

FRS - KF KOREA PROGRAM ON SECURITY AND DIPLOMACY

“One of the most persisting myths about Korean politics is that the North Korean issue determines the outcome of the elections.”

A conversation with Lee Sang Sin, February 2020



Dr. Lee Sang Sin is a Research Fellow of the Unification Policy Research Division at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). His study areas include political behavior and elections, public opinion in South Korea, and human rights issues in North Korea. He received his Ph. D. in Political Science at the University of Iowa and worked at the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University.

Q1/ The annual poll by KINU started in 1992, which makes it the oldest active poll in South Korea on unification and North Korean issues. Over the same period, South Korea's political life has been marked by strong political changes, notably in 1997, 2007 and 2017 at the presidential level. Yet, can you detect mega-trends that might help you describe the evolution of Korean public opinion regarding North Korea and unification over these three decades?

In 1994, the KINU Unification Survey asked South Koreans if they thought the unification of two Koreas was necessary. Back then, 91.6 % of respondents said that unification was necessary. Almost three decades later, most South Korean still believe unification is necessary.

There are two leading surveys dedicated to the issues of Korean unification and North Korea. One is conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) of Seoul National University, and the other is the KINU Unification Survey. Both surveys contain the question for the necessity of unification, with different scales (five-point scale for IPUS, four-point for KINU). Figure 1 below compares the two surveys of IPUS and KINU. According to the KINU survey of 2019, 65.6 % (1st wave) and 64.6 % (2nd wave) of South Koreans think unification is necessary.

Compared to the 1994 survey, a lot less South Koreans believe in the necessity of unification now. Still, 65.6 % is quite a robust majority. But we must consider that the issue of unification is still a moral one, meaning it is not easy for South Koreans to say that they do not think unification is necessary in front of other people.

Since 2016, KINU Unification Survey has been using a new question to measure more honest opinions about the unification. It asks respondents if they agree with the following statement: “if South and North can peacefully coexist without war, the unification is not necessary.” In the second survey of 2019, 50.7 % of respondents choose peaceful coexistence over unification, while only 28.1 % think unification is more important than peaceful coexistence.

Figure 2 shows a clear trend. More South Koreans prefer peaceful coexistence to unification. It seems that South Koreans are now struggling to find justification for unification. I believe this question reveals a more honest opinion of South Koreans regarding the issue of unification. Also, it should be noted that there is a clear difference in preference for peaceful coexistence among generations. Younger generations have a strong preference for peaceful coexistence compared to older generations. Especially for the Koreans in their 20s, the gap between peaceful coexistence and unification has been over 40 % since 2017. Yet, older Koreans still tend to prefer unification rather than coexistence.



Figure 1. The necessity of unification (2007-2019). (%)

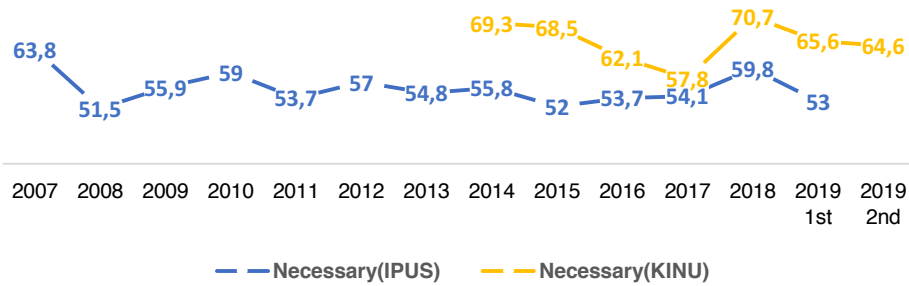
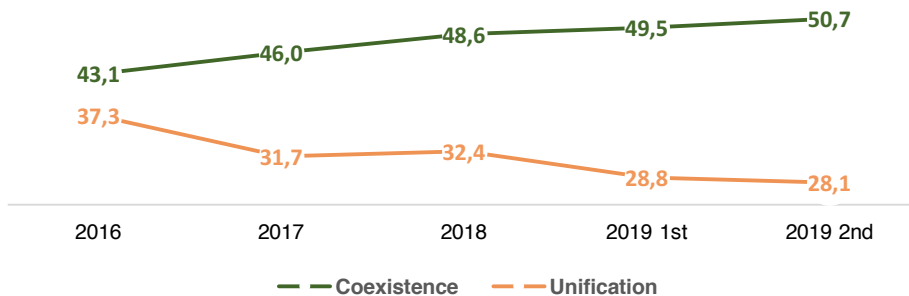


Figure 2. “If South and North can peacefully coexist without war, the unification is not necessary”. (%) (2016-2019)



Q2/ In 2017, a month after the presidential election, KINU conducted a survey. Did the North Korean issue end up being a decisive issue in determining the votes? Compared to the former presidential election in 2012, what were the voters’ main expectations?

