



Online Series

2020. 9. 16. | CO 20-25

Possibility of Inter-Korean Reconciliation Viewed through the Lens of COVID 19¹⁾

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A comparison analysis has been made on the survey results of 2019 and 2020. After COVID-19, people in South Korea have strengthened a sense of ethnic identity as South Korean, which has led to harboring animosity against North Korea. At the same time, however, the shared ethnic identity and empathy towards North Korea has also increased following COVID-19. Both the destructive and constructive paths of COVID-19 have been confirmed, which implies that the two paths can be applied to the inter-Korean relationship. After all, the inter-Korean relationship should be perceived within a model of post-COVID-19 order of removing uncertainties and expanding empathy.

- 1) This report is written based on the results of the study, “*2020 Annual Reports of Attitude of Koreans toward Peace and Reconciliation*” which is being conducted at KINU. The detailed outcome will be published in January 2021. Eran Halperin and Nimrod Nir are the joint researchers of this project.

We are living in the era of COVID-19. Coronavirus is violent. It has caused over 900,000 deaths around the globe. COVID-19 affects our lives across economic, social, cultural, political and diplomatic areas, and it plays a pivotal role in forming our mind and behaviors. Our society is pouring a large amount of physical and psychological resources to tackle COVID-19. Our final goal is to claim a complete victory against the virus, but as the battle to combat the virus will not be won easily, we are bracing ourselves for a protracted battle.

Ironically, the very Korean society observed 70 years ago, when the Korean War broke out followed by a full-blown division, can be found in today's society facing COVID-19.²⁾ The war and national division was violent and has ruled the lives of the people living on the Korean Peninsula. The division on the Korean Peninsula has exerted influence in all sectors of Korean society and has been at the core of the agenda of both individuals and society. Both South and North Korea have poured a vast amount of physical and psychological resources to overcome the war and division. The two Koreas set the goal of achieving a victory but had to compete with each other at least not to be defeated. As time goes by, the influence of division, which used to be tangible in the early days of division, became embedded and institutionalized into Korean society.

In 2020, when the influence of national division has already been internalized and institutionalized, COVID-19, in a sense, provides a social context, through which Korean society in the early days of division can be indirectly experienced. In some sense, it considered an isomorphic problem where the exteriors of tension stemming from COVID-19 and national division differ, but the structure of conflicts is similar. If that is the case, the coronavirus crisis and national division are likely to have a solution that shares a similar structure.

2) Regarding theoretical discussions about psychosocial changes of individuals and groups in society where violent conflicts sustain at least for a generation and cases where such theory is applied to the Korean Peninsula, refer to Juhwa Park, *et al.*, “*2019 Annual Reports of Attitude of Koreans toward Peace and Reconciliation*” (Seoul: KINU, 2019)

Individuals who were exposed to life-threatening violence such as COVID-19 or war make varied efforts to satisfy their deprived basic desires and deal with extreme stress. The same goes with the mind. People have developed a psychological mechanism for survival. This report explored two types of psychological mechanisms which respond to COVID-19 (the destructive path and constructive path) and reviewed the possibility of applying the two paths in the context of the two Koreas. Also, the clues to resolve national division—the isomorphic problem—have been identified based on the psychological mechanism manifested to survive the coronavirus.

Destructive Path of COVID-19: Animosity

When faced an external threat, especially a sudden, unpredictable, inevitable one such as COVID-19, they are known to respond by ① identifying themselves with the in-group and ② strengthening animosity against the out-group. From the perspective of evolution and adaptation, distancing themselves from the out-group has proven to be particularly effective in preventing infection.³⁾ The out-group is more likely to transmit an infection source, to which the members of the in-group are not yet immune. Thus, people reason that they are less likely to get infected from the members of the in-group who share the same social identity, and develop greater in-group favoritism and out-group bias.

