aid by Western states. Even up to the present, under the leadership of Kim Jong-un, North Korea still adheres devoutly to the Juche concept of extreme self-reliance.

This blatant adherence to that notion has come at the expense of economic hardships and poverty of its people. Its closed political system and foreign policy has made it isolated from the majority of the global societies. Its poverty rate keeps increasing on a year-to-year ratio, at the alarming level of 25%. This condition is exacerbated even more when one only has to look over the border to see that the "brothers and sisters" in South Korea have been not only prospering, but able to develop as an industrial power in the world stage.

Another prominent study in the context of reunification as a form of conflict resolution was conducted by R. M. Berdahl. He studied about the reunification of West Germany and East Germany and its impact as a conflict resolution form in his article "German Reunification in Historical Perspective" (Berdahl, 2005). Berdahl suggests that the reunification of the two Germanys was supported

by a common history shared by them. Although at first, ideological difference between them made it very difficult to reconcile, it was the people, viewing and thinking that both of them share the same history that made the reunification finally possible.

After 1980, people of both sides have begun to voice reunification aspiration. They regarded that circumstances have changed, which were signified by increasing interactions among societies from West Germany and East Germany. Another sign of changing situations was the strong re-emergence of state identity issue, where people once again looked for other people with the same origin and culture. This high aspiration by the people fueled several social movement incidents, such as the illegal crossing of people from East Germany into West Germany. One string of incidents, in August 1989, saw the smuggling of approximately 13,000 East Germans to West Germany through Hungary. Around that time, several regions of East Germany, such as Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Sachsen, Sachen-Anhalt, and Thuringen, opted to reunify with West Germany.

Based on the aforementioned studies, the roles of the government and the people are profound and significant in determining whether or not reunification would be successful. Those studies have, to an extent, similarities with this thesis' own study, naturally however, there exist some differences. There are some differences between the two previous studies themselves, and Table 1 sums up the comparison of them:

Table 1. Studies Comparison

No.	Scientist	Purpose of Study	Theory and Method	Result
1.	G. Ulferts	To understand the underlying reasons of North Korea's rejection of foreign intervention and humanitarian aid, and additionally to gauge the support, if any, of a possible reunification with South Korea	The study used "dependency theory" and secondary data and observation method	The study concludes that the rejection comes from the extreme pride and self-confidence in addition to the highly robust leadership of Kim Jong-un that is able to control North Korea's political elite and the general population
2.	R. M. Berdahl	To understand the reasons for the successful reunification of West Germany and East Germany	The study used the concept of contributed severity of crash and secondary data and observation method	The study concludes that the successful reunification of West Germany and East Germany was largely due to the overwhelming aspiration and support of the two German peoples in order to achieve the shared dreams in economy, social, and culture. This grass-root objective was also backed by the international communities

From the two studies performed by G. Ulferts and R. M. Berdahl, it can be seen that there are differences between the two of them and this study. One is the subject of the study (i.e., West Germany and East Germany) and the other is the purpose of the study (i.e., to understand the reasons why North Korea has so far been rejecting foreign humanitarian intervention). It can be inferred from this study that one of the factors contributing to the failure of reunification of North Korea and South Korea is the leadership of Kim Jong-un. He was originally expected, as a very young leader, to bring in fresh ways and an open-minded thinking to the political system of North Korea, and to be a young reformist leader that can progressively develop democracy and reunification efforts. However, those expectations did not realized, as he kept clinging to the authoritarian style of governing.

Realism

Realism has become an important aspect in the dynamics of international relations. Those that adhere to this classical theory maintain that the state is the main actor that must be safeguarded at all times by the policymakers, the government, and other stakeholders. Additionally, the international system is still very much considered in a state of anarchy. Therefore, several states attempt to apply policies in resistance to the dynamics of international politics, whether they take the form of other states, international organizations, or other actors.

Gaetano Mosca states that in each and every society there exist two classes of population: The class of those who rule and the class of those who are ruled over. The ruling class is always

far smaller in number, organizes all the political functions of the society it is in, monopolizes power in that society, and enjoys most of the benefits that come with said power. The ruled over class is far more numerous, yet are controlled – effectively or not is another matter entirely – by the ruling class. This ruling class consists of the political elites, and they possess wide ranging authorities to the dynamics of structure and functions of a political system. Indeed, the operational of a society's political system is very much dominated by this ruling class. They determine the formulation, and adoption, of most policies (Bhushan, 2006).

