

## **Division and Reconciliation in Korea: A Comparative View**

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Korea is not the only country that has suffered from national division. But, I would say Korea is unique in many ways. Korea experienced several decades of colonization followed by permanent division at the hands of outside powers. This historical combination is what made Korean division so violent and complicated. To show why these factors have had such profound effect on both the inter-Korea relations and internal politics of both parts, I would like to draw a comparison with other countries that have had similar experiences with national division.

Let me start with a look at the division of Cyprus and its relevance to the division of Korea.

To begin, there are some peculiar similarities. Historically, Korea was the only country colonized by another Asian country, Japan. Cyprus was the only European country colonized by another European country, Britain. In fact, there are still two fairly large tracts of land known as “sovereign bases,” that Britain uses for military purposes. As such there are still mixed sentiments (some positive but mostly negative) in both Korea and Cyprus toward their respective former colonial countries. Korea and Cyprus both have formal armistice lines dividing their territory (and backed by military force), known as the Military Demarcation Line (or MDL) in Korea and the Green Line in Cyprus. But, the Korean MDL is longer, wider, more closed, and much more heavily guarded. There is also a large economic development gap between the two divided parts.

What makes the two cases quite distinct is the sociological and historical background of their division. Cyprus was divided as a result of ethnic conflict between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots while Korea was divided by the geopolitics of the United States and the Soviet Union. It was in connection with the situation in Cyprus, some Cypriots of both sides claim, that the expression “ethnic cleansing” started to be used. Today, many (more than half of some 200,000 residents in the northern Turkish Cyprus) are not even original Cypriots, but are settlers who came to Cyprus from Turkey’s Anatolia after the division of Cyprus in 1974. There is much less commonality between the southern and northern Cypriot people that bring them together and even more grievances and animosity that separate between them.

By contrast, one still hears North and South Koreans chanting “we are one people,” and for the most part there is no sign of animosity between them on the popular level. What animosity that remains from the struggle and mutual slaughter during the Korean War more than 60 years ago is directed towards the former government leaders of the time who are long gone physically. Many older South Koreans and especially those who had come from the North still resent North Korea’s Kim Dynasty which started the devastating Korean War, which threatens the South with nuclear weapons and provocations, and which oppresses its own people. The division has been so long and so complete in Korea, and the people of the South and North have had such little direct contact, that, if any grievances or animosity still existed as a result of the Korean War, it would be among and between South Koreans themselves as much of the mutual assault took place in localities in the South.

So, what reconciliation and justice do we need to seek between the North and the South in case of reunification?

On this question, perhaps we should look to other cases of divided countries such as Germany and Vietnam for comparison with Korea. Of the four countries divided after World War II, Germany, Korea, China and Vietnam, Korea and China remain divided and Germany and Vietnam have been reunified, Germany by incorporation and Vietnam by force.

The main difference between Germany and Korea in their division was that while Germany was the precipitator of the Second World War, Korea, having been a colony of Japan, was merely the

victim of an arbitrary decision made by the victors, the United States and the Soviet Union. Thus, Koreans feel that while Germany may have itself mostly to blame for the division, Korea was the innocent and helpless victim. It is true that before and during the Korean War, Koreans were divided between the left, supported by the Soviet Union and the right, supported by the United States, but they were merely the instruments of the division thrust on them. But animosity and rivalry between the North and the South developed to the extent that they were engaged in a fratricidal war (some call it a proxy war) supported by their respective guardians.

In the divided Germany, there was no animosity or hostility between the people of the West and of the East. Germans in the West felt sympathy towards their brethren in the East and wanted to help them to improve their economic situation, regain political freedom, and free them from the Soviet yoke. Germans in the East envied the freedom and prosperity their Western brethren enjoyed. After unification, problems arose from three sources: One, the issue of dealing with properties in the Eastern part of Germany that used to be owned by those who were now living in West Germany; two, what to do with those responsible for the political oppression of East Germans, especially those related with or to the Stasi organization; and three, the sense of second-class citizenship felt by the East Germans known as Ossies toward those supposedly high-handed West Germans known as Wessies. But these were manageable problems that were in fact managed and ameliorated in reasonable ways in the post-unification period.