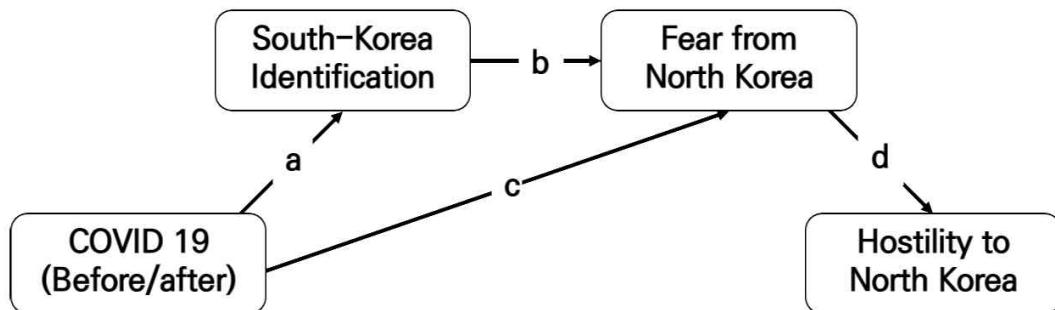
In-group favoritism and out-group bias is closely related to the fear generated when facing a threat to existence like COVID-19. Fear is an emotion individuals experience when faced with uncertainties, which is a physical and psychological reaction to enhance capabilities to survive in dangerous circumstances. Terror is related to acknowledging one's own weakness and feeling relative fatigue; it is known to make individuals avoid dealing with conflicts or induce extremely

3) Damian R Murray, Mark Schaller and Peter Suedfeld, “Pathogens and Politics: Further Evidence That Parasite Prevalence Predicts Authoritarianism,” *PLoS One*, vol. 8, no. 5 (2013), p. e62275.

aggressive responses. When equating oneself with the in-group and excluding the out-group intensifies in order to survive, the fear caused by threats like COVID-19 and animosity caused by the fear can be transferred to the out-group.

These theoretical explanations have been observed in the context of the inter-Korean relationship in the era of COVID-19.⁴⁾ <Figure 1> describes changes found in the perception of South Koreans after COVID-19 in 2020 compared to 2019. The arrow implies the causal relationship. After COVID-19, a sense of identity within the internal group, that is, South Korea, has been strengthened (path a in <Figure 1> below), which increased terror about North Korea (path b in <Figure 1> below). As expected, the path of COVID-19 → South Korean identity → terror about North Korea has been confirmed. At the same time, COVID-19 has directly intensified terror about North Korea (path c in <Figure 1> below). Lastly, terror about North Korea has heightened animosity towards North Korea (path d in <Figure 1> below). This shows COVID-19 may become an obstacle to achieving inter-Korean reconciliation.

<Figure 1> Destructive Paths of COVID-19 in the Inter-Korean Relationship



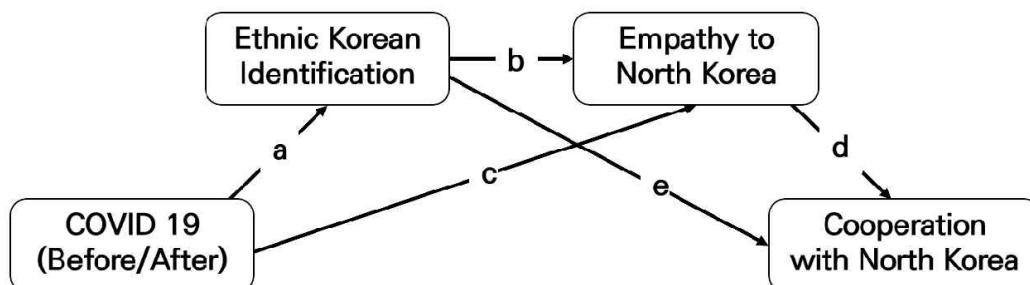
4) The difference between surveys conducted by KINU in 2019 and 2020 has been statistically verified. More detailed methodology is left out in this report due to the limited space. Contact jhpark@kinu.or.kr to find more about the methodology.

Constructive Path of COVID-19: Empathy

Going beyond the preference within the in-group and terror and animosity, there exist possibilities of COVID-19 having a meaningful, positive influence on the relationship in conflict. When two groups experiencing conflicts recognize that they share a common fate—in other words, they believe, in the face of an external threat like COVID-19, the in-group and the out-group are in the ‘same boat’—the groups in conflict are regarded as being under the same upper level group. In the context of the two Koreas, ethnic identity gets reinforced. When two conflicted groups have a noticeable and stronger identity of belonging to the common upper group, it can be easily predicted that cooperation between the two groups gets facilitated.