Naturally, a given state would attempt to preserve and defend itself within the said anarchic international system. This would then be seen as a just survivability or defensive mechanism. Stewart Patrick in his book "Weak Links: Fragile State, Global Threat, and International Security" states that:

> "...the country will defend itself from various real threats or other forms of softer risks, including the application of sanctions to the isolation from international communities. Ideology, past experiences and the character of the leader become the most powerful benchmarks in bringing countries into the mainstream in the direction that is opposite to the more dominant or affiliate power" (Patrick, 2011).

In contemporary times of the globalized world, multiple new states have come into the limelight and become new powers in international politics. This has given states that traditionally are considered to be in the Third World category opportunities to formulate and develop their own politics and foreign policies. Considerations such as profit and loss, open or closed, etc., on such issues can be made while minimalizing a sense of vulnerability.

Further, Stewart Patrick asserts that those three factors

(i.e., ideology, past experiences, and the character of the leader) play a significant role in a particular state's rejection of foreign intervention. This foreign intervention includes foreign aid or monetary assistance, technical assistance, operational supports, and other programs (Patrick, 2011).

According to realism, both North Korea and South Korea adhere to rival political and economic ideologies, and they have a history of violent conflict. These opposing ideologies are not simply different or competing, they are contrasting enough to be put at the extreme ends of the spectrum, and as such the two Koreas are exceptionally difficult to be reintegrated or reunified. Additionally, they are formally still at war with one another. Further, realism maintains that since both states will be looking to exploit any potential weakness in the other, an arms race will consequently develops. As it is now, realism tend to view the situation as too materialistic, in that it considers state's ideologies and condition as given and fixed to very slowly change, if ever.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a theory that posits that our social world is not natural in nature, i.e., it is not created or given by God as is, per se, but instead is an artificial one. This social theory states that the actual world is only as the humans, as social beings, see it. Thus, the world itself is a product of humanity's ideas and, as such, is able to be changed by human transformation. That the world is not fixed or set in stone, yet it is flexible and constantly changes, is the mainstay of the constructivism theory. It concerns with how to conceptualize the relationship between agents and structures

(otherwise perceived as the agent-structure problem).

Constructivists believe that states should, in addition to focus on the material forces (e.g., geography, military power, wealth, etc.), also put emphasis on the importance of norms and ideas. According to constructivists, only focusing on the material forces would restrict states as rational egoists – or actors – in their pursuit of self-interests, which in turn would deprive them of actually shaping their self-interests (Adler & Barnett, 1998). In so doing, states are reduced to nothing more than passive entities with fixed perceived interests, as opposed to active entities with evolving interests capable of considering and forming them.

Constructivists adhere to a normative structure of international relations, with actors being constrained by both the material structures and the collectively held ideas of individuals (e.g., norms, rules, knowledge, and beliefs). These normative forces do not simply constrict said actors but construct their identities, as well. This would, successively, shape their interests and define their patterns of appropriate conducts in the international communities (Adler & Barnett, 1998).

The role of constructed identity is vital in the realm of international relations. For constructivism in particular, it is of utmost importance for understanding how different states act. The social construction of reality means that actors are not born outside (international) societies with set interests, but are constructed and shaped by their social environs.

Recognizing how actors develop their interests is crucial to explaining phenomena of international politics. Hence, constructivism can provide a notable assistance in such endeavor.

Alexander Wendt in his work "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics" states that:

"...*identities are the basis of interests*" (Wendt, 1992).

Ted Hopf suggests that a state's identity and interests are linked. According to him, as far as constructivism is concerned, states' identities contribute to the shaping of their interests. States have a wider array of potential choices available to them, and that these choices are constrained by the social structures that are mutually created by states and structures through social practices (Hopf, 1998).

In the Korean context, the identity issue is a complex one. Firstly, the peoples of the two Koreas do not see themselves – and their counterparts – as the one and the same people. Each side tends to see themselves as the "true" representation of the Korean people and their way of life, culture, social system, etc., and that their counterparts is not. Secondly, whereas South Korea's identity leans more toward a cooperative, team-player member of the global society, North Korea's identity is that of an isolated, yet extremely capable of self-sufficient due to its adopted Juche concept, which is inherently unique to it. In this context, from theoretical perspectives, the successful reunification history has been conducted such as in Germany between East Germany and West Germany (Hayes & James, 2014) and the reunification of China with Hong Kong and Macau (Forsby, 2015).

