

## **The Perplexing Bilateral Relations between Two Koreas: Finding Peace in Korean Reunification Through Critical Theory's Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Despite being formerly homogeneous in terms of history, culture, language, and nation, the separation of the Korean people has led to significant contrasts in political, economic, and cultural aspects between South Korea and North Korea. Conflict resulting from these differences eventually leads to war. However, since World War II, the two Koreas have been seeking reunification in three different ways: "reunification through war," "reunification through revolution," and "peaceful reunification." These Three Concepts of Korean Reunification was driven by the distortion of the term peace. This research employed a case study method to analyze a specific historical event to gain a comprehensive understanding of peace related to the three different concepts of Korean Reunification. Peace is essential for the realization of the reunification of separated nations. The Korean reunification program is affected by the research finding that given their common ethnicity, culture, familial ties, economic complementarity, international diplomacy, humanitarian concerns, and nuclear disarmament, the reunification process between North and South Korea has the possibility for peaceful reconciliation. However, a distorted understanding of peace has created challenges in Korea Reunification where peace was built on mutual distrust and fear, making achieving a positive and sustainable peace exceedingly difficult, and meaningful reunification has yet to occur.

**Keywords:** bilateral, Critical Theory, East Asia, Korean Reunification, peace concepts

### **Abstrak**

*Pembagian bangsa Korea telah menghasilkan perbedaan yang sangat besar di antara Korea Selatan dan Utara dalam bidang politik, ekonomi, dan budaya dari yang sebelumnya homogen, baik dari sisi sejarah, budaya, bahasa dan tanah air. Perbedaan ini menimbulkan konflik dan meningkat menjadi perang. Namun, Keinginan masyarakat Korea untuk bersatu kembali sejak perang dunia II dalam sejarahnya telah melalui tiga proses konsep perdamaian reunifikasi yaitu, "reunification through war," "reunification through revolution," and "peaceful reunification." Menurut teori kritis, distorsi terhadap istilah perdamaian telah mempengaruhi proses reunifikasi Korea berdasarkan Tiga Konsep Reunifikasi Korea. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kasus yang digunakan untuk menganalisis suatu peristiwa sejarah tertentu, digunakan untuk memperoleh pemahaman menyeluruh tentang perdamaian yang terkait dengan tiga konsep reunifikasi Korea yang berbeda. Perdamaian adalah hal yang penting untuk mewujudkan reunifikasi negara-negara yang terpisah. Program reunifikasi Korea dipengaruhi oleh temuan penelitian ini bahwa meskipun mereka memiliki kesamaan etnis, budaya, ikatan keluarga, komplementaritas ekonomi, diplomasi internasional, kepedulian kemanusiaan, dan penghentian nuklir, proses reunifikasi antara Korea Utara dan Korea Selatan memiliki potensi untuk rekonsiliasi damai, namun karena pemahaman yang terdistorsi tentang perdamaian, proses reunifikasi Korea menghadapi tantangan. Hal ini telah menyebabkan perdamaian dibangun di atas saling tidak percaya dan ketakutan, membuat pencapaian perdamaian positif dan berkelanjutan menjadi sangat sulit, dan reunifikasi bermakna belum terjadi.*

**Kata kunci:** Asia Timur, bilateral, konsep perdamaian, Reunifikasi Korea, Teori Kritis

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## INTRODUCTION

The reunification of North and South Korea remains a complex, challenging issue engaging political, economic, and social dimensions. A peaceful reunification would require a delicate and sustained effort to address the differences between two Koreas and build a framework for a unified, stable country. The partition of Korean country has resulted in major contrasts in the political, economic, and cultural areas between South and North Korea, despite sharing common history, culture, language, and homeland. Following this division is the emergence of diverse beliefs and political systems in both sides of the country. As a result, each country must follow separate patterns of development and growth (Hui in Fitrah & Ramadhani, 2018: 89).

