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MZ Generation's Perspective on Korean Unification

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President Yoon Suk-yeol's [speech](#) on the commemoration of Liberation Day outlined a revised unification vision based on the values of freedom and democracy. To this end, President Yoon committed to enhancing unification education for South Korean youths, raising North Koreans' awareness of freedom, continuing humanitarian aid to North Korea, and establishing an inter-Korean working group. Despite the aspirational tone of the speech, it does not necessarily reflect the South Korean public's shifting sentiment toward unification. According to the [2024 Unification Survey](#) by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), 52.9 percent of the respondents stated that unification was necessary. This marked one of the lowest levels in the last decade, during which KINU's survey data shows an overall decline in public support for unification, despite a notable uptick in 2018 surrounding a peak in inter-Korean engagement.

A notable finding of the 2024 survey was that the age group with the least support for unification was those born after 1991. Although, like other age groups, this cohort has shown variation over time in its level of support for unification, its support [has shown an overall decline](#) and has consistently been the lowest among all other age groups in the survey. As the so-called "MZ Generation," which refers to both millennials (born after 1981) and Generation Z, or Gen Z (born after 1997), assumes positions of authority in politics and society, their preferences and perceptions will have considerable influence over South Korea's policies on unification.

Factors Behind the MZ Generation's Negative Perceptions of North Korea and Unification

It is not surprising that the MZ generation harbors negative perceptions of unification. The average millennial was in their late teens or early twenties when incidents such as North Korea's shooting of a South Korean tourist in the Mount Kumgang area in 2008, the 2010 North Korean attack on Yeonpyeong Island, and North Korea's sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan occurred. Many male millennial peers would also have been serving in the military at the time, reinforcing the perception of North Korea as an existential enemy.

As the MZ generation enters the workforce, the difficulties of securing permanent employment and facing an increasing wealth gap and rising housing prices have been juxtaposed with the South Korean government's efforts to improve inter-Korean relations. Government catchphrases such as "unification bonanza" or a "new Korean Peninsula regime" sound tone-deaf for the MZ generation who understands that if unification does occur in the future, it will be their generation that foots the bill. Unification becomes even more unappealing when it is apparent that North Korea's authoritarian regime has no interest in denuclearization or improving its human rights situation but rather continues to devote more resources to its nuclear weapons program. Periodic incidents such as North Korea's sending of trash balloons or the demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong add to the negative sentiment among South Koreans toward the North.

At the same time, the period between the late 1990s and 2000s is when South Korea's soft power increased. Movies such as *My Sassy Girl* (2001) and *Old Boy* (2003) achieved international success, while Korean brands such as Samsung and LG rose to become globally leading companies. As teenagers, the millennials during this time grew up witnessing the boost in South Korea's international status. As such, the millennials are a generation proud of South Korea's achievements. Gen Z, who were in their teens when Korean groups such as BTS and Blackpink debuted and gained international popularity, are likely to take South Korea's global soft power status as a given.

In this context, North Korea is more likely to be seen as a source of trouble and instability for the Korean Peninsula. And the South Korean government's efforts at inter-Korean rapprochement are seen with suspicion and rife with party agenda. For example, there was considerable public anger during the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics when South Korea proposed a joint women's ice hockey team with North Korea, which meant that the addition of North Korean players to the roster would exclude several South Korean players who had long trained to prepare for the games.

Missing the Mark on a New Unification Vision

As the Yoon administration attempts to grapple with the issue of unification, any policy that does not consider the preferences and perceptions of the MZ generation will be short-lived. In particular, the unification vision stated by President Yoon during his Liberation Day speech frames unification in a way that is difficult for many South Korean youths to relate to. President Yoon stated that complete liberation is an "unfinished task" that will only be achieved when a unified, free, and democratic nation is established on the Korean Peninsula. Three key undertakings were spelled out: ensure that South Koreans firmly possess the values and capabilities to pursue freedom-based unification, change the minds of North Koreans to desire freedom-based unification, and stand in solidarity with the international community to gather support for unification.

For millennials, who have also been referred to as the “angry generation” due to the challenges of finding employment, getting married, and owning a house, as well as a myriad of domestic societal issues such as increasing misogyny and anti-feminism, aspirations of freedom-based unification ring hollow. Although they may theoretically agree with the ideals of freedom and human rights and sympathize with the suffering of the North Korean people, this does not mean they support unification by absorption or have a strong desire to forego their own ways of life to liberate those suffering under Kim Jong-un.

Indeed, this ideologically driven approach adopted by the Yoon administration misses the sentiment that many South Koreans have about North Korea and unification. Unification per se might not be objected to, but it needs to be grounded on a strong rationale of how it will benefit not only the country but also individual South Korean citizens. This argument is supported by the aforementioned KINU survey: in response to the question, “How beneficial will unification be to the state, to myself, and to North Korean residents,” the responses overwhelmingly supported the view that South Koreans think unification benefits the state and North Korean residents more than themselves.

Furthermore, the motivation for unification, as suggested by President Yoon, appears misplaced. According to the KINU survey, the older the respondents, the more they felt that the most important reason for unification was to unite the Korean people. However, the younger the respondents, the stronger the view that unification was needed to alleviate the threat of war. In other words, appealing to North Korean human rights or ethno-nationalism is not enough to sway the MZ generation on the need for unification. Rather, the Yoon administration needs to clarify the link between unification and peace and stability. Without this linkage, it will be difficult to reverse the MZ generation's preference for peaceful coexistence over unification.

Implications for Inter-Korean Relations

Given MZ sentiments in South Korea, it is likely that pragmatism will come to define how they view North Korea and the issue of unification. Phrases such as “freedom-based unification” may sound and feel good, but they are ideologically laden and overly politicized, which is likely to increase public fatigue. In this light, the Yoon administration should refrain from presenting unification as a liberalizing crusade. Rather, it should acknowledge that unification will take a long time and require innovative top-down government policies along with civil society's collective efforts. There should be a clear rationale for how unification will materially benefit the South Korean population, as well as reassurances that the unification process will be peaceful. To prepare for the shift in generational attitudes, there should be efforts to engage the MZ generation in policy dialogues. Otherwise, an insulated echo chamber will only lead to redundant and out-of-touch policies that will disappear with a change in administration.

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