Results and Discussions

"...*The dynamic and relationship between the State and its leaders are the two sides of a coin money. Both in developed and developing*

countries, leaders determine the image of their countries. North Korea emerged as acountry that has a strong leadership, and regardless of the authoritarian or even totalitarian leadership of this country, it has contributed strongly to the international political constellation, which is of interest to be reviewed" (Lim, 2015).

The above statement proposed by Jae Chon-lim implies that North Korea is a unique state entity in the modern world. While the mainstream trend globally is for states to have embraced or start to embrace democracy, North Korea still endures as a totalitarian state. Moreover, it is even proud of the fact that it still manages to govern itself without any help – and interference – from the outside. This, in turn, would play a role in the failure of reunification between North Korea and South Korea.

The leadership succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un did not bring about changes toward democratization as expected by some. Relationship between the two states also did not improve save for some sporadic diplomatic activities. This chapter covers in detail the historical background of classical Korea (i.e., before the break-up into what are currently North Korea and South Korea), which includes the pre-historic age, empire age, and the Japanese occupation. The historical background of the Korean conflict that has resulted in the currently divided Korean peninsula and its people is also examined. In addition, the chapter also briefly describes the profile of North Korea in the economic, demographic, and political fields.

The Division of Korea

This period of Korea is the first time in its history that its people has been divided after they had been united into one single entity.

This period began after the end of World War II, when in 1945 Japan surrendered to the Allies and was forced to hand over its Korean territories. However, in spite of the delight of the Koreans, not all of the problems were sorted out. In fact, it seemed that a new problem arose. It was the fact that the Allies, upon receiving the Korean peninsula from the Japanese, immediately began dividing the land into a northern area and southern area.

This was done to accommodate the Soviet Union (Soviets) and the United States (US) as the two strongest (and most intact) member states of the Allies. The Soviets received the northern part, while the US received the southern part. Although the official phrase used was "protection", in reality this was administration by the two foreign powers, with each trying to establish its own influence over the respected population.

In 1948, when the powers failed to agree on the formation of a single government, this partition became the modern states of North Korea and South Korea. The Korean peninsula was divided at the "38th Parallel", basing it on 38^0 north of the Earth's equatorial plane. The area of the peninsula to its north became the modern-day North Korea, while the area to its south became the South Korea today. As the contemporary situation remains relatively the same since the division, the subsequent part shall cover North Korea in more details.

North Korea finally transformed became a state with republic as its form of government in 1948. Until now, it has undergone three leadership regimes, of which all have family relationship, making it a dynasty. Table 2.2. recapitulates this fact:

Table 2. North Korean Leadership Regimes for the Years of 1948-2016

No.	Leader	Term in Office
1.	Kim Il-sung	9 September 1948-8 July 1994
2.	Kim Jong-il	8 July 1994-17 December 2011
3.	Kim Jong-un	17 December 2011-up to present (incumbent)

Source: (Grzelczyk, 2012).

As Kim Il-sung was the father of Kim Jong-il, and, in turn, Kim Jong-il was the father of Kim Jong-un, the familial relationship of the dynasty is a linear one. Thus, power (and legitimacy) is passed on from father to son. This means that the republic form of government is textual only, where the actual governmental system is conducted in a closed structure with a patrimonial flair.

Since the difference of interests combined with the complexity of differing political identities between the two countries contribute to the present failure of Korean reunification. For example, North Korea makes sure that a form of reunification would finally take place sometime in the future that it puts such an article in its constitution, whereas the same cannot be said about South Korea. Accordingly, we shall first look at how they differ in their national interests, then followed by an observation of the complexity of their differing political identities.

As it stands today, there is a fundamental schism between the national interests of North Korea and South Korea. As constructivism would posit, self-identity and national interests are directly related. As a whole, collectively held ideas by individuals would give rise to a constructed identity, which would then give rise to their shaped interests. In the context of North Korea, these

collectively held ideas have been the notion that it is one of the few countries left in the world that still maintains its dignity by having its own principle and standing on its own feet. Most other countries have been seen to have succumbed to capitalism, which it regards as losing one's dignity. North Korean people, both the general public and the elites, hold these ideas that as a result of such notion they have been opposed, if not even antagonized, by the rest of the world that somehow dislike the notion, and that they must militarily protect themselves. Exceptions exist, however, for a few friendly countries that share a similar ideology or principle to their own. These ideas then gave rise to their constructed self-identity of being a proudly independent country of people that needs to defend itself from others who dislike it.

