

Abstract

This research is prompted by recent findings highlighting a declining trend in support for reunification among South Koreans, which contradicts the conventionally prevailing narrative of reunification as both “our dream” and a “national duty.” Whilst the question of what diminishes enthusiasm for reunification among South Koreans might seem self-evident—given Korea’s over 70-year division and the disparate paths taken by the North and South—this research aims to provide a more in-depth diagnosis. It seeks to identify the social constructs that have developed within this prolonged division affecting South Koreans’ perceptions of reunification. Employing a social constructivist lens, the study focuses on underexplored dilemmas specific to South Koreans in the context of intergroup relations and reunification. Grounded in Social Identity Theory and Integrated Threat Theory, the study formulates hypotheses relating to the interplay between South Koreans’ perceived “otherness” towards North Koreans, intergroup threat perceptions, and attitudes towards reunification. Using the 2022 Reunification Consciousness Survey (N=1193) data from the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS), this study runs statistical analysis through SPSS and Hayes' PROCESS Macro Model 4 to test the hypotheses. The quantitative findings reveal generational differences in which the perception of North Koreans as “others” and threat perceptions towards North Korea’s nuclear capabilities and reunification affect attitudes towards reunification. The study concludes by discussing the security and strategic implications, highlighting the often-overlooked human insecurities related to reunification and underscoring the need for further academic inquiry.

Keywords: Korean reunification, intergroup relations, threat perception, human (in-)security, social identity theory, integrated threat theory