Over the past seven decades, there has been a struggling pursuit of Korean reunification. Various dynamics and expectations have pulled both Koreas into either positive direction (towards reunification) or negative direction (further apart). According to Young-sun Ha (2021), efforts to reunify Korea are classified into *Reunification Through War*, *Reunification Through Revolution* and *Peaceful Reunification*. The end of the Cold War shifted the international landscape, requiring war and peace to be viewed and addressed from different angle. Due to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea has been a major security concern. In line with the shifted international landscape at the end of the Cold War, the Panmunjom Declaration, a historic meeting between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-In aimed at establishing a nuclear-

free Korean Peninsula through "full denuclearization" initiatives, symbolized a significant step toward peace between North and South Korea. (Satria, Puspita, & Kristiono, 2018: 110). However, North Korea's nuclear tests that launched 23 missiles in a single day of 2022 (Dotto, London, & Yeung, 2022) shattered the Panmunjom Declaration and caused South Korea to fear another conflict in the future. It appears that Cold War persists in Korea Peninsula.

Taking the critical theory perspective, this article will examine how the distortion of 'peace' has influenced the Korean reunification process based on the Three Concepts of Korean Reunification. The analysis will point out how critical theory views the process of peace carried out by two Koreas thus far as challenging, and that Korean reunification is a long way off. The author believes that examining the distorted peace in Korean reunification process is important for ensuring that efforts toward reunification are built on clear, sincere, and comprehensive understanding of what genuine peace implies. This examination helps avoid superficial solutions and short-term measures as the image peace and instead focuses on addressing the root causes of division between North and South Korea.

## Theories or Conceptual Framework

### *Critical Theory*

Critical theory in international relations seeks to understand and critique the underlying power dynamics and social structures that shape the international system. Beyond Marxism and Realism: Critical Theory and International Relations (1990), Andrew Linklater identifies various aspects of

Kenneth Waltz's Neo-Realism that can be classified as "distorted thoughts" in the study of international relations. First, Waltz claims that domestic politics and international politics can be clearly distinguished; the former has a "hierarchical" nature in which states have full rights to use instruments of violence in an effort to protect every citizen from all forms of threats and chaos, the latter has a "anarchic" nature characterized by a systematic absence of protection in which each country must maintain its survival (self-help). Thus, anarchic international politics that enables each country to act independently tends to build rational behavior that reproduces conditions of distrust and insecurity because it faces potential invasion by a more powerful country. As a result, the premise that international relations are full of distrust and fear appears to be imposed (taken for granted) on us (Hadiwinata, 2017: 162).

Second, Waltz's belief that the international system is a domestic version of system theory in which the role and function of each part of political system define its existence. In anarchic conditions, every country is required to maximize its military capability in order to secure its existence and the continuance of the international system. In cases like this, Waltz is prone to oversimplification, believing that a country's character is decided by the magnitude of its military force. In other words, the reproduction of systems theory in the context of international politics tends to overlook important state characteristics beyond military strength. In this context, Neo-Realism tends to implement "absurd reductions" (*reductio ad absurdum*) by ignoring other capacities of a country such as the ability

to form friendships with other parties, to use economic influence, to initiate international provisions, to encourage the formation of international agreements, and so on. One of the "distorted thoughts" in international relations is the nature of "reductio ad absurdum" as a result of systems theory (Hadiwinata, 2017: 162).

Third, based on the first reason (anarchic international politics) and the second reason (the international system that reduce the existence of states to military power), a specific pattern of international relations is produced with the typical atmosphere of "endless struggle for power and security" between states. According to Neo-Realism, the "struggle for power" is a natural result of anarchy in the international system that will never alter. In such circumstances, Neo-Realism appears to have a pessimistic viewpoint regarding the future of international politics. This is not to say that peaceful conditions will never occur. Even in a "struggle for power" environment, peace can prevail in an atmosphere of balance of power when military force is distributed fairly equally. Ironically, this type of peace is built on "mutual distrust and mutual fear," because the absence of war is primarily due to the absence of parties willing to initiate a war with approximately equal military strength. Thus, the logic of "endless struggle for power and security" in an anarchic condition, as Neo-Realism believes, is a type of "distorted thought" in the study of international relations (Hadiwinata, 2017: 163-164).

