

# North Korea's Transformation On Peaceful Reunification Marks Paradigm Shift In Asia



*John P. Ruehl - Source:  
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*02-20-2024 ~ Abandoning peaceful reunification could escalate into a major conflict, or signify that the window for reunification is presently closed, prompting Pyongyang to explore alternative approaches.*

Late 2023 marked a notable transformation in North Korea's longstanding pursuit of peaceful reunification with South Korea after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un noted the failure of the policy [in his end-of-year speech](#). This sentiment was reiterated during [a January 15 meeting](#) of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), where the country's constitution was ordered to be rewritten to label South Korea as its "[principal adversary](#)."

Subsequently, public symbols promoting peaceful reunification in North Korea [were dismantled](#) and references to it [were deleted](#) on state media outlets. Additionally, [three inter-Korean cooperation organizations](#) —the Korean People's Cooperation Administration, Kumgangsan International Tourism Administration,

and the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland—were abolished, accompanied by an [increase in North Korean missile tests](#).

Several North Korea experts, including former State Department official Robert L. Carlin and nuclear scientist Siegfried S. Hecker, have [sounded the alarm](#) about the growing potential for conflict. Armed with nuclear weapons and emboldened by challenges to U.S. power in [Ukraine and the Middle East](#), Pyongyang might see this as an opportune moment for large-scale aggression. However, the North Korean leadership may believe that abandoning reunification while avoiding war could bolster its autonomy by freeing it from the democratization constraints linked to the reunification process.

North Korea explored various avenues for peaceful reunification [in the decades following the Korean war](#), including Kim Il Sung's Three Principles of National Reunification [in 1972](#). [The 1980s](#) saw more substantive ideas emerge. North Korea's "Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo," proposed two regional Korean governments under a confederal government. Subsequently, South Korea put forward its "Unification Formula for the Korean National Community," outlining a three-step model of reconciliation and cooperation, formation of a Korean commonwealth, and establishment of a unitary liberal democracy.

[In 1991](#), North Korea introduced the idea of a "low-stage federation" with regional autonomy, which received a positive reception from South Korea. By 2000, a Joint Declaration acknowledged common elements in both North and South Korea's proposals that fostered an environment conducive to the pursuit of unification.

However, relations between the Koreas began to break down in the 2000s, particularly after the North conducted its first nuclear test [in 2006](#), and have [sourer further](#) in recent years. [Citing](#) the "vicious cycle of contact and suspension, dialogue, and confrontation" and accusing South Korea of using reunification to collapse the North Korean government, Kim Jong Un's policy shift threatens to undo decades of work.

Apprehension about South Korea and the U.S. maintaining a firm stance on North Korea without concessions no doubt motivated Pyongyang to discontinue reunification efforts. The Biden Administration [reversed Trump's outreach policies](#) to North Korea, while [in 2022](#), South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk

Yeol declared it would designate North Korea as the country's "main enemy" following North Korean missile tests.

The U.S. and South Korea later launched the U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) [in 2023](#) to strengthen deterrence and cooperation on nuclear and contingency planning, while Yoon stated [in December 2023](#) that a "nuclear-based, powerful Korea-U.S. alliance" would be formed to deter Pyongyang. Additionally, greater [military cooperation](#) under Biden among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan may have further incentivized North Korea.

Amid worsening relations with its adversaries, North Korea's foreign policy is [increasingly aligned](#) with its major partners. Russia and China, once occasional collaborators with the U.S. on North Korea issues, [have hindered U.S. measures](#) against Pyongyang as their own relations with Washington have worsened. Widespread sanctions on [China](#) and especially [Russia](#) in recent years have prompted them and other countries to work around the sanctions through increased mutual trade and assistance with North Korea.

North Korea [came to rely on China](#) after the collapse of the Soviet Union but has strengthened its partnership with Russia since the start of the Ukraine war. South Korea's support for Ukraine saw Russia include it in its list of "[unfriendly countries](#)," easing Moscow's limitations on aiding North Korea's military. In return for [receiving](#) energy, food, and space and weapons technology, North Korea has supplied [missiles](#), [artillery](#), and other weapons to Russia.

