

# EXPLAINING NORTH KOREA'S ABANDONMENT OF KOREAN UNIFICATION: EXTERNAL PRESSURES AND DOMESTIC POLITICAL DYNAMICS

*Salma Putri Manora*<sup>1</sup>

Received: 30 January 2026      Accepted: 24 February 2026

**Abstract:** The process of unifying the Korean Peninsula is an effort to reduce the escalation of violence and increase regional stability through increased interaction between North Korea and South Korea. Previously, this framework was also reflected in the Inter-Korea Basic Agreement of 1991 as the normative basis for peaceful unification by the two countries. However, the dynamics of inter-Korea relations underwent significant changes in 2024, especially when North Korea officially declared that it would no longer pursue the unification agenda. Therefore, this study aims to analyze North Korea's policy change from a neoclassical realism perspective, employing qualitative methods on document and archival analysis. The findings indicate that North Korea's shift in its attitude towards South Korea was influenced by external and domestic factors. Externally, fluctuations in South Korea's policy, the involvement of the United States and Russia in regional security issues, played an important role in North Korea's strategic calculations. Meanwhile, at the domestic level, Kim Jong Un's effort to strengthen his legitimacy and consolidate power also shaped the direction of North Korea's unification policy.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy; Kim Jong Un; North Korea; South Korea; Unification

---

## INTRODUCTION

International conflict is one of the main factors shaping global political dynamics. In the study of international relations, contemporary conflict is no longer understood as armed violence, but also includes non-violent conflict that has a significant impact on the patterns of interaction and relationships between actors. According to John Paul Lederach (2014), contemporary conflicts can be viewed through the conflict transformation approach, which is a process that aims to create change in reducing violence and increasing justice in direct interactions between the actors involved. This process is expected to bring about a peaceful situation and improve the quality of relations between conflicting actors. This is relevant to the conditions in the Korean Peninsula, where the two Koreas are still in a state of ongoing conflict. The process of Korean unification is expected to serve as a vehicle for conflict transformation and a means of reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

---

<sup>1</sup> Author and corresponding author, International Relation Studies, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia. Email: spmanora@gmail.com

Technically, North Korea and South Korea remain in a state of conflict as a consequence of the division of the Korean Peninsula. The aspiration for reunification, as stated in each nation's constitution, is rooted in the historical context of the unilateral division of the Korean Peninsula by the United States, which was done without consulting the Korean people (Cumings, 2005). The unification process is seen from both sides as a pathway to bring peace and stability that has long been damaged due to the conflict driven by the division of the Korean Peninsula. The commitment to pursue peaceful unification is articulated in the 1991 Inter-Korea Basic Agreement, officially known as the *Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between South and North Korea*, which was signed on December 13, 1991. This agreement serves as an important foundation as it affirms both parties' commitment to focus on achieving reconciliation, while setting aside political and military confrontation and reducing tensions by preventing the use of armed force. In addition, the agreement states that the relationship between South Korea and North Korea is now a special and temporary arrangement, established to aid in the unification process. Consequently, the 1991 Inter-Korea Basic Agreement serves as a vital foundation for various forms of exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas, aimed at ensuring peace on the peninsula.

The 1991 Inter-Korea Basic Agreement can also be viewed as an attempt to address North Korea's provocative and aggressive behavior in its unification efforts on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, underpinned by its communist ideology, has consistently employed an aggressive stance in its pursuit of Korean unification. This is evident in North Korea's initiation of the Korean War (1950–1953), which was driven by its objective to unify the entire Korean Peninsula under the leadership of Kim Il-sung (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2014). The war concluded with an armistice agreement rather than a peace treaty, leaving the conflict between the two Koreas unresolved to this day. In addition, North Korea's possession of nuclear capabilities serves as a strategic instrument to reinforce its objective of achieving the unification of the Korean Peninsula under its regime (Roehrig, 2020). Such a provocative behavior has underpinned North Korea's decision to advance its nuclear weapons program. Under the leadership of Kim Jong Un, North Korea has conducted four nuclear weapons tests (in 2013, twice in 2016, and in 2017), which have triggered widespread condemnation from the international community. Despite its confrontational posture, North Korea has also expressed a commitment to peaceful unification in line with the principles outlined in the 1991 Inter-Korea Basic Agreement. This intention was reflected in its participation in the 2000 Inter-Korea Summit, which took place under the framework of the Sunshine Policy introduced by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. Following this, the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit, which brought together Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, signaled the renewal of inter-Korean dialogue, signifying the revival of engagement between the two Koreas after a long period of heightened tensions.

The aforementioned suggests that North Korea has maintained a consistent approach to pursuing Korean unification, employing confrontational tactics, while simultaneously expressing its commitment to the 1991 Inter-Korea Basic Agreement through cooperation with South Korea in efforts toward a peaceful unification process. However, the Korean unification process encountered a significant setback in 2023, when Kim Jong Un, during the 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, announced a policy shift concerning South Korea and the broader unification agenda. This shift poses a serious challenge to the historical trajectory of inter-Korean relations, increases mutual distrust and confrontation, and signals North Korea's willingness to resort to physical measures, including the possible use of its nuclear capabilities (K. S. Kim, 2024a). Moreover, since 2024, Kim Jong Un has declared that

South Korea would no longer be recognized as a counterpart in the processes of reconciliation and unification (K. S. Kim, 2024b).

This policy shift was accompanied by a significant transformation in North Korea's official discourse. By explicitly omitting references to peaceful unification and redefining inter-Korean relations as ties between "two separate and hostile states", the regime signaled a fundamental redefinition of its national identity. In this reconfiguration, unification is no longer viewed as a shared historical and ethnic aspiration, but rather as a strategic liability that could undermine regime security (J. H. Lee, 2025; K. S. Kim, 2024b).