In the Korean case, South Koreans feel the similar sympathy for the North Koreans for their dire economic situation and lack of freedom. Similarly as the East Germans, North Koreans feel envious of South Koreans who enjoy relative economic prosperity and political freedom. Some may feel that South Korea should be doing more to help them economically and to improve their political predicament. But, in the case of Korea, the conflict and cleavage that needs to be reconciled exists not so much between North and South Koreans as between the South Korean left and the South Korean right, a phenomenon known in South Korea as the "South-South conflict." To be sure, some on the left are moderate and some are radical or extreme. The same moderate-radical spread exists among those on the right. The conflict is based on opposing interpretations and understandings of a whole range of historical issues such as the division of the country, origin of the Korean War, Jeju Uprising of 1947-48 (known as the April-Third Incident), Kwangju massacre in 1980, and Kim Dae-Jung-Kim Jong Il Summit of 2000. The left is critical of the United States for being mainly responsible for the division of the country, supporting and encouraging successive military and authoritarian governments in South Korea, and fostering tension on the Korean Peninsula. The right accuses the left of toeing and supporting the North Korean line, undermining South Korea's alliance with the United States, and trying to weaken the legitimacy of the South Korean government.

The left regards South Korea's successive rightist regimes starting from Syngman Rhee to Park Chung Hee on to Lee Myong Bak as having been insufficiently nationalistic—meaning not anti-Japan enough and too dependent on the United States. In this regard, they would view North Korean government as having stronger credentials on nationalism issues. The right responds by emphasizing the contribution made by their leaders to the cause of independence and subsequent economic development. They (both the left and the right) have been fighting over history, textbooks, what to teach and not to teach in schools, and whom to revere and whom to despise.

Until the German unification, it was the South Korean left which clamored for unification while the right, which feared that it would mean unification under North Korean auspices, took the defensive position. However, the tables were turned after German unification in that the left began to fear that any unification, following the German example, would come as a result of South Korean absorption of the North. It was now the right which became more vociferous about the need for reunification of Korea.

As it happens, the moderate left, currently represented by the opposition party, is in favor of providing massive and unconditional economic aid to North Korea, reducing tension and arms competition with North Korea, and expanding cooperation with it. The right is in favor of

strengthening the alliance with the United States, more actively and aggressively promoting human rights in North Korea, and promoting reunification at an earlier date. They are against providing large scale economic assistance to North Korea while it devotes resources to development of weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear weapons and missiles.

In this context, it is interesting to speculate on what role the South Korean left would play if and when unification takes place. Given that, after ten years of controlling the government during the Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Mu-Hyun presidencies, the left has difficulty expanding its electoral support base in the South, the “progressive” party or parties will try to expand their electoral support base in the northern part of Korea after unification. By promising more economic benefits, social welfare and greater political autonomy for North Korea—promises that the right will find it hard to match—the left may very well succeed in their effort to expand support in the North, provided that somehow they succeed in finding coherence and unity among their various factions and individuals.

No matter what happens in the balance of political forces after unification, it is not clear what will happen to the degree and intensity of the conflict and bad blood between the political left and political right in Korea, particularly between the extreme or radical left and right. It is a conflict that will not disappear with unification and that will continue to play havoc to the unity and harmony of the nation as a whole.

In the North, there will be after unification the serious but inevitable issue of settling score with and taking punitive measures against those involved in the oppressive state and party apparatus. The success of this task will depend very much on how limited the scope of the rectification, how judiciously the punishment is meted out, and how fairly the operation is conducted.

I would like to add just a couple of footnotes to what I have said so far.