One of the most persisting myths about Korean politics is that the North Korean issue determines the outcome of the elections. It does not. There is only a weak coalition between electoral outcomes and North Korean issues. Korean elections, not unlike elections of other democratic countries, are largely domestic elections. Foreign policy issues have only minor influence over the election at best.

The presidential election of 2007 was held two months after the second inter-Korean Summit of Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il. Yet, it did not stop Lee Myong-bak, the opposition party candidate, from sweeping the election. The sinking of the Cheonan ship by a North Korean submarine in March of 2010 did not help the conservative ruling party win the local election in June 2010. Also, in 2017, South Koreans elected the progressive candidate Moon Jae-in even though there was a real possibility of war on the Korean peninsula back then.

Q3/ The year 2018 was marked by numerous inter-Korean events, the most high-profile of which were the three summits between President Moon and Chairman Kim in Panmunjom and Pyongyang. What was the direct impact on Korean public opinion? Do you consider that the loss of momentum in inter-Korean relations in 2019 will also have a significant, and reverse, impact?

The rejuvenation of inter-Korean relations in 2018 certainly had an impact on Korean public opinion. First, South Koreans have come to take a more positive view of Kim Jong-un. Second, South Koreans have become less afraid of North Korea, as presented in Figure 3.

When asked if they think that the current regime is a possible partner for dialogue and compromise, only 8.8 % of South Koreans gave positive answers in 2017. It was understandable because military tension between South and North Korea was at its highest then. But in 2018, over one-quarter of South Koreans (26.6 %) trusted Kim Jong-un. The first wave of the 2019 survey was conducted one month after the failed Hanoi summit, but even more South Koreans (33.5 %) were trusting him. The second wave of the 2019 survey was conducted in September, and the level of trust for KJU

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dropped about 10 points, but it was still higher than that of the 2017 and 2016 surveys.

The threat of North Korea has been the mirror image of trust for KJU. In 2016 and 2017, over half of South Koreans agreed with the statement that North Korea wanted the Communist unification (threat perception). But in 2019, there was a considerable drop in the threat perception (28.7% in the first wave, 30.8% in the second). Clearly, the loss of momentum in the inter-Korean relations is reflected in public opinion. But the relatively positive image for KJU and North Korea has not retracted to the level of 2016 and 2017.

Q4/ Economic cooperation with North Korea has been highly impacted by international sanctions. Yet, do South Koreans support the reopening of inter-Korean complexes such as the Kaesong industrial complex and the Kumgang touristic complex? While many North Koreans are still in need, do South Koreans support providing humanitarian aid to the North?

South Koreans want to have economic cooperation with North Korea. Even in 2017, 46.9% of South Koreans supported the policy for inter-Korean economic cooperation. And the engagement policy of President Moon is widely supported. As shown in Figure 4, economic cooperation, the reopening of the Kaesong industrial complex, and the reopening of Mt. Kumgang tourism are all supported by a large margin.

But it seems that South Koreans are relatively lukewarm about providing humanitarian aid to North Korea. About 45% support humanitarian aid, but compared to the other engagement policy, South Koreans are reluctant to provide North Korea with humanitarian aid. We can blame Kim Jong-un since he has incessantly boasted about his splendid hotels, ski resorts, and luxurious beach resorts in Wonsan for years, and South Koreans have watched these new luxuries on TV. It is not surprising for South Koreans to suspect that even though North Koreans need humanitarian aid, because the country is still very poor, the population does not seem to be in dire need of help as it was in the 1990s.