The unification process of the Korean Peninsula has been marked by ongoing conflict and tension. Nevertheless, efforts pursued through inter-Korean dialogue and exchanges have contributed to a more peaceful approach to this process. Previous studies have highlighted that these dynamics present both challenges and obstacles to achieving unification on the Korean Peninsula. Some emphasize the role of identity construction as a crucial asset that simultaneously poses difficulties in the unification process, while others focus on North Korea's possession of nuclear capabilities as a factor that significantly influences unification-related discourse.

Identity is regarded as both a crucial factor and a significant challenge in the unification process of the Korean Peninsula. Although both Koreas share civilizational and historical roots that inspire aspirations for unity, the unification process is often perceived to be in a status quo due to the deeply rooted division, reinforced by differences in ideologies, languages, policies, historical narratives, and conceptions of statehood (Horton, 2020; Utomo & Maksum, 2020). Furthermore, South Korea's identity shift toward becoming a 'Global Korea' (Watson, 2012) and North Korea's redefining of itself as a nuclear-armed state (K. S. Kim, 2024b) have further contributed to the complexity of the unification process.

Meanwhile, Kim Kap-sik (2024b) points to the drastic changes that have occurred in North Korea. North Korea has declared itself a nuclear state, posing a serious threat to South Korea and further undermining the prospects for unification. According to Milani (2018), the issues of unification and North Korea's nuclear capabilities should be addressed separately, as the pressure to achieve denuclearization as a precondition for inter-Korean relations is viewed as a potential obstacle to the unification process. On the one hand, Park Kwangcheol (2016) argues that addressing the issue of North Korea's nuclear armament may facilitate the unification process of the Korean Peninsula by garnering international support for denuclearization efforts. Several studies support this view by indicating that North Korea's pursuit and retention of nuclear capabilities are driven by its strategic objective to unify the Korean Peninsula under its own regime (H. rhak Park 2024, S. H. Park 2024, Roehrig 2020). Nonetheless, the development of North Korea's nuclear capabilities has generated a negative perception among the South Korean public, contributing to low public support for unification and potentially influencing policy decisions concerning the unification process (K. Kim 2022, Koo 2020, Kwon and Lee 2024). Ultimately, leveraging the nuclear issue as a tool of coercion in the context of unification would undermine the efforts that have been pursued through peaceful means.

Existing studies show that a number of factors hinder the unification process, making it difficult and prolonging delays. Nevertheless, efforts to achieve unification despite these challenges. Prior research has mainly examined the dynamics of the Korean Peninsula unification process through identity and material dimensions, particularly nuclear capabilities, and other structural obstacles, while the shift in North Korea's policy to withdraw from the unification agenda as part of its national strategy has received insufficient attention. Consequently, further research is required that specifically analyzes North Korea's policy change in halting the

unification agenda, which has been pursued through provocative approaches and peaceful dialogue mechanisms, as reflected in the 1991 Inter-Korea Basic Agreement.

Following North Korea's withdrawal from the unification process in 2024, which had been ongoing for decades, this study focuses on the country's policy shift as the main subject of analysis, contrasting with previous studies that have generally highlighted the obstacles to the unification process. This focus is significant because North Korea's strategic move away from the unification agenda not only accounts for the stagnation of the unification process but also influences security and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The policy shift raises the question of why North Korea chose to discontinue the unification process, despite it had been a continuous national strategy. Accordingly, this study examines the external and internal pressures that led North Korea to enact this change.

To explore the potential reasons, this study opens with a background on the Korean Peninsula's unification process. It proceeds with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological approaches that will guide the analysis. The following section outlines the results of the study using the framework of neoclassical realism, categorizing the findings into internal and external factors that have contributed to North Korea's shift in unification policy. The study will conclude with a summary of key findings, highlighting the internal and external factors that have shaped North Korea's changing policy toward the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopts the framework of Neoclassical Realism to analyze North Korea's decision to halt the unification process from its national strategy. This approach is employed as it incorporates both external and internal variables, enabling a holistic analysis of foreign policy decision-making underlying North Korea's unification policy.

When explaining a country's foreign policy, Rose (1998) integrates both external and internal variables, thereby improving the system offered by the classical realist framework by incorporating elements of neoclassical realism. Classical realism holds that a state's material power position within the international system is the primary driver of its foreign policy, whereas neoclassical realism argues that systemic pressure do not always directly shape policy. Unit-level intervening factors, such as domestic political dynamics, leadership preferences, and institutional constraints, should be accounted for to explain how systemic pressures manifest. Consequently, a state's policy response can differ within the same international structure, reflecting complex interplay between systemic forces and domestic conditions. In addition, these variations underscore the importance of considering both external and internal dynamics.

According to Schweller (2004), analyzing a country's foreign policy requires more than examining international pressures alone, as these pressures do not directly translate into policy outcomes. It is also necessary to incorporate domestic variables that shape how the state interprets and responds to such pressures. In this regard, Ripsman et al. (2016) identify four intervening variables at the domestic level, which are elite perceptions, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. However, the influence of these four variables is not uniform and depends on a state's the political characteristics.

As shown by Putra (2021), in an analysis of non-democratic countries with centralized power structures, elite perceptions emerge as the most influential domestic variable. In the context of inter-Korea policy, in the broader context of regional dynamics, North Korea, an autocratic socialist state, concentrates decision-making process in the hands of Kim Jong Un. Consequently, shifts in North Korea's stance on the unification agenda should be interpreted through the

perceptions and strategic calculations of the regime's elites as they respond in the context of external pressure in the context of global political arena today.