One distinguishing aspect of Korean division compared with that of Germany and Vietnam is that it has lasted longer (nearly 70 years or over two generations) than that of the other two countries, which were divided for 35 and 25 years respectively. The long period of division resulted in a demographic change, particularly involving the generational change, which has been extensive and significant. Increasingly fewer numbers of individuals with the memory of living together with family members, friends and colleagues separated since division are surviving today. Their descendants and other Koreans of younger generations would naturally have more muted feelings toward Korea and Koreans of the other side, whether they are positive or negative feelings.

In South Korea, until the late 1980s, it was the younger generation and political forces of the left which showed strongest interest in national reunification. They denounced the older generations and foreign powers, which supposedly stood in the way of national unification. Since the early 1990s, however, they became more globalized and utilitarian, and focused on more mundane matters as jobs and careers. Members of the younger generation who shared the progressive views of their seniors, also shied away from the unification cause for reasons that their older ideological compatriots did.

What these generational and demographic changes indicate is that time matters in how necessary, feasible, and attainable reconciliation will be in any divided country. Unless the conflict is of “primordial” nature (such as ethnicity and religion) as in Cyprus or Northern Ireland, with the passage of time, negative feelings and the need for reconciliation would matter less than when division is still fresh in everyone’s memory and living experience.

I would also like to add one more footnote--about “restoring commonality between North and South Koreans.” In this connection, I would also like to speak about the critical role of those known as “North Korean defectors” in South Korea.

The phenomenon that is worrisome about the long period of division between the North and the South is not so much antagonism between the residents of the two Koreas as their losing

commonality (*yijilhwa*--becoming different) as one people in such key areas as language (at least in vocabulary and expressions), ways of thinking and living, inter-personal relations, and abilities and skills. Upon reunification, they will have the serious task of enlarging and restoring areas of commonality (*dongjilhwa*--becoming the same). Meeting this challenge will require effective policies of the government and active role of the civic groups. But the group of people who will play a key role will be those who are known as “North Korean defectors” in the South, the number of whom has grown to nearly 30,000 by the end of 2014. To be sure, they have more grievances toward the North Korean regime than the South Koreans. However, they have more connections with people in the North; they have the experience of living in both parts of Korea; they understand the ways of thinking and living in both North and South Korea; and they have more ability to create a bridge between the Koreans of the North and the South. Whether and how well they can play the role of bringing the two peoples that will have lived apart for so long will depend much upon how they are treated in the South and how smoothly and well they integrate into the South Korean society.

So, what conclusions or words of wisdom can I draw from the remarks so far?

1. More often division is not the result of hostility and animosity between the peoples of a divided country but that of geopolitics, historical circumstances, and government policies.
2. As such, reconciliation is more often the result rather than the cause of reunification. In the case of Korea, reconciliation within each of the divided parts (South-South, North-North) remains at least as formidable a task as reconciliation between the peoples of the respective parts..
3. History (and interpretations thereof) influences policy. In Korea, the left and the right often have opposite views on what happened in history and adopt different policies when they assume power. In South Korea, the left thinks the U.S. has kept Korea from reunifying; the right thinks the United States saved South Korea from extinction. They differ most distinctly on how to deal with North Korea and how to handle alliance with the United States.
4. Policy statements and decisions affect the interpretation and politicization of history. Characterization of the other side as war-mongering only results in accelerated arms race and greater insecurity. Furthermore, the policy statements and decisions made can often result in self-fulfilling prophecies, especially in the area of mutual distrust and insecurity.
5. Even though the cases are never identical in all respects, it is useful to engage in comparative analysis of Korea-related issues (and the role of the U.S.) through other country cases of political division and reconciliation. What happened and happens in other cases can provide lessons to follow or anti-lessons to avoid in the case at hand, meaning Korea.

Let me end my talk with a quotation from the late Nelson Mandela, “Great anger and violence can never build a nation. We are striving to proceed in a manner and towards a result, which will ensure that all our people...emerge as victors.” This statement can give us a moment to reflect on the history of division and future reconciliation between the two Koreas.

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