Two conflicted groups having the perception of being in the same boat and facing a common threat imply that they have developed a ‘sense of empathy,’ which relates one’s experience to another’s experience. Empathy means to share and understand another person’s emotional state in times of adversity or misfortune. Humans are motivated to recognize another person’s sorrow and terror and try to ease his or her distress by feeling the same emotion themselves. Thus, it is obvious that empathy becomes the basis for cooperation. Yet, it is rare that two groups in conflict cooperate through empathy. Rather, they analyze the other’s position to identify its weaknesses or have schadenfreude (experience of pleasure that comes from the sorrow of another). Is it indeed possible to have a constructive path in the inter-Korean relationship which has harbored hostility for 70 years?

<Figure 2> Constructive Paths of COVID-19 in the Inter-Korean Relationship



The constructive path was witnessed in the context of the inter-Korean relationship. After COVID-19, Koreans have developed a stronger ethnic identity (path a in <Figure 2> above), which has led to a stronger empathy towards North Korea (path b in <Figure 2> above). Also, the experience of COVID-19 has directly enhanced empathy towards North Korea (path c in <Figure 2> above). Lastly, the shared ethnic identity and empathy towards North Korea has reinforced the perception on cooperation (path d and e in <Figure 2> above).

Policy Implications

This report has confirmed two psychological paths to take in the aftermath of COVID-19: the destructive path based on terror and the constructive path based on empathy. In order to respond to COVID-19 successfully, it is necessary to have the principle of minimizing the destructive path while maximizing the constructive path. When it comes to COVID-19 prevention, South Korea, a standout case internationally, has faithfully upheld the two principles. First of all, it got rid of uncertainties to minimize terror. For instance, Korean people could distinguish where to go and not to go based on the contact tracing information made public so they were able to minimize the terror of getting infected. If it were not for the empathy of Korean people who have made an active participation in response to COVID-19, as well as the efforts of those responsible for the prevention of epidemics, medical teams, fire fighters, the military and volunteers, none of this would have been possible. The reason why the majority of Koreans have little reluctance to wearing a face mask is that they try not only to protect themselves but also to avoid infecting others.

This report started out by proposing the isomorphic problem of COVID-19 and national division in that both pose a threat to the lives of individuals and society as a whole. The destructive and constructive paths of COVID-19, which was identified in this study, were applied to the attitudes towards North Korea. In the inter-Korean relationship, it is necessary to minimize terror induced by uncertainties and maximize empathy.

It appears natural that the destructive path of COVID-19 is applied to North Korea given the 70-year long divided history between the two countries. What should be noted here is ‘empathy.’ The constructive path of COVID-19 has been found among South Koreans despite the fact that South Korea fought a war against North Korea and still has feelings of hatred, anger and terror without recognizing the regime in North Korea. It is vital, therefore, to first minimize uncertainties, which evoke terror. The two Koreas have tried to terrorize each other through uncertainties. Cooperation is needed to ensure transparency and predictability.

Another way to minimize terror caused by uncertainty is empathy. Empathy starts from conceiving of the other’s circumstances. As South Korea is going through COVID-19, people could develop empathy about North Korea and easily predict their situation. The constructive path based on the prediction of situations can also be found in the survey conducted by the National Unification Advisory Council in the first quarter of 2020. In the survey, respondents living in the Daegu and Gyeongbuk region showed a relatively high level of empathy about COVID-19 aid being sent to the North, compared to respondents in other regions. The report suggested the possibility that their experience of getting hit hard by COVID-19 led to developing stronger empathy.⁵⁾ This is not a simple issue of information or accessibility to information about North Korea. To that end, it is important to provide information and opportunities to predict and experience situations in North Korea. Also important to note is that empathy is not something South Korea should have alone. Unilateral empathy would rather engender negative side effects. North Korea’s empathy about South Korea is also essential.

Above all, it is necessary to change the way of thinking in order to relate COVID-19, especially the post-COVID-19 order, to national division and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The new order in the post-COVID-19 world depends on who minimizes the destructive path and expands the constructive path and how. Over

5) A meeting at the National Unification Advisory Council, “*The Report on the Analysis of Public Opinions and Trends about National Unification in the First Quarter of 2020*” (Seoul: NUAC, 2020), pp. 12–13.

the last 70 years, the destructive path has ruled the Korean Peninsula, the last remnant of the Cold War. Efforts must be made to look at the inter-Korean relationship with the model of a new post-COVID-19 order, and the world will witness how the destructive path on the Peninsula can be converted into the constructive path.

“Only when the 38th parallel in our mind is demolished can the demarcation line on the ground be removed; from there, we can naturally engender the idea of national unification.”

– Kim Gu, Baek-beom (1949)

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* The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).