Therefore, North Korea's policy shift regarding the removal of the unification agenda from its national strategy is analyzed through the interaction between international pressure and domestic factors, as conceptualized within the neoclassical realism framework by Rose (1998). In this framework, pressures originating from the international system do not translate directly into foreign policy outcomes. Rather, they are intertwined with intervening variables at the domestic level that shape how policy-making elites perceive and respond to external constraints. This analytical approach allows this study to explain how North Korea responds to both external and internal dynamics in determining changes in its policy on the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

The policy decisions taken by Kim Jong Un regime in 2024 can be understood as the result of international structural influences. However, international structure alone cannot account for variations in state behavior, as countries facing similar systemic conditions often react in different behaviors. These variations arise from differences in domestic political characteristics, which shape how states interpret external pressures and convert them into policy decisions. Accordingly, domestic factors within North Korean political system, particularly elite perceptions and bureaucratic dynamics, play a crucial role in shaping the regime's response to developments related to the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

By incorporating both external factors originating from the international system and internal domestic factors, this study examines how these variables interact in shaping North Korea's policy on the unification process. At the external level, the analysis focuses on dynamics that contribute to policy change, including South Korea's policies and actions toward North Korea, the role of the United States in shaping the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, and North Korea's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. At the internal level, the study examines the Kim Jong Un regime to assess domestic political dynamics and the regime's responses to external pressures. Taken together, this framework enables the study to analyze the factors underlying North Korea's decision-making, as shaped by both international pressure, particularly from South Korea and the United States, and the internal dynamics of the Kim Jong Un regime.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to analyze existing data that has already been collected from events experienced by North Korea related to the unification process. A qualitative methodology is employed in this study to emphasize a descriptive approach in explaining the results of the data analysis (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, the qualitative approach offers the flexibility to explore and understand the phenomenon holistically. Through the use of a qualitative approach, this research seeks to explain the Kim Jong Un regime's decision to withdraw from the Korean Peninsula unification process, thereby addressing the central research question.

This paper aims to examine the influence of both domestic and international factors on North Korea's policy shift, especially in the context of the Korean Peninsula unification process. Accordingly, changes in North Korea's behavior will be analyzed through the collection and analysis of non-numerical data using archival and document-based research methods (Lamont, 2015). Thus, this study will draw on primary data such as documents concerning the unification process of the Korean Peninsula, as well as official agreements and meeting outcomes that reflect relevant policy positions. In addition, secondary data, including previous research, books, and media coverage related to the developments of the unification process, will be employed to complement the analysis in this study.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic examination of written and online materials obtained from official archives, relevant institutional websites, and official North Korea media sources. Following data collection, the materials were categorized according to indicators derived from the neoclassical realism framework and classified into internal and external factors to facilitate the analysis of the underlying reasons for changes in North Korea's policy on the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

The scope of this research centers on the Kim Jong Un regime from 2011 to the present, intending to understand the policy change regarding unification that happened in 2024. Nonetheless, key events preceding this will also be taken into account to provide a more comprehensive analytical perspective. Given the recent changes in North Korea's behavior, this study is expected to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Korean unification issues. Furthermore, this paper offers an alternative perspective for analyzing and responding to the evolving dynamics surrounding this issue. From an academic standpoint, this study also seeks to enrich geopolitical studies on the Korean region within the discipline of international relations by offering a more comprehensive insight into North Korea's policy in regional and global contexts, while also contributing to theoretical discourse. Thus, this study holds not only theoretical relevance but may also serve as a reference for policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders seeking to understand political and security strategies on the Korean Peninsula.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

North Korea no longer perceives its relationship with South Korea as a special relationship aimed at unification, as previously stipulated in the Inter-Korea Basic Agreement 1991. North Korea has firmly declared that it no longer considers South Korea a counterpart in the process of unification and reconciliation, but instead defines it as a hostile state (K. S. Kim, 2024b). Accordingly, North Korea has expressed its readiness to go to war and employ its nuclear arsenal against South Korea. This declaration underscores Kim Jong Un's intention to advance a 'two states' narrative in inter-Korean relations.

Moreover, Kim Jong Un vowed to treat South Korea as a separate state, effectively abandoning the long-standing notion of shared national identity (J. H. Lee, 2025). In addition, Pyongyang removed *Uriminzokkiri* (among our nation self) from the Rules of the Workers' Party of Korea and deleted the obligation of party members to pursue national reunification, replacing an identity-based unification doctrine with a framework emphasizing "peace and unification through strength" (K. S. Kim, 2024a). This was further consolidated at the 10<sup>th</sup> Session of the 14<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly in January 2024, where Kim ordered the elimination of terms symbolizing inter-Korean solidarity and subsequently shut down propaganda outlets, including *Uriminzokkiri*, *Kugukjeonseon*, *Naenara*, *DPRK Today*, and *Maeri*, that had previously promoted unification grounded in an identity-based idea (J. H. Lee, 2025).

The Kim Jong-un regime has responded to inter-Korean relations through a series of policy changes concerning South Korea and the unification process. First, in 2020, Pyongyang demolished the inter-Korean Liaison Office, an event that marked the beginning of a gradual shift in North Korea's inter-Korean policy orientation toward a competitive posture against South Korea, signaling that ties between the two are rapidly deteriorating (Berlinger et al., 2020). Second, North Korea removed the term *unification* from its constitution and dissolved government institutions dedicated to unification efforts, such as the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country, the National Cooperation Bureau, and the Mount Kumgang International Tourism Administration (*North Korea Closes Agencies Working for Reunification With South*, 2024). Third,

North Korea demonstrated its commitment to this decision by severing the railway and roadway connections linking it to South Korea (G. Bae et al., 2024).