In turn, a part of their national interests is to keep being self-reliant and to be militarily strong. This is especially evident with the adoption and application of the Juche ideology and the Songun principle into the everyday life. The Juche ("self-reliance") ideology which has been in practical use since 1955, or mere seven years since the founding of the country, emphasizes the virtues of self-confidence and self-reliance. In essence, it practices Marxism's and Leninism's principles, but is infused with several modifications and supplements so that becoming distinctly North Korean in character, it stresses the importance of having a North Korea that is able to independently function without needing other countries. The Songun ("military first") principle underlines the importance of having a robust military, and this translates to giving members of the military the first treatment over non-military individuals, as it is believed that a privileged military is a contented military, and

a contented military is a strong military, which is exactly what the North Korean people require.

Another part of the national interests is to become a respected, or even feared, country so that other countries would hesitate from opposing it. This, of course, includes the addition of nuclear weaponries. As such, having a close neighbor in the same Korean Peninsula sharing the same Korean name, but with different political identities is not something that can be tolerated with ease. Hence, a reunification of the peninsular region in some way or another, be it by force of violence or with peaceful means, is included in North Korean constitution to finally be carried out at some later date.
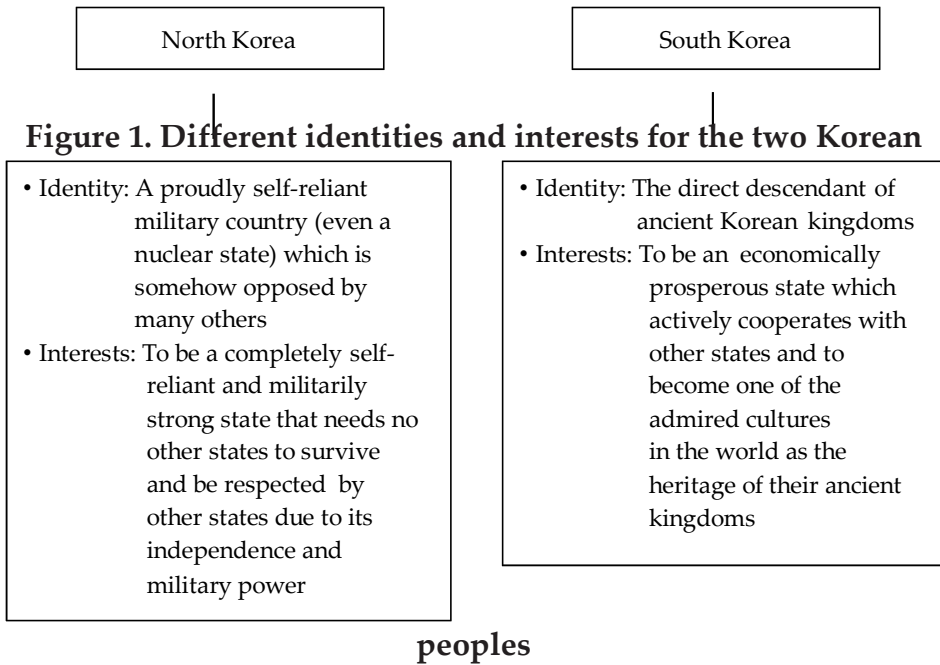
In comparison, South Korea does not have such notion as ideas collectively held by its people. The notion shared by most South Korean people is that they are the continuing population of the many Korean kingdoms of ancient times. This notion is supported by the occurrence of flourishing Korean culture that also occurred during those old times. A feature of this notion is the resulting belief that as the successor of those kingdoms, South Korea is inevitably a member of the world community which must naturally work together with them in one way or another. These ideas that the South Korean people are the descendants of those ancient Korean kingdoms and that they are actively promoting the Korean culture as its surviving population then helped shape their constructed self-identity of being the direct successor of such kingdoms.

Consecutively, their national interests are to be an economically prosperous country and to become one of the admired cultural centers of the world. In order to achieve the economic prosperity goal, active cooperation with other countries are needed, especially

with those that are also seeking to accomplish financial welfare. South Koreans in general, both the general public and the elites, then tend to view this as the validation of the adoption of capitalism into the country's monetary system. As for the goal to become a country of people that is admired culturally, they believe that as they are the direct descendants of Korean kingdoms of old times, their contemporary culture is notable since it has evolved for more than a millennium, so that they should broadcast it around the world for others to appreciate.

From those preceding sections it has become clear that both North Korea and South Korea have completely different national interests. One has self-preservation by military means and self-reliance as its national interests, whereas the other has self-preservation by economic means and cultural veneration as its national interests. As such, it is difficult to fathom the probability of success of reunification efforts.