Figure 3. Level of Trust for KJU and Reduction of Threat Perception of North Korea. (%) (“Trust Kim Jong-un” in yellow, “North Korea as a threat” in green)

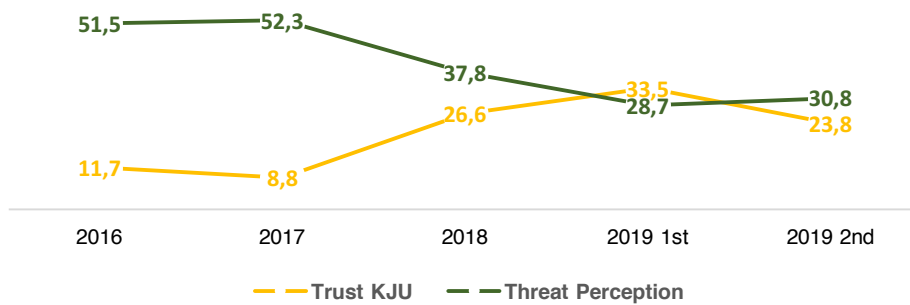
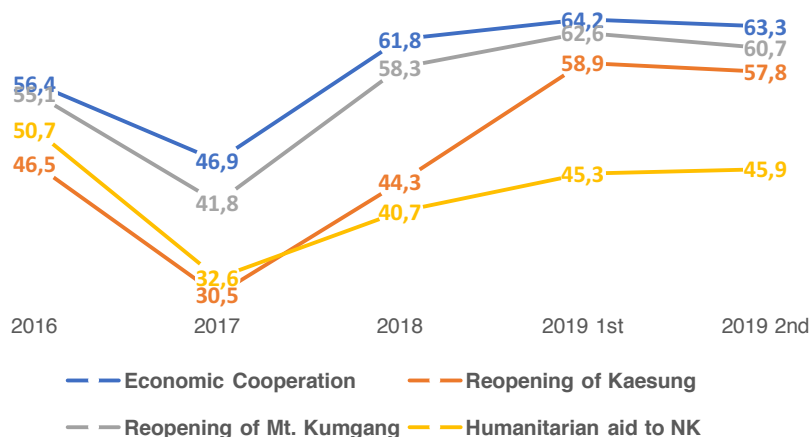


Figure 4. Support for Cooperation with North Korea. (%)



Q5/ One of your questions evaluates what you call "changes in the nationalist vision of unification". Is nationalism, as the engine of unification, weakening? What are the main motivations of Koreans wishing or, conversely, postponing unification?

Korean ethnic nationalism is a strong political force. Both South and North Korean governments have not bothered to explain why unification is needed, indeed, South and North have an agreement that unification means returning to the norm of ethnic homogeneity before the Korean War (1950-1953). But the KINU Unification Survey finds that this traditional consensus on nationalistic unification has begun to change.

To measure the attitude toward nationalist unification, the KINU Survey asks the respondents if they agree with the following statement: *"The two Koreas do not need to form a unified nation just because they are of one people."* When this item was introduced for the first time in 2017, 35.7 % agree with the statement (post-nationalism), while 32.8 % disagree (nationalism). In the most recent survey, post-nationalism is 40.2 % and nationalism 24.2 %.

As we can see in Figure 5 below, the gap between nationalism and post-nationalism grows more significant over time. The inter-Korean relationship in 2019 is not exactly as good as in 2018, but still, many South Koreans are reluctant to give up hope. And certainly, it is much better compared to the "fire and fury" of 2017. Even in the relatively positive context, more South Koreans are discarding nationalism as an unreliable justification for the unification. We need more data to argue with certainty that this is a clear trend, and nationalism may surge again in the future. But it seems clear to me that South Koreans are questioning the need for unification.

Q6/ How do South Koreans feel about the possibility of North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons? What is the Korean perception of the purpose of these weapons?

As discussed before, South Koreans want peace. But it does not mean that they are naïve about the North Korean nuclear program. Most South Koreans are skeptical about denuclearization. According to the KINU Unification Survey, over 70 % of South Koreans do not believe that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons program.

The skepticism was at its highest in 2017. Back then, 81.1 % of South Koreans did not believe in the possibility of denuclearization. In 2018, the year Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un met three times, still 72.8 % had a negative outlook on denuclearization. The stagnation of inter-Korean relations in 2019 has led to somewhat deepened skepticism. As shown in Figure 6, over three-quarters of South Koreans do not currently see the vision of nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

As discussed above, a majority of South Koreans support economic cooperation with North Korea. But at the same time, they do not believe North Korea will give up nuclear weapons programs. This conundrum is nothing special in Korea. Few Koreans believe a military operation is a viable option to deal with North Korea, which leaves engagement or containment. The last two conservative governments of Korea maintained the containment of North Korea, but it only provided North Korea with time and opportunity to stockpile more nuclear warheads and to develop ICBMs. For most liberal and moderate Koreans, engagement and economic cooperation with North Korea are the only choice left.