Kim Jong Un has also ordered constitutional revision to designate South Korea as the “primary enemy state” and the “invariable principal enemy” (K. S. Kim, 2024b). In line with this redefinition, Pyongyang called for the demolition of the Arch of Reunification, denouncing it as an eyesore after redefining the South as its principal foe (Jack et al., 2024). All changes have significantly deteriorated the inter-Korean relations that were established to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula, thereby heightening threats to regional stability.

### **International Pressure and South Korea’s Policy on Inter-Korean Relations**

Kim Jong Un has led North Korea since 2011, during which South Korea has experienced multiple presidential transitions. The direction of the Korean unification process has been significantly shaped by changes in South Korea’s domestic political leadership, particularly the orientation of the ruling party. Conservative administrations, such as those associated with the Saenuri Party or now the People Power Party, have generally pursued foreign policies aligned more closely with the United States, often deprioritizing engagement in inter-Korea relations. In contrast, progressive governments, notably those led by the Democratic Party, have tended to adopt more cooperative approaches toward North Korea. Consequently, under the administrations of Presidents Kim Dae Jung and Moon Jae-in, South Korea pursued more sustained dialogue and engagement with North Korea as part of broader efforts to promote peaceful unification. This policy orientation shifted following the election of Yoon Suk Yeol in 2022, whose administration pursued closer strategic cooperation with the United States, thereby reshaping inter-Korean relations.

South Korea’s inter-Korean policy is shaped by the contrasting orientations of conservative and progressive political groups (Santosa, 2025). As shown in Table 1, shifts in inter-Korean policy closely correspond to changes in South Korea’s domestic political leadership. Conservative parties generally adopt a more hardline stance toward North Korea, perceiving it as a direct threat to South Korea’s national security and stability. Accordingly, conservative policymakers tend to favor coercive and restrictive measures, emphasizing pressure-based strategies in the formulation of inter-Korea relations. Within this framework, the South Korea-United States defense alliance is viewed as the primary and most credible mechanism for responding to security threats posed by North Korea.

By contrast, progressive groups advocate a more engagement-oriented approach toward North Korea, emphasizing dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang in addressing inter-Korea issues. Accordingly, policy instruments such as enhanced cooperation and people-to-people exchanges are favored as means to build mutual trust, support the unification process, and promote reconciliation between the two Koreas.

Table 1. South Korean Presidents Since the 1991 Inter-Korean Basic Agreement

Name	Party	Periode	Inter-Korea Policy
Roh Taewoo	Democratic Justice → Democratic Liberal Party (conservative)	25/02/1988 – 24/02/1993	Nordpolitik (Inter-Korea Basic Agreement)
Kim Youngsam	New Korea Party (before: Democratic	25/02/1993 – 24/02/1998	

	Liberal Party) (conservative)		
Kim Daejung	National Congress for New Politics → Millennium Democratic Party (progressive)	25/02/1998 – 24/02/2003	Sunshine policy (Inter-Korea Summit)
Roh Moohyun	Millennium Democratic Party – Uri (Our) Party (progressive)	25/02/2003 – 24/02/2008	Sunshine policy
Lee Myung-bak	Grand National Party (conservative)	25/02/2008 – 24/02/2013	Vision 3.000 (Hard Line Policy)
Park Geun-hye	Saenuri Party (before: Grand National Party) (conservative)	25/02/2013 – 10/03/2017 (impeached)	Trustpolitik
Moon Jae-in	Democratic Party (progressive)	10/05/2017 – 9/05/2022	Moonshine policy (Sunshine Policy 2, Inter-Korea Summit)
Yoon Suk Yeol	People Power Party (conservative)	10/05/2022 – 04/04/2025 (impeached)	

Source: compiled by the author based on multiple sources

Consequently, in the early phase of his leadership, Kim Jong Un faced strong demands for complete denuclearization from the Lee Myung-bak administration, along with significant deterioration in inter-Korean relations. This deterioration was driven by a series of security incidents, including the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island (2010), the sinking of ROKS Cheonan (2010), and the perceived security threats posed by joint military exercises conducted by the United States Forces Korea (USFK) and South Korea (Govindasamy & Azman, 2018).

Following the Park Geun-hye administration, similarly exhibited limited progress, largely due to the rooted conservative outlook toward North Korea within South Korea's political leadership. Although Park Geun-hye sought to combine elements of the Sunshine Policy with a more hardline approach, North Korea remained skeptical of these initiatives. It did not regard them as credible pathways to the unification process. This skepticism was further reinforced by Park's articulation of a "reunification by absorption" framework, which implied the collapse of the North Korean regime as an essential for unification (Santosa, 2025).