#### *Understanding the Concept of Peace*

Critical theory in international relations offers a broader and more holistic understanding of peace. It

emphasizes the need for structural changes and social transformation in order to achieve a more just and sustainable form of peace. "Distorted thoughts" acquired by Neo-Realism Theory, where the concept of peace is regarded as the absence of war, colored the situation during the Cold War, which was full of mutual distrust and fear. According to John Gaddis, there is theoretical rigidity in the subject of international relations when it comes to explaining the complex cases of international peace. This means that researchers who explain the emergence of war use the same theoretical methods to explain the outbreak of peace. Simply put, they believe that studying the reasons for peace is the same as studying the causes of war. This appears to be a simple and logical conclusion at first glance, but it is not, because peace between states is a deeper notion than the absence of surface hostility (Martin, 2005: 51-52). In accordance with Johan Galtung, the definition of peace is not a situation in which there is no war; rather, peace is divided into two concepts: (1) positive peace, a situation in which the country has no intentions or symptoms of engaging in war; and (2) negative peace, a situation in which a country tries to avoid war with its rivals by building nuclear weapons and strengthening its military for defense purposes (Martin, 2005: 44-59).

During the Cold War, the pursuit of social justice was overshadowed by the urgent concerns related to nuclear weapons and the potential for catastrophic conflict. It introduces the concept of strategic deterrence, emphasizing that it's not exclusive to nuclear weapons, and underscores the dual role of armed forces in both

deterrence and defense (Barash & Webel, 2009: 76). The overshadowing of social justice concerns by the immediate threat of nuclear warfare led to a narrowed focus on peace as the absence of catastrophic conflict. This emphasis on strategic deterrence further reinforced the importance of military capabilities in international relations, potentially distorting the broader concept of peace, which should encompass not only the absence of war but also a more comprehensive vision of social, economic, and political justice. According to Oliver P. Richmond (2007: 247-274), in the international world, countries have various cultures, histories, interests, and different concepts of peace, so bias towards peace is used as justification and legitimacy by international institutions. It is because if these institutions cannot fully comprehend the countries' characteristics, a new and more complex conflict will occur. Richmond's statement emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity, contextual understanding, and the need to avoid imposing a single, rigid concept of peace onto diverse international actors. The complexity and intricacy of peacebuilding efforts in a world where different nations have their own distinct identities, interests, and perspectives on what constitutes a peaceful state of affairs must be observed in order to create positive peace.

### **Research Methods**

This article adopted a case study method to analyze a specific historical event. It involves a well-defined aspect of the event, such as a class of events or variables. A case study is a research method that involves an in-depth examination and analysis of a specific case or instance to gain comprehensive

understanding of a particular phenomenon, event, or situation (Bennet, 2004: 20-21). Case studies method are effective for offering historical explanations of cases. This means that they aim to provide an account of how and why certain events unfolded in a particular way within their historical context. Also, case study focuses on constructing historical explanations for specific cases (Bennet, 2004: 37-38).

This article will focus on three different concepts related to the reunification of Korea using a historical analysis to examine them within the context of the historical events and circumstances that have shaped them.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Three Concepts of Korean Reunification Based on a Historical Review**

Reunification occurs when countries are in conflict, aiming to peacefully bring together the nations divided by historical events. This process is based on nationalism and characterized by a sense of identity and belonging. However, achieving reunification is a complex and time-consuming process due to various factors. In a state of war, a country strives for peace, while in a state of peace, the state remains alert by strengthening its defense. The Cold War climate created by the West and East Blocks has placed North Korea and South Korea in mutual hostility, forcing them to constantly fight. North Korea and South Korea are pursuing reunification after over 70 years since Japan's defeat in World War II. Korean reunification aspirations can be classified into three concepts: "reunification through war," "reunification through revolution," and "peaceful reunification" (Ha, 2021).

### **Reunification through War**

Since Japan's conquest of Korea, various Korean parties have sought to liberate the country from Japanese colonialism. Inspired by nationalist and communist leaders, they shared a common environment in constructing the political systems in North Korea and South Korea. After World War II, exiled Korean nationalist leaders returned to South Korea, establishing an independent political system and gaining The United States (US) assistance. Communist groups, on the other hand, were founded on Marxism-Leninism and sponsored by the Soviet Union and China. North Korea adopted a "united" representation of various political and social groups, influenced by the ideologies represented by the US and Soviet Union authorities.