Figure 5. Nationalism and Unification. (%)

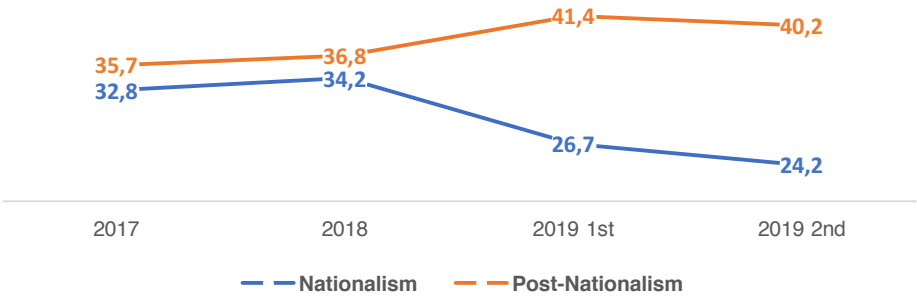
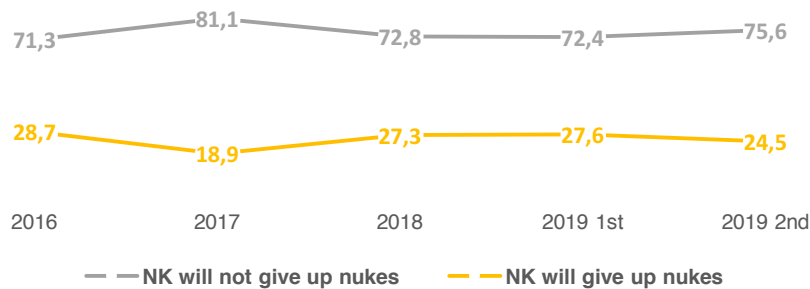


Figure 6. Prospect of Denuclearization. (%)



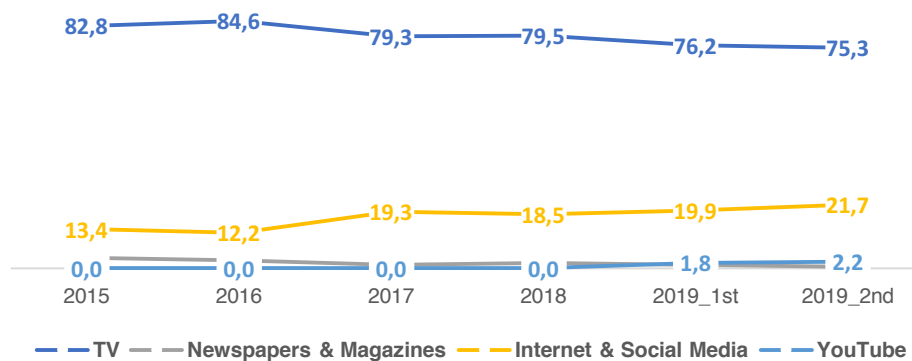
Q7/ At a time when information manipulation is on the rise around the world, sometimes with direct political impacts, what are the main sources of information in Korea about North Korea? In the age of the Internet and social networks, what are the most influential sources of information?

South Korea is famous for its information technology and high-speed Internet. Though once expected to save modern democracy, social media and YouTube have now become the most dangerous threat to the democratic public sphere. South Korea is not an exception. Unfiltered fake news is widely distributed through the cyberspace and it has emboldened extreme political factions both left and right of the political spectrum. Yet, most South Koreans say they still depend on TV for information on North Korea.

In the most recent survey, 75.3 % of South Koreans depend on TV as a primary source for information about North Korea. The number of TV viewers reduced from 82.8 % in 2015. Though TV is still the most important provider of North Korea-related news, the KINU survey shows that South Koreans are switching to the Internet and social media. While only few are reading newspapers or magazines to get informed on North Korea, the influence of YouTube is slowly on the rise.

**Interview conducted in January 2020
by Antoine Bondaz**

Figure 7. Primary Information Source for North Korea in South Korea. (%)



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