The Korean-Americans' Role Perception Toward the North-South Reunification Issue

JIN WHYU MOK* and YOUNG SOON YIM**

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the opinions of Korean-Americans living in the United States regarding their attitudes and perceptions toward North-South reunification in the Korean peninsula. According to the analysis, the North-South reunification issue is seen as an issue whose resolution will not happen any time soon. It is also, at the same time, one that Koreans, regardless of background or ideological affiliation, feel strongly about and are willing to contribute considerable effort to.

Introduction

THE DIVISION OF the Korean peninsula into North and South has been a reality for half a century, long since the end of World War II. During this period, Koreans fought against each other in a three-year war of fratricide. This was not only a highlight, but a crystallization of the East-West cold war, which was to last until 1989. The ideological cleavage between North and South became permanent and a high degree of military confrontation was evidence of the prolonged tension and antagonism between the two. At the same time, however, there has been a continuing effort to maintain and improve the channels of communication between the two nations although no one hardly denies those contacts were, at best, sporadic and politically shaped in their intent. An early example is the 1972 North-South Joint Declaration. This historic contact between the two Koreas is known to be the beginning of subsequent communications ranging from the North-South Red Cross talks, to the recent North-South prime minister talk. Typically, the government of either side initiates a talk and the other agrees to carry it on. However, both sides, represented by relatively high-ranking government officials, are so politically determined that none of the talks so far have achieved their stated goals.

Since the early 1980s, however, North-South contacts have taken quite different paths, increasing in both number and substance. Perhaps, more importantly, both sides appear to be more serious in these talks stressing more substantive issues rather than merely political rhetoric. According to a 1990

* Department of Public Administration, Kookmin University, Seoul, Korea.
** Department of Politics and Diplomacy, Sung Kyun Kwan University, Seoul, Korea.
issue of *Vintage Point*, North and South met 22 times at the government level in 1989. This is a remarkable record of talks between such adversaries, especially considering the fact that both sides have not acted in any meaningful way to reduce military hostilities. In contrast to this progress are many indications that both sides are not yet to be so driven as to achieve the goals of such talks. Recent examples of this include abrupt cancellation of the eighth North-South parliamentary preparatory talk and the ninth Asian Games talk. Each side blamed the other for its inconsideration and unwillingness to participate. Thus, it is quite evident that more frequent talks do not necessarily result in more meaningful outcomes (Hwang, 1990: 16).

As pointed out, the locus of North-South contact has been at the government level. Given the various political and strategic obstacles which surround the Korean peninsula, it is quite understandable that the general public, from both sides, have been excluded from the process of mutual contact. Nonetheless, the exclusion of public input and the political use of talks by both sides have hampered their potential for resolving the differences and difficulties which have kept the peninsula divided for the last 45 years. The first official North-South contact in 1972 was used predominantly by both sides to help maintain the political and governing structures of their regimes (Kim, 1990: 28).

Recently, however, North-South contact and communications have shown remarkable differences in both type and method as compared to past ones. Perhaps the most important and remarkable transformation is in the role which civilians play in delegate formation as well as in the process of the talks. A few examples include group exchanges of home visitation, of artistic performance, and of mass media. At the same time, many private South Korean industries explored and established commercial channels for commodity trade with and investment in North Korea. As a result, the 1980s can be characterized as a decade of lively and extensive public discussion exploring the possibility of North-South co-operation, the reduction of ongoing hostilities, and perhaps the beginning of reunification.

This paper investigates the opinions of Korean-Americans living in the United States. The main issue addressed through an extensive mail survey covered their attitudes and perceptions toward North-South reunification in the Korean peninsula. There are several important reasons why their opinions about the reunification issue need to be examined.

First of all, North-South reunification is an issue that most Koreans, regardless of where they live, find emotionally stirring. Korean-Americans are no exception. They probably represent the largest block of pro-reunification sentiments outside of the peninsula. The latest estimation of their numbers is about one and a half million and growing. This is at least twice the number of Koreans living in Japan. Thus, in formulating any policies regarding reunification, how Korean-Americans view this issue should be considered.

Secondly, the North and the South cannot take their relationship with the U.S. lightly. To the South, the U.S. was the crucial ally in repulsing the North's