South Korea was established on August 15, 1948, under the name Republic of Korea (ROK), led by Rhee Syngman, while North Korea was founded on September 9, 1948, under the name of Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), commanded by Kim Il Sung, two years before the Korean War. In terms of political legitimacy, the two regimes remain in conflict. South Korea asserts that the ROK's foundation is "genuine" since it is under the authority of the United Nations, which states that the ROK is Korea's sole legitimate government. Conversely, North Korea claims that its government is "genuine" since it represents all Koreans and conducts general elections in both North and South Korea. The official establishment of the two Korean governments escalated conflict, ideological differences, and contest for legitimacy, which resulted in a massive war on the Korean Peninsula in 1950-1953, known as Korean War. Two major powers assist

each other in Korea. The Korean War may indeed be considered a proxy war between the US and the Soviet Union. The conflict concluded in a ceasefire facilitated by the United Nations.

At this period, the concept of peace is perceived as superficial solutions that focus on short-term and technical conflict resolution. Peace agreements and international institutions may be constructed to serve the interests of powerful parties, prolonging gaps and hindering meaningful transformation, which leads to larger conflicts. The Korean War, which concluded in a major-power ceasefire facilitated by the United Nations, resulted in severe societal disintegration for the Korean people, and heterogeneity began to evolve into two regimes with opposing ideological orientations. South Korea has transformed into a free entity, an open society based on a politically liberal democracy, while North Korea becomes a uniform society that fully embraces communism. North Korea has become increasingly monolithic, retaining a high degree of coherence among the ruling regime and between the elite and the population, whereas South Korea remains socially pluralistic. As a result of the system's transformation, national homogeneity on the Korean Peninsula was dismantled, with South Korea striving to preserve liberal democracy and North Korea maintaining communist ideas. The two Koreas had become so divergent that when they reunited again, the people from both sides would feel a rather weak kinship.

### **Reunification through Revolution**

Conflicts occurred and remained during the Cold War, when the post-World War II order was based on a form

of agreement that major powers had the authority to harm other countries in order to sustain global peace and security (Linklater in Hadiwinata, 2017: 163). In 1960, South Korea underwent national modernization and aligned with the international political situation between the US and the Soviet Union. President Park Chung-hee implemented the "Construction First, Unification Later" policy in bilateral relations with North Korea, focusing on economic development. In contrast, President Kim Il-sung prioritized Korean unity and national supremacy for the revolution, aiming to eliminate the US influence in South Korea. North Korea strategized to dismantle the US-South Korean alliance by neutralizing the "puppet government" in Seoul. Kim's philosophy focused on transforming communist North Korea into a liberal democracy, leading to the dispatch of guerrillas to South Korea for the first time since the Korean War in late 1966. However, a military incident involving a firefight across the ceasefire line disrupted stability along the DMZ, resulting in the "quiet war" which killed 397 North Koreans, 299 South Koreans, and 43 Americans. South Korea faced a series of confrontations following North Korea's guerrilla attack on the presidential residence in 1968. On February 3, 1969, South Korea conducted counterattack operations, killing 28 troops and capturing one unit of 124 personnel. In the same year on October 30 and November 2, 120 North Korean commandos were infiltrated into Samcheok and Uljin provinces. On November 3, South Korean soldiers counterattacked and arrested the infiltrators, increasing their defensive capacity. Special army troops were established to counter North Korea's

attacks, and a 250-kilometer barbed wire fence was built along the Armistice Line, symbolizing Korea's division and the Korean Peninsula's Cold War (Lerner, 2010: 18–19).

As a result, bilateral relations between North Korea and South Korea have been fraught with mutual distrust and threats of terror, violence, and war. The two Korean presidents appear to have little interest in reuniting their nations. The Cold War and post-World War II historical context have shaped the dynamics of peace and conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Rather than genuine cooperation and justice, peace was frequently maintained through power conflicts and military deterrence. South Korea's approach to peace was inspired by its national modernization throughout the 1960s, with President Park Chung-hee favoring stability over resolution to division and conflict with North Korea. The conflicting visions of South Korea's Park Chung-hee and North Korea's Kim Il-sung demonstrate the disparities in peace interpretations and aspirations.