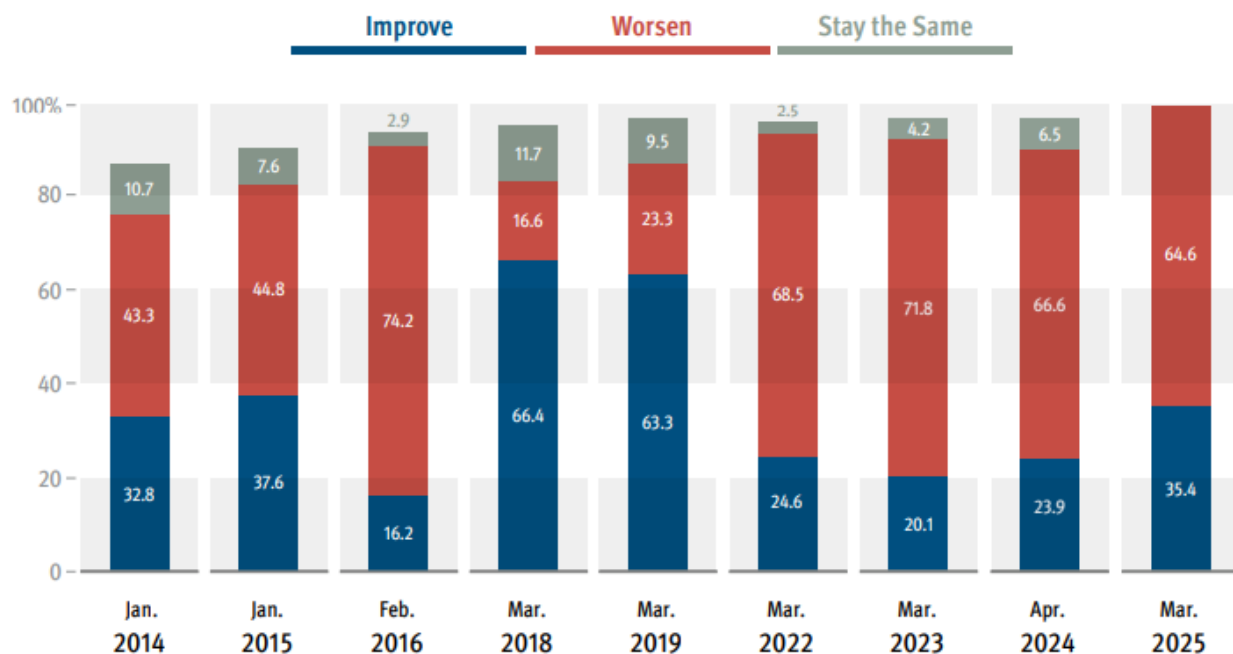
Kim Jong Un experienced a significant shift in South Korea's policy toward North Korea during the administrations of Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk Yeol. Unlike his predecessors, including those from the same progressive party, Moon Jae-in adopted a more proactive approach in responding to North Korea-related issues (Kelly, 2019). Under Moon's leadership, South Korea successfully resumed active dialogue with North Korea through three Inter-Korea Summits held in 2018. Moon Jae-in also played a mediating role between North Korea and the United States, facilitating direct engagement between the two countries. These policy initiatives received favorable public responses, as reflected in public opinion surveys conducted between 2018 and

2019, as seen in Figure 1, which showed a significant increase in support for Korean unification compared to previous years (South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025, 2025).

Meanwhile, President Yoon Suk Yeol adopted a policy orientation that emphasized closer alignment with the United States, particularly through the strengthening of the bilateral defense alliance via the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG). The Yoon administration has framed North Korea's nuclear capabilities as a concrete and immediate threat, leading to an increased emphasis on defense preparedness and expanded security cooperation with the United States (*Yoon Gov't Unveils National Security Strategy Highlighting NK Threat*, 2023). In response, Pyongyang noted that Yook Suk Yeol's 2024 New Year's address, urging the strengthening of South Korea's three-axis defense system, served as justification for further advancing what it described as a more overwhelming nuclear combat capability (K. S. Kim, 2024b).

From North Korea's perspective, however, South Korea's growing proximity to the United States has been perceived as a direct security threat. As illustrated in Figure 1, between 2022 and early 2025, perception for Korean unification deteriorated further, coinciding with a notable shift in North Korea's strategic posture (South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025, 2025).

Figure 1. Annual public opinion on South-North Korea unification



Source: South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025, 2025

Beyond systemic pressure from South Korea, the South Korea-United States alliance has also generated significant pressure on North Korea, particularly in relation to activities perceived by Pyongyang as a threat to its national security. For instance, joint military exercises conducted by South Korea and the United States have consistently been interpreted by North Korea as confrontational in nature (Chung, 2023). During the Park Geun Hye administration, the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea further heightened North Korea's security concerns towards the United States.

In addition, North Korea has long been subjected to international economic sanctions in response to its nuclear program. However, the limited effectiveness of these sanctions has not

prevented Pyongyang from continuing its nuclear development. This ineffectiveness is further compounded by the declining influence of the United States as a dominant global actor, as well as the intensifying multilateral competition between the South Korea-United States-Japan bloc and the North Korea-China-Russia alignment. Together, these dynamics have reduced the credibility and enforcement capacity of economic sanctions imposed on North Korea.

The failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit to bridge relations between North Korea and the United States also contributed to the stagnation of the unification process. The primary agenda advanced by the United States centered on North Korea's complete denuclearization. However, negotiations collapsed due to a lack of mutual trust between the two parties, as the United States was unwilling to lift economic sanctions, while North Korea refused to halt its nuclear development (Nah, 2019). Furthermore, North Korea's demands to avoid marginalization within South Korea-United States policy coordination were not accommodated. This exclusion reinforced Pyongyang's perception of hostility, ultimately leading North Korea to redefine inter-Korea relations as adversarial rather than cooperative.

According to K. S. Kim (2024b), the failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit marked a turning point in the deterioration of inter-Korean relations, as Pyongyang came to interpret the deepening alliance between the United States and South Korea as evidence of long-term confrontation. During the summit, Washington's demands were perceived as "counter to the fundamental interest of our country," reinforcing North Korea's distrust (R. M. Lee, 2025). In the aftermath, Pyongyang resumed advancing its nuclear and missile programs and revived the doctrine of "self-reliance," increasingly equated with diplomatic isolation. By early 2022, Kim Jong Un had concluded that the United States – North Korea relations remained hostile, further diminishing the perceived utility of diplomacy with Washington (R. M. Lee, 2025).

The Russia-Ukraine War has also contributed to shifts in North Korea's strategic environment and indirectly influenced unification policy. This international conflict has provided a strategic opportunity for North Korea and Russia to strengthen their bilateral relationship, culminating in a 2024 defense treaty that elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The treaty includes mutual defense commitments, resulting in North Korea under the extension of Russia's nuclear umbrella, in addition to its own nuclear arsenal and long-standing mutual security with China (Dashdorj, 2025).

