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Findings and Implications of Survey into People's Perception on Unification

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It seems inevitable to predict that public opinion on unification would have worsened with the straining of inter-Korean relations caused by North Korea's nuclear test. The 2017 Survey into People's Perception on Unification¹⁾ shows that the public opinion on unification has worsened more than what was initially predicted and that the people's fundamental understanding of unification itself is being changed. In this paper, the results from the survey specifically detailing the people's perception about unification will be described, the causes of this worsening public perception be examined, and possible solutions to improve public perception on unification be explored.

1) This survey was commissioned to PointMac, and was conducted as a one-on-one face-to-face interview involving 1,000 male and female adults over the age of 19 residing in 16 provinces and cities in South Korea from March 21 to April 14, 2017. Sampling quotas were decided in proportion to the population per gender, age, and region. The final results of this research will be released on December 2017.

1. Three Characteristics of Public Perception on Unification in 2017

Reinforcement of Tendency in Support of Division: Dilemma of Unification and Division

The most noticeable feature in the result of survey is that the number of those in favor of a peaceful division has increased. On a question of necessity for unification (4-point scale), 57.8% of respondents answered that the unification was needed (strongly agree: 13.8%, somewhat agree: 44.0%), a number decreased by 4.3% compared to 2016 (62.1%), and by 11.5% from 2014 (69.3%). The results showed that in every group, with the exception of the age group comprising of people in their 20s, the percentage of those who answered that unification was needed was higher than those, who responded it was not needed.

The survey also addressed questions concerning the necessity of unification and maintenance of a peaceful division. On a question of “unification is not needed if South Korea and North Korea can co-exist peacefully without a war (5-point scale),” 46.0% of respondents gave a positive answer while 31.7% of respondents did not. Compared to 2016, the number in support for a peaceful co-existence of the divided nation has increased by 2.9%, and the rate on the opposite site fell by 5.6% with 22.2% of the respondents answered “neutral.”

Table 1. Result of Cross-analysis of Necessity for Unification and Maintenance of Peaceful Division

Category		Perceived Necessity of Unification	
		Not Necessary	Necessary
Status Quo (staying divided) ²⁾	Disagree	Group indifferent to unification 4.4%(2016) ³⁾ ⇔ 2.4%(2017)	Group in favor of unitary system 32.9%(2016) ⇔ 29.3%(2017)
	Agree	Group in favor of staying divided 26.6(2016) ⇔ 34.6(2017)	Group viewed staying divided as possible 11.4%(2016) ⇔ 16.5%(2017)

What is worthy of attention is that there was a reinforced tendency toward the maintenance of division when compared it to the 2016 survey result. The group in favor of staying divided, who view unification as unnecessary and agree with the maintenance of peaceful division, makes up the largest percentage at 34.6% – an increase by 8% from 2016. Moreover, the number of group, who acknowledges the necessity of unification and is also positive about a divided state, has increased by 5.1%. In other words, the number of people, who are positive about division, has increased by 13.1% compared to 2016. On the other hand, the group in favor of unitary system comprises of 29.3%, a decrease by 3.6% from 2016.

Unification Becoming Distant from Individual Life

The second feature of the survey result is that there has been weakening implications of unification affecting an individual's life. To a question of “my life will not be significantly affected by whether unification occurs or not,” 58.6% respondents answered positively. People responding that unification would have an effect in their lives only make up 11.6% in the group, and 29.8% of respondents said “neutral.” It is shocking that nearly 60% of the public answered that unification would not affect their lives, when considering the mainstream prediction that unification will have a notable effect on one's life regardless of whether it be positive or negative, and the fact that people already witnessed the implications of unification on the citizens of West and East Germany.

Limitations of Unification Discourse Based on Ethnic Identity

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- 2) The percentage of respondents who answered “neutral” to a question of the maintenance of a peaceful division was excluded.
 - 3) The survey was conducted from June 2 to 24, 2016 and the company conducting the survey and the method of the survey are equivalent to those of 2017 survey.