### **Peaceful Reunification**

The Nixon Doctrine, which began in 1969, was carried out in the US during the 1970s. The South Korean government began reshaping its reunification agenda on August 15, 1970, with the Declaration of Ideas for Peaceful Unification, which served as an initial stepping stone to its new approach with North Korea. While President Park officially acknowledged that North Korea is *de facto* Communist, the South Korean government is striving to create an ideal political atmosphere for reunification through dialogue, economy, and cooperation with North Korea. Following the June 23 Declaration, South Korea proposed a non-aggression treaty

with North Korea on January 18, 1974, followed by the August 15's proposal of the Three Basic Principles for Peaceful Unification with North Korea (Hanssen and Woo, 2020: 8–9).

The Three Basic Principles of Korean Unification emphasize the importance of peace, inter-Korean dialogue, and mutual exchanges. Prioritizing peace on the peninsula, developing trust and homogenization, and conducting general elections with fair administration and monitoring without UN supervision are essential for Korean unification. South Korea's unification policy has shifted from "development first, unification later" to "peace first, unification later," laying the foundation for future governments. The ideal concept of Korean reunification consists of a nuclear-free zone on the Korean Peninsula, sustained trust and cooperation between North Korea and South Korea, and bilateral dialogues free from external influences. The non-aggression treaty, which primarily stems from nuclear proliferation, is a major issue in Korean Peninsula peace efforts.

North Korea began developing nuclear weapons in 1956 as part of a cooperative agreement with the Soviet Union on peaceful nuclear energy use. (Satria, Puspita, & Kristiono, 2018: 111). Kim Il Sung, North Korea's leader at the time, started a program of developing ballistic missile capabilities in 1965 with the establishment of the Hamhung Military Academy, a North Korean army training facility for missile development (Bermudez, 2017: 2). On the other hand, South Korea urged the military presence under President Park Chung-hee to seek its own domestic nuclear weapons program in the 1970s based on changes in the South Korean state's security

environment in the 1960s, which were largely due to the influence of the Nixon Doctrine. South Korea also collaborates with the US and the United Nations to defend against North Korea's nuclear proliferation.

This condition has not improved, although the administrations in North Korea and South Korea have changed. North Korea has profusely refused to abandon its nuclear development program and instead, conducted a series of missile tests. Meanwhile, South Korea allowed the placement of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system during the Park Geun Hye administration in anticipation to counterattack the North Korean missile threat (Yong, 2016). In addition, throughout the leadership of Moon Jae-in, South Korea maintained military cooperation with the US (Shin, 2021b) which became the source of the Korean Peninsula's issues, prompting North Korea to launch a series of missile tests as a warning to the US and South Korea to immediately withdraw all US soldiers and discontinue military exercises with them. Since the Korean War ended in a ceasefire, the US and South Korea have held joint military exercises to prepare for potential North Korean invasion of South Korean territory. Despite the fact that South Korea's military capabilities have significantly increased since the 1950s, the South Korean government has never seriously contemplated withdrawing US soldiers nor conducting military exercises without them (Shin, 2021a).

The Nixon Doctrine, a US policy formulated by President Richard Nixon in 1969, significantly influenced South Korea's reunification policy during the 1970s and beyond. It emphasized the

principle of "Vietnamization" and reduced direct American military involvement in regional conflicts, urging South Korea to take greater responsibility for its defense and security. This led to a shift in South Korea's reunification policy from "development first, unification later" to "peace first, unification later," which acknowledges the importance of fostering a peaceful atmosphere for reunification with a focus on building domestic military capabilities and pursuing diplomatic initiatives with North Korea independently. The Nixon Doctrine also reduced South Korea's dependence on military force, encouraging the pursuit of peaceful solutions and reducing tensions. This approach impacted South Korea's approach to its relationship with the US, as it maintained military cooperation with the US while asserting its own interests and policies in its pursuit of reunification.

In brief, the ongoing nuclear issue, military cooperation with external powers, and nuclear proliferation in both Koreas have been a major obstacle to peace efforts and reunification. Despite changes in leadership and administrations, the issues surrounding nuclear proliferation and military cooperation persist, suggesting that deeper structural challenges and power dynamics continue to shape peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula.