Moreover, North Korea deployed personnel to support Russian military operations on the battlefield, while Moscow has signaled its willingness to provide assistance and support to North Korea in advancing its military and strategic capabilities. This reciprocal exchange indicates that the North Korea – Russia relationship has evolved beyond a purely transactional arrangement into a longer-term strategic partnership (Howell, 2024). This development reflects Pyongyang's diplomatic strategy of mitigating international isolation, which intensified after COVID-19 and the failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit, by consolidating long-term diplomatic and ideological cooperation with its patrons and rethinking its strategic posture (Ponomarenko, 2025). This geopolitical pressure has, to some extent, offset the risks arising from the shift of inter-Korea relations by encouraging North Korea to deepen alignment with its ally by expanding diplomatic and security cooperation.

Overall, international pressure has significantly shaped the trajectory of inter-Korean relations by transforming the unification process from a long-term political objective into a security-contingent issue. The deepening of South Korea's alliance with the United States, combined with military deterrence measures, sanctions, and intensifying regional power competition, has heightened North Korea's perception of external threat. Under these conditions,

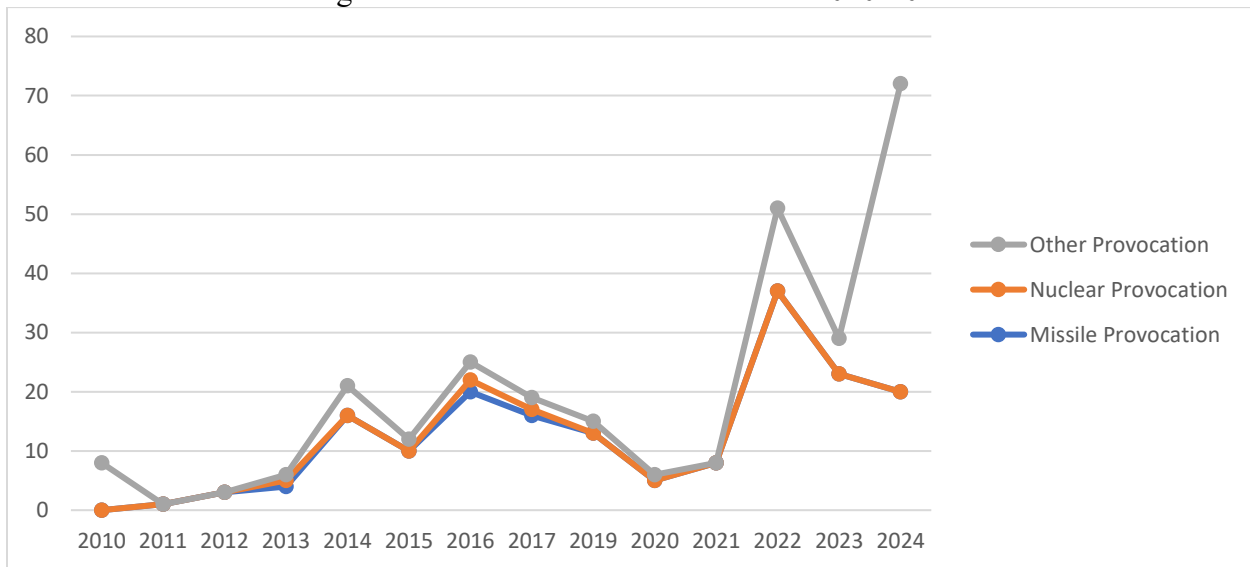
unification itself is no longer interpreted by Pyongyang as a cooperative project, but rather as a potential risk to regime survival. As a result, international pressure has constrained the political feasibility of unification by reinforcing securitization, eroding mutual trust, and prioritizing strategic stability over reconciliation.

**Domestic pressure and the intervening factor of Kim Jong Un's absolute power**

Kim Jong Un holds the central position in the political hierarchy of North Korea. Political power is highly concentrated in a single leader in this personalist regime (J. Bae, 2018), making the decision-making process largely dependent on the leader's personal preferences while formal institutions remain weak and operate primarily under the control of leadership. This authoritarian system has been maintained across generations of the Kim family, from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il and, now, Kim Jong Un.

Despite governing under the same dynastic framework and sharing similar authoritarian characteristics, each leader pursued distinct strategies for addressing the Korean Peninsula issue. Kim Il Sung's strategy, most notably during the Korean War, centered on military action as a means of asserting dominance and achieving unification under his regime. In contrast, Kim Jong Il adopted a more collaborative stance, showing a willingness to explore diplomatic alternatives such as a summit meeting, negotiations, and confidence-building measures such as the six-party talks, partly in response to the changing geopolitical environment and the need to secure economic aid. Then, Kim Jong Un has engaged in dialogue with South Korea while simultaneously intensifying military provocations. This dual approach has resulted in increasingly unstable inter-Korean relations.

Figure 2. North Korean Provocation in 2010-2024



Source: processed from Beyond Parallel CSIS Korea Chair

In the early phase of his leadership, Kim Jong Un conducted a series of missile tests amid the international sanctions imposed on Pyongyang. In 2012 alone, three missile provocations were carried out, signaling the regime's continued commitment to advancing intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities with the potential to carry a nuclear warhead (*North Korea's Nuclear Program: A History*, 2012). This pattern continued throughout Kim Jong Un's tenure, with four

nuclear test conducted in 2013, twice in 2016, and again in 2017. The repeated missile and nuclear test events have frequently contributed to fluctuations in inter-Korean relations, intensifying tensions between North Korea and South Korea.