Military assistance to North Korea meanwhile allows Russia to raise the security costs for the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, which Russia declared in January 2024 were [preparing for war with North Korea](#). Boosting North Korea's abilities may distract the U.S. from aiding Ukraine and complicate its efforts to [deter increasing Chinese activities](#) around Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Washington has also intensified attempts to sanction numerous countries to a level not seen in decades. The [increasing number](#) of countries attempting to [circumvent traditional networks](#) may have persuaded North Korea that it is no longer as susceptible to isolation from the global economy as it was in decades past. Utilizing Russia as a conduit, North Korea has already increased engagement with other sanctioned states [like Iran and Syria](#).

In recent decades, the waning of the prospect of Korea's reunification has also

paralleled a global trend. Country unification has become [increasingly rare](#) compared to state fragmentation. The last two major reunifications, Germany and Yemen, occurred in 1990, with the reunification of East and West Germany often cited as a model for Korea. But the absorption of the far smaller East Germany by the [far larger](#) West Germany contrasts to South Korea's population being [only double that of North Korea](#).

Familial links between North and South Korea have also dwindled significantly since 1953 and [income gaps](#) have widened. Bringing East Germany up to West German social standards has meanwhile cost [more than \\$2 trillion](#), with [lingering cultural differences between them](#)—challenges that will be even more pronounced in Korea. And in contrast to Germany's relative success, Yemen's reunification attempts since 1990 have been marred by [ongoing violence and instability](#).

Faced with these realities, [growing numbers](#) of South Koreans, [particularly younger generations](#), no longer want reunification with the North, trends that may solidify as the population difference between the two countries may reverse by the [end of the century](#).

Concerns remain that though North Korea may not actively pursue forceful unification, there is a potential for an escalation in destabilization tactics. [In 2010](#), a suspected North Korean missile sank the ROKS Cheonan, a South Korean naval vessel, killing 46 servicemen. [Months later](#), North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island left two South Korean servicemen and two South Korean civilians dead. Although full-scale conflict was avoided, South Korea's government may now not show as much restraint, and North Korea has increased its shelling near Yeonpyeong Island in recent weeks.

With Washington distracted in Ukraine and the Middle East, it has become harder for it to effectively punish North Korea for missile launches and military posturing. But open conflict or serious escalation might be deemed too risky by Kim Jong Un. While Russia and China may welcome distractions from their own territorial ambitions, a flare-up in the Korean peninsula may be too close to home for Moscow and Beijing.

Recognizing the aversion of major powers to the instability associated with the collapse of a nuclear-armed North Korean government, Kim may choose to test the U.S. and South Korea without the allure of reunification as a bargaining chip.

Distracting Washington but steering clear of serious escalation would ensure his long-term rule and is an approach that both Moscow and Beijing could support.

Capitalizing on perceived greater leverage, Pyongyang [has reverted](#) to the [Cold War-era strategy](#) of playing Moscow and Beijing off one another. Following North Korea's foreign minister's visit to Moscow in January 2024, state media invited Putin to Pyongyang, dubbing him "[the Korean people's closest friend](#)," language usually reserved for China. But in contrast to the later stages of the Cold War, the [foreign policy alignment](#) of North Korea, Russia, and China against Washington has made confronting them more formidable.

[In 936](#), the Goryeo dynasty managed to reunify Korea after centuries of division. Today, North Korea's recent policy shift has halted Korea's current reunification process, shaping a new chapter in the peninsula's history. South Korea now faces the crucial decision of upholding its reunification policy and championing [pan-Korean nationalism](#), or abandoning these ideals and more permanently dividing the two countries. Seoul's decision to downsize and repurpose the Ministry of Unification [in mid-2023](#) offers some insight into the direction it is leaning.

Though the prospect of reunification could return, the joint admission of North and South Korea to the UN in 1991, while still committed to reunification, hints at the early stages of consideration of abandoning reunification as a policy. Committing to the policy reversal will fundamentally alter Asia's geopolitical landscape and reshape bilateral ties, and already appears to be bringing the threat of conflict closer.

Yet should North Korea's policy shift solidify, [abandoning reunification](#) "theoretically opens the way to diplomatic relations, mutual recognition, and even the establishment of embassies" between the two Koreas. Pyongyang, Seoul, and outside powers could transform the decision to abandon reunification from a crisis into an opportunity—provided collaboration, a commitment to diplomatic resolution, and an avoidance of escalation are recognized as a collective responsibility.

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