### **The Elusive of Korean Peace**

North Korea and South Korea have the potential for peaceful reunification because they share ethnicity, culture, family ties, economic complementarity, international diplomacy, humanitarian concerns, and a common goal of



denuclearization. More specifically, the shared heritage and emotional impetus for reunification have laid the foundation for reconciliation, while family ties and existing reunification efforts show willingness to bridge the divide. Economic complementarity exists between South Korea's highly developed industry and technology and North Korea's natural resources and potential labor force which potentially benefit a unified Korea. Also, international actors, including the US, China, and neighboring countries have expressed interest in facilitating a peaceful resolution. Lastly, progress in denuclearization and regional stability could create a conducive environment for reunification talks.

However, through the critical theory lenses, the distorted term "peace" has significantly impacted the Korean reunification process, leading to miscommunication and misunderstanding among actors. Divergent interpretations of peace can lead to conflicting expectations and hinder productive dialogue, making it challenging to find common ground. Political actors may strategically exploit this distortion to advance their own agendas, justifying policies or actions that do not align with sincere efforts towards reunification. The Korean War has shaped the term "peace" in the context of the divided Korean Peninsula, with the North viewing peace as a shield against external threats and the South as a beacon of hope for reunification under democratic principles. The focus on a distorted version of peace may lead parties to prioritize superficial or short-term measures, which fail to address the deeper structural issues at the heart of the division between North and South Korea. This lack of clarity hampers the

effectiveness of negotiations and the development of a coherent reunification strategy. Efforts aimed at peacebuilding may also be compromised by a flawed conceptualization of peace. The dominance of hegemonic or allied forces has a strong impact on defining war and peace, influencing Korean foreign policy and leading to social contracts tainted with hegemonic or allied forces' interests. The distortion of the term "peace" may erode trust between parties involved in the reunification process, potentially leading to a breakdown in cooperation and deterioration of relations. For the reunification process to be sustainable in the long term, a clear and accurate understanding of peace is imperative.

Critical theory emphasizes the elusive nature of finding peace on the Korean Peninsula as well as the complex and demanding nature of achieving genuine peace. Traditional definitions of peace, which focus on the absence of visible conflict, fall short of reflecting the deeper structural and systemic concerns that underlie the partition and tensions between North and South Korea. True peace requires a restructuring of the underlying power dynamics, economic structures, and ideological frameworks that have contributed to Korea's division. Addressing historical legacies, sociopolitical inequities, and geopolitical interests is critical to creating this comprehensive form of peace. The Korean Peninsula remains entangled in a complex web of historical, ideological, and geopolitical factors, including ideological differences between the North and South, external influences from major global powers, and the enduring legacy of the Cold War. Critical theory accentuate the importance of

examining and challenging existing norms and power structures, seeking alternative approaches that prioritize social justice, human rights, and genuine self-determination for the Korean people.

## CONCLUSION

The pursuit of Korean reunification is deeply influenced by historical, political, and ideological complexities. Three distinct approaches to reunification—war, revolution, and peaceful means—reflect the enduring tensions and challenges between North and South Korea. The legacy of the Cold War, marked by ideological divides and military confrontations, has left a lasting impact on the region. Efforts towards peaceful reunification have been impeded by nuclear proliferation and external military cooperation, highlighting the intricate dynamics that shape peace initiatives. Despite evolving political landscapes, the underlying

structural challenges continue to shape the prospects for lasting peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula.

Based on the historical review, given their common ethnicity, culture, familial ties, economic complementarity, international diplomacy, humanitarian concerns, and nuclear disarmament, North Korea and South Korea can reunify through peaceful reconciliation. The hindrance to this reconciliation is the distortion of the term "peace", resulting in miscommunication and confusion among participants. The Korean War shaped the term "peace" in the context of the divided Korean Peninsula, where North Korea's peace means a shield against foreign threats and South Korea's peace is a beacon of hope for democratic reunification. This lack of clarity hampers the effectiveness of discourse and the development of a clear reunification strategy.

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