From the perspective of elite perceptions, the policy choices adopted by Kim Jong Un reflect rational and strategic calculations shaped by contested leadership legitimacy (Chu, 2025). His succession generated internal uncertainty regarding his authority, particularly due to his young age and limited governing experience, making leadership consolidation a central priority in early decision-making (Aum, 2019; J. Bae, 2018). In this context, nuclear and missile development functioned not only as a response to external security pressure but also as tools of domestic legitimation.

North Korea, as a personalist regime, uses external confrontation to reinforce regime stability (J. Bae, 2018). Kim Jong Un's rise to power occurred within a political culture influenced by Confucian traditions, where seniority and revolutionary credentials carry significant symbolic weight. As a result, he faced potential internal challengers from established elites (Aum, 2019). Thus, military provocations and confrontational foreign policy behavior functioned as mechanisms of domestic control.

The heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula were then partially balanced by Kim Jong Un's strategic engagement in dialogue and negotiation initiatives related to peace on the peninsula. In 2018, Kim Jong Un met with South Korean President Moon Jae-in during the Inter-Korean Summits, which marked a significant improvement in diplomatic relations. These meetings articulated three principal objectives: 1) the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and the establishment of a permanent peace regime, 2) the development of sustainable inter-Korean relations, and 3) the realization of a new economic community on the Korean Peninsula.

This diplomatic momentum was strategically leveraged by Kim Jong Un to advance North Korea's national interests rather than to signal a long-term commitment to unification. Engagement in dialogue functioned as an instrument to manage international pressure and create opportunities for economic relief. As Bae (2018) notes, Kim Jong Un demonstrated an intention to utilize denuclearization negotiations as a means to address North Korea's deteriorating economic conditions. This willingness to enter dialogue was closely linked to expectations of economic assistance and expanded economic cooperation with South Korea (Pratamasari, 2019). Such calculations are consistent with the broader structural reality that the stability of North Korea's socialist political regime is tied to its economic performance (Frank, 2018). Consequently, North Korea's meetings with South Korea regarding the unification process in this period should be understood as instrumental, shaped by economic imperatives and regime survival rather than a normative commitment to unification.

In addition, Kim Jong Un's consolidation of absolute authority in Pyongyang has generated leadership characteristics distinct from those of his predecessors. Kim Jong Un exhibits greater pragmatism, a preference for fast-paced decision-making, and deeper personal involvement in the policy-making process (Isozaki, 2020). He sought to distinguish his leadership from his father, who focused on the military-first policy (*Songun*) to prioritize economic stability (*Byungjin*) while preserving the nuclear development program as the key source of regime legitimacy (Isozaki, 2020; J. Bae, 2018).

This shift in policy orientation has fundamentally altered North Korea's approach to the unification process in 2024. Under Kim Jong Un, the unification process has been framed as a strategic burden. He has openly criticized previous unification approaches, removed the term from North Korea's legal frameworks, and prohibited references to South Korea as part of a shared

nation (K. S. Kim, 2024b). Kim Jong Un has declared that inter-Korea relations are now relations between two hostile states.

Thus, Kim Jong Un's concentration of authority within a personalist regime operates as a critical intervening variable shaping North Korea's inter-Korean policy. His leadership characteristics, prioritization of national interests, and persistent efforts to consolidate regime legitimacy enable him to interpret domestic political vulnerabilities and translate them into strategic foreign policy choices. In this context, the unification process with South Korea is no longer viewed as an ideological objective but rather as a politically contingent issue calibrated to regime survival. Consequently, shifts in North Korea's inter-Korean relations are best understood as outcomes of leader-driven domestic political calculations rather than responses to structural pressure alone.

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that North Korea's decision to abandon unification as a national objective is shaped by the interaction of domestic, regional, and systemic pressures. Drawing on neoclassical realism, the analysis demonstrates how external factors, particularly shifts in South Korea's inter-Korean policies across administrations and broader international dynamics involving the United States and Russia, intersect with internal political considerations to influence Pyongyang's evolving stance on inter-Korean relations. These pressures collectively contributed to a strategic reassessment in which the unification process came to be perceived as incompatible with North Korea's national priorities.

At the domestic level, Kim Jong Un's leadership functions as a critical intervening variable translating internal challenges into foreign policy outcomes. His consolidation of power within a personalist regime, prioritization of regime survival, and recalibration of national interests reshaped North Korea's approach to inter-Korean relations, ultimately reframing unification as a liability rather than a strategic objective. While this study highlights the strength of neoclassical realism in integrating domestic political dynamics into foreign policy analysis, future research would benefit from incorporating perception-based approaches to more fully capture elite cognition and belief systems in North Korea's policy formulation toward the Korean Peninsula.

## REFERENCES

- Aum, D. (2019). The More Avid Historian? A Comparison Between Kim Jong-Il's and Kim Jong-Un's Uses and Usage Rates of the Korean War as a Heuristic in KCNA, 1998 – 2018. *North Korean Review*, 15(2), 38–58.
- Bae, G., Lendon, B., Seo, Y., & Valerio, M. (2024). *North Korea to cut off road and rail links to South Korea*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/09/asia/north-korea-army-militarized-border-south-korea-intl-hnk/index.html>
- Bae, J. (2018). The North Korean Regime, Domestic Instability and Foreign Policy. *North Korean Review*, 14(1), 85–101.
- Berlinger, J., Kwon, J., & Seo, Y. (2020). *North Korea blows up liaison office in Kaesong used for talks with South*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/16/asia/north-korea-explosion-intl-hnk>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Chu, Y. M. (2025). Explore and Interpret the Psychology of Kim Jong-Un: Understanding the Mindset of North Korea's Leader and Its Implications for Foreign Policy in the Trump's Return. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 590–603.