Figure 1.
Identities and Interests Comparison:
North Korea and South Korea

North Korea	South Korea

Figure 1. Different identities and interests for the two Korean

• Identity: A proudly self-reliant military country (even a nuclear state) which is somehow opposed by many others • Interests: To be a completely self-reliant and militarily strong state that needs no other states to survive and be respected by other states due to its independence and military power	• Identity: The direct descendant of ancient Korean kingdoms • Interests: To be an economically prosperous state which actively cooperates with other states and to become one of the admired cultures in the world as the heritage of their ancient kingdoms

peoples

Furthermore, the different political identities adopted by the two countries also add to this already convoluted situation. North Korea adopts authoritarianism in the official implementation of its Juche ideology, while South Korea, on the other hand, adopts liberalism. These two political identities are juxtapose of each other. Authoritarianism is under the assumption that the state is everything, and that while the state stands so do its people, no matter what the actual condition may be. Moreover, in order to achieve this, the state is given nearly – if not truly – unlimited authority

to govern its subjects in ways it sees fit that often results in the extensive restrictions on its citizens' freedom, with issues arising from the difficulty of distinguishing where the boundaries of state ends and where the boundaries of those people running the state begins. Meanwhile, liberalism has the belief that the people is of utmost importance, and that the state exists to see that its people's welfare is guaranteed. Furthermore, in order to achieve this, the people should be free to govern themselves, as it is considered that a sort of "invisible hands" is present in this because no people are assumed to want to deliberately hurt themselves, so they are granted as much liberty as possible with the state acting in a limited authority as a supreme facilitator.

Although officially North Korea is a republic, the authoritarian creed means the republic form of government is textual only, as supreme power lies not truly with the people but with the state. Additionally, the transfer of power is also much more similar to that of a non-republic country with the son of the former supreme leader inheriting the power, which corresponds more to a king passing the power to his son instead of to an elected president to the next. Therefore, the actual governmental system is conducted in a closed structure with a patrimonial flair, as has been discussed before.

North Korea's political landscape is reflected by the notably powerful authority of its president, who heads all major governing structures. Although there are three official branches of government, which are the State Affairs Commission of North Korea, the Supreme People's Assembly, and the Cabinet of North Korea, they are not truly independent of each other. Similarly, although officially it recognizes multiple political parties, in actuality, North

Korea is a one-party state. It has one superior political party – the aforementioned WPK – which coexists with two other legal parties, and those inferior parties must accept its leading governing role as a prerequisite for their existence. Those legally recognized three political parties are all members of the political coalition called the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland which work, as North Korea's constitution stipulates, toward a reunification of the peninsula in one way or another. Therefore, although there are three legal political parties there, the two inferior parties have never been opposing each other or the superior party, and instead, they have been its subservient collaborators.

Conclusion

The relationship between the two Korean states of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) has been rocky. In some periods, relationship has been icy cold, with the two sides sharing the same level of enmity toward each other. In other times, relationship has warmed up with friendly diplomatic exchanges conducted by the two sides. Still, at other times, interactions have been hot with the two states issuing threats and seemingly at the brink of continuing the war that has so far been put in an uncertain armistice. Efforts to reunify these essentially the one and the same people of the Korean Peninsula have so far ended in failure.

This failure is due to the difference in the identities and national interests of the two countries. As both the DPRK or North Korea and the ROK or South Korea have evolved their own diverging identities since the division of Korea in 1948, so have the national interests that they seek after. No longer do they possess the same goals as

before, and as such this proves a hurdle to efforts of reunifying the divided people. Seemingly, they are the same people in appearance and roots only (which includes same language, same writing system, and overly-similar culture), whereas in essence, they have evolved into different peoples altogether, which has transpired in that hurdle. Additionally, the obstacle has been complicated further by the different ideologies adopted by the two countries. This is especially so by observing situations domestic to North Korea, where the authoritarian principle in the form of the Juche ideology and its political setting is arguably making it arduous to attempt to reunify the two countries. A state embracing authoritarianism where the state – and to an extent, the elites that run it – owns the supreme authority would find it extremely problematic to release some of that power in the face of being reunified or merged with another. As a final note, any hope for successfully reunifying the two different political entities starts with changing the *status quo*. Thus, as long as the situations in the Korean Peninsula remain as they are, any efforts of reunification of the two Koreas would, sadly, end in failure.

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