The third feature of the result is that a discourse of unification based on ethnic identity, which holds that unification must occur because both parties are of the same ethnicity, has noticeably weakened. In response to a question of “why the two Koreas should be unified,” the answer “to eliminate threats of a war between South Korea and North Korea” had the most support at 41.6%, the highest percentage ever since the survey began in 2014, followed by reasons such as “because we are of the same ethnicity” at 30.0%, “so that Korea can become a better developed country than present” at 14.0%, “to address the pain of separated families caused by division” at 11.1%, and “so North Koreans could have a better life” at 2.9%. The percentage of respondents who chose “same ethnicity” as a reason for unification was 36.9% in 2014, 38.7% in 2015, and 34.2% in 2016.

Table 2. Percentage in Support for the Same Ethnicity and Nation-state

Age group (International Age)	Positive to Nation-state	Neutral	Negative towards Nation-state
19-29 (175)	20.5	32.4	47.2
30-39 (178)	25.1	30.7	44.1
40-49 (207)	29.8	35.1	35.1
50-59 (199)	36.2	34.7	29.1
Over 60 (241)	47.3	26.1	26.6

2. Background and Causes for Weakening Perception on Unification

Internationalization and Politicization of Unification Issue

The internationalization of unification issue has become an unavoidable phenomenon when viewed in the context that issues of the Korean Peninsula have also been internationalized. This is because the understanding and support of neighboring countries have become ever more important for and during the process of unification. In other words, there arises a need to make a compelling argument to persuade countries, such as the US, China, Japan, and Russia that why unification is necessary for them and how a unified Korea is also at their national interests.

Recently, efforts have been made to go beyond merely persuading each country's government and actually make their citizens' perception changed in a positive way, which is exemplified by the so-called unification public diplomacy.

Unification diplomacy, including unification public diplomacy, starts from the premise that the Korean public wishes for unification, which implies that if the neighboring countries and their citizens were to agree with unification, Korea will opt for unification. However, the unsettling survey result that Korean people's preference for the divided state is being reinforced suggests that this fundamental premise can be easily broken.

3. Policy Alternative: National-level Education for Unification

The internationalization of peninsular issues has become global-level constraints to the unification issues. Moreover, the weakening public perception towards unification can act as domestic restrictions against unification, as illustrated by the examples of the public preference for the divided state, the public perception that unification is not relevant to their life, and the weakening of discourse in support of ethnicity. If the unification public diplomacy is part of an effort to overcome the international limitations of Korean Peninsula issues, national-level education for unification is an effort to resolve the domestic restrictions of unification issues.

Division, Not Unification

Since unification and division are two sides of the same coin, national-level education for unification should focus not on the future event of unification but on the current divided state. Imagination is required to predict the outcomes of a future event. However, even with that, it is not easy to see through what it would feel like when the actual event occurs. On the other hand, information about the current status of division can easily be researched so one can have an access to abundant

information and experiences of division. Moreover, as division has remained in place for the past 70 years, unification has become the normative state, not an abnormal state. Given that people generally prefer the maintenance of the status quo over changes unless under exceptional circumstances, division, not unification, is likely to become a reference point for the public in the decision-making process. The national-level education for unification should involve making people recognize and changing people's perception that division incurs individual- and state-level costs and that division is actually an abnormal state and that unification should be regarded as a way to weather the challenges of division.

Unification Experience, not Unification Education

The view of unification as a solution to overcome division can best be encouraged not by lectures or compulsion but by experience of unification. In other words, costs from division and changes in individual life resulting from unification should not be learnt but experienced first-hand. The importance of experience has already been widely accepted in the education and industrial sectors. For example, in the IT industry, the success and failure of products are determined by whether the overall experiences of a consumer, who uses the products and services (termed UX or the User Experience), are optimized. Experience Marketing, a marketing theory that people feel more happiness when buying experiences not products, also shows the importance of experience. Consumers reported positive emotions, such as excitement and expectations, when imagining the experiences of actually using the product, but reported irritation and anxiety when imagining a situation, in which they are waiting for the product to arrive.

Both international and domestic constraints against unification on the Korean Peninsula are increasingly becoming heavy. Peninsular issues have become international problems, regardless of whether this shift of viewpoint was intended or not. Therefore, corresponding efforts must be required to obtain the support and

agreement of neighboring countries and their citizens. However, one should be mindful that the main actors in unification are citizens of South Korea and North Korea. The objectives and strategy of unification public diplomacy should be extended into national-level education for unification. Unification public diplomacy can only succeed with the strong and robust domestic base of support for unification. Thus, an effort to find a balance between public diplomacy and national-level education for unification is required. ©KINU 2017

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