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From Peaceful Unification to Two Koreas? Paradigm Shifts in Inter-Korean Relations



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For decades, inter-Korean relations have oscillated between confrontation and cautious engagement, grounded in a shared yet contested aspiration of eventual peaceful unification. This aspiration, rooted in nationalist ideals and constitutional mandates on both sides of the 38th parallel, has shaped the political lexicon and security posture of both Seoul and Pyongyang throughout. Yet developments since the beginning of last year suggest that North Korea under Kim Jong Un is abandoning the peaceful reunification paradigm altogether. At the turn of 2024, Pyongyang publicly reframed the Republic of Korea not as a compatriot regime but as a separate, hostile state. Speaking at a session of the country's rubber-stamp parliament, Kim issued orders to reify that political decision in the country's society, military, and economy. The pivot marks a potentially irreversible rupture in inter-Korean relations — one with consequences not only for the Korean Peninsula but also for regional geopolitics. This article explores three interrelated dimensions of that apparently transformative policy turn. First, it examines the nature, drivers, and implementation of North Korea's paradigm shift on unification and reconciliation. Second, it analyzes the spectrum of South Korean political responses, from government policy to public sentiment. Finally, it reflects on the potential long-term implications of this shift for the future of the peninsula and the broader security environment in Northeast Asia.

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Join the Korea Economic Institute of America for an exclusive event on Tuesday, September 30, to discuss our annual public opinion survey and learn what Americans think about South Korea, the alliance, economic cooperation and other bilateral issues.

The first year of the Trump administration in the United States and the first several months of the Lee administration in South Korea have brought significant changes to both domestic politics and foreign policy. As Americans adjust to this political transition, domestic and international issues remain at the forefront of public attention.

With US foreign policy more significant than ever due to ongoing geopolitical challenges in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific, KEI, in partnership with YouGov, examined where American attitudes stand with regard to US-Korea relations. What are American opinions on the alliance's role on the Korean Peninsula and beyond? How do Americans view US-Korea relations today? How do Americans differ in these outlooks?

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Beyond the Demographic Cliff: Economic Adaptation in Hyper-Aged Korea



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KEI is pleased to host an exclusive event, "Beyond the Demographic Cliff: Economic Adaptation in Hyper-Aged Korea," which examines how South Korea can redesign its economic structures to sustain prosperity and promote national security under conditions of demographic maturity.

KEI Non-Resident Fellow Darcie Draudt-Véjares will discuss this research into South Korea's demographics and help attendees better understand how and why South Korea's efforts to reverse its world-low fertility rates have failed.

By 2070, Korea's population is projected to shrink by 27%, with older adults comprising nearly half the total. But the country can also adapt to this new reality, prioritizing age-smart industrial policy and retooling national strategies around longevity and capital efficiency. This includes increasing investment in financial literacy, pension equity, and regional specialization.

Dr. Draudt-Véjares's full report on these pathways forward will be featured in the spring/summer issue of KEI's flagship journal, Korea Policy, due out in early June. Dr. Ellen Kim, KEI's Director of Academic Programs, will host this hybrid panel event on Monday, May 19, from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. EDT at the KEI event space in Washington, D.C. and live on YouTube.

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