- <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.137032>
- Chung, S.-Y. (2023). *North Korea 's Perception and Behavior toward the ROK-US Joint Military Exercise*.
- Cumings, B. (2005). *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. W.W. Norton.
- Dashdorj, Z. (2025). *The global ramifications of the Russia-North Korea pact Strategic win for North Korea*. Geopolitical Intelligence Services. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-north-korea-treaty/>
- Frank, R. (2018). *North Korea 's Economic Policy in 2018 and Beyond : Reforms Inevitable , Delays Possible*. 38 North. <https://www.38north.org/2018/08/rfrank080818/>
- Govindasamy, G., & Azman, M. D. (2018). Inter-Korean Relations and the Nuclear Issue: Hostility to a Possible Rapprochement. In M. D. Azman & G. Govindasamy (Eds.), *Insights to East Asia: Bridging the Past and Present* (pp. 57–73). University of Malaya Press.
- Horton, H. (2020). *North and South Korea: division by constructions* [University of Tennessee at Chattanooga]. <https://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses>
- Howell, E. H. K. (2024). North Korea and Russia ' s dangerous partnership: The threat to global security from the Kim-Putin axis and how to respond. In *Research Paper*. Royal Institute of International Affairs. <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136321>
- Isozaki, A. (2020). Characteristics of Kim Jong-un's leadership: analyzing the tone of official North Korean media. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 9(1), 50–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2020.1752425>
- Jack, K., Mason, J., & Hunnicutt, T. (2024). *North Korea tears down monument symbolizing union with South*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-tears-down-monument-symbolizing-union-with-south-report-2024-01-23/>
- Kelly, R. E. (2019). *Moon Jae-in 's foreign policy reorientation*. The Interpreter. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/moon-jae-s-foreign-policy-reorientation>
- Kim, K. (2022). Inter-Korean Relations and Unification Perception in South Korea. *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies*, 14(2), 39–78. (in Korean).
- Kim, K. S. (2024a). Implications of North Korea's Policies toward South Korea and Unification. In *Korean Institute for National Unification* (Vol. 24, Issue 4).
- Kim, K. S. (2024b). Why Did Kim Jong-un Delete Unification? Issues and Implications of North Korea's Position on 'Hostile Relations Between Two States.' *Asian Perspective*, 48(4), 671–695. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anp.2024.a944266>
- Koo, B. S. (2020). An Analysis of Koreans' Perception of Neighboring Countries and Attitudes toward the Unification. *21st Century Political Science Review*, 30(2), 169–196.
- Kwangcheol, P. (2016). Analysis on The Crisis Management of North Korea's Nuclear Threat and The Reunification Strategy of the Korean Peninsula. *Journal of Korean Military History*, 5(2), 29-70 (in Korea).
- Kwon, Y., & Lee, K. S. (2024). Revisiting inter-Korean events and South Koreans' perception on unification. *Social Science Quarterly*, August, 1953–1969. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13453>
- Lamont, C. (2015). *Research Methods in International Relations*. SAGE.
- Lederach, J. P. (2014). *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. Good Books.
- Lee, J. H. (2025). Splitting Koreas for Good: Kim Jong Un's Desperate Push to Consolidate Power amid the DPRK Crisis. *Korea Observer*, 56(2), 225–253. <https://doi.org/10.29152/KOIKS.2025.56.2.225>
- Lee, R. M. (2025). North Korea ' s Two Koreas Policy and Prospects of Inter-Korean Relations.

- Analysis from the East-West Center*, 29(175).
- Milani, M. (2018). Securitizing Cooperation: Nuclear Politics and Inter-Korean Relations. *North Korean Review*, 14(1), 11–29.
- Nah, L. T. (2019). The prisoner's dilemma and the U.S.–DPRK summit in Vietnam. *North Korean Review*, 15(2), 90–96.
- North Korea's Nuclear Program: A History*. (2012). Columbia Law School Center for Korean Legal Study. <https://kls.law.columbia.edu/content/north-koreas-nuclear-program-history>
- North Korea Closes Agencies Working for Reunification With South*. (2024). Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/16/north-korea-shuts-agencies-working-for-reunification-with-south-korea>
- Oberdorfer, D., & Carlin, R. (2014). *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (3rd ed.). Basic Books.
- Park, H. rhak. (2024). Ending the Debate about the Goal of North Korea's Nuclear Armament. *Asia Policy*, 19(3), 91–115. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2024.a934567>
- Park, S. H. (2024). A study on Changes in North Korea's Territorial Perception: Focusing on Comparison of "National Territory integrity" and "Territorial integrity." *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies*, 33(2), 121-142. (in Korean).
- Ponomarenko, A. (2025). *The North Korea- Russia Partnership Is Now a Battle-Tested Alliance*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/the-north-korea-russia-partnership-is-now-a-battle-tested-alliance/>
- Pratamasari, A. (2019). Kim jong-un's change of stance: North Korea's rapprochement for peace in 2018. *North Korean Review*, 15(2), 23–37.
- Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E. (2016). *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Roehrig, T. (2020). North Korea and Reunification, The Limits of Nuclear Coercion. *Asian Survey*, 60(5), 859–881.
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics*, 144–172.
- Santosa, T. (2025). *Reunifikasi Korea: Game Theory*. Booknesia.
- Schweller, R. L. (2004). Unanswered threats: A neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing. In *International Security* (Vol. 29, Issue 2). <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288042879913>
- South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025*. (2025).
- Utomo, A., & Maksum, A. (2020). The Role of Identity in the Korea Reunification Process: An Analysis. *Dauliyah*, 5(1), 27–49.
- Watson, I. (2012). South Korea's State-led Soft Power Strategies: Limits on Inter-Korean Relations. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 20(3), 304–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2012.748972>
- Yoon gov ' t unveils National Security Strategy highlighting NK threat*. (2023). The Korea Times. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20230607/yoongovt-unveils-national-security-strategy-highlighting-nk-threat>