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South Korea's Perception Towards North Korea in Reunification Efforts during Moon Jae-In Administration: Image Theory

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Abstract
South Korea's foreign policy in its efforts toward reunification with North Korea is carried out through a peaceful and reconciliatory approach. The Panmunjom Declaration in 2018 marked a significant milestone in reviving peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula. The series of subsequent events reflected a positive perception of one another between the two countries. This study will examine how South Korea has constructed its image of North Korea through the Panmunjom Declaration, as part of its efforts to pursue peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula. The declaration was followed by several high-level meetings between national leaders, which were expected to lead to positive outcomes. However, by the end of President Moon Jae-in's term, these efforts toward peace and unity had not been achieved. This research employs Image Theory to examine how South Korea built its image of North Korea. Image Theory will be analyzed using a qualitative method. Both primary and secondary data will be examined through triangulation and causal process tracing (CPT). CPT will be applied to trace the causal mechanisms of policies and political decisions during Moon Jae-in's administration, and to understand how these sequences of events shaped or altered South Korea's perceptions of North Korea. This study argues that while South Korea perceives North Korea as a partner or ally, North Korea's nuclear program continues to be viewed as a threat.

Keywords
Panmunjom Declaration; Reunification; North Korea; South Korea; Image Theory

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a set of strategies, attitudes, and actions undertaken by a state toward other states to achieve its domestic interests. In the study of International Relations, foreign policy is formulated not only as a response to external conditions but also as a reflection of the state's identity, perceptions, and values that it upholds and believes in. This approach is evident in various policies adopted by South Korean President Moon Jae-in during his 2017–2022 term, who actively promoted a foreign policy toward North Korea based on reconciliation (Go, 2017).

However, throughout 2017, North Korea continued its provocations through a series of nuclear weapons tests and ballistic missile launches (South Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Despite heightened tensions and security threats, President Moon Jae-in adopted a more constructive approach by prioritizing dialogue, cross-border cooperation, and the cultivation of mutual trust between the two states. Initiatives such as the Panmunjom Declaration and a series of summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un reflected Moon's efforts to reframe North Korea's image—not merely as a threat,

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but as a potential partner in the pursuit of inter-Korean reunification. This highlights how more positive perceptions can influence the orientation of foreign policy, particularly when viewed through the lens of image theory.

As part of these reconciliation efforts, Moon met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on three occasions during his presidency, all of which took place in 2018. The final meeting took place on 18 September 2018, when Moon visited North Korea for the Inter-Korean Summit, accompanied by senior government officials and warmly received by North Korean citizens (Kompas ID, 2018). The summit aimed to address denuclearization, reduce military tensions, and strengthen bilateral ties. In his speech, Kim expressed his support for the Panmunjom Declaration, emphasizing the importance of peace, prosperity, and the unification of the Korean Peninsula. Both leaders shared a conviction that peace was an inevitable path that could be realized sooner rather than later.

Table 1. The Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, April 27, 2018

No	Contents of the Panmunjom Declaration
1	Both parties shall reconnect the bonds of national bloodline and promote a future of shared prosperity through independent reunification led by the Korean people, by enhancing and developing inter-Korean relations in a comprehensive and historic manner.
2	Both parties shall make joint efforts to ease acute military tensions and substantially eliminate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula.
3	Both parties shall actively cooperate to establish a permanent and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea

The Panmunjom Declaration, signed by South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, represented a joint commitment to ending the ongoing conflict. The longstanding division and confrontation were gradually redirected toward a new era of reconciliation and the enhancement of more peaceful and conducive inter-Korean relations. Beyond fostering inter-Korean peace, Moon also lobbied Kim to hold a meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump (Kompas ID, 2022). This plan eventually materialized, as Kim met Trump three times: first in Singapore in 2018, second in Vietnam in 2019, and the third at the Demilitarized Zone. The Singapore meeting resulted in a Joint Statement between the United States and North Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2018). The Joint Statement also reaffirmed the commitments made in the Panmunjom Declaration, particularly those aimed at

advancing peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Tabel 2. Joint Statement of U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un at the Singapore Summit, June 12, 2018

No	Joint Statement of the United States & North Korea
1	The United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) commit to establishing new U.S.–DPRK relations in accordance with the desire of the peoples of both countries for peace and prosperity.
2	The United States and North Korea will join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.
3	Reaffirming the Panmunjom Declaration of April 27, 2018, North Korea commits to working toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.
4	The United States and North Korea commit to recovering the remains of prisoners of war (POW) and those missing in action (MIA), including the immediate repatriation of those already identified.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea

Following the Singapore Summit, optimism grew regarding the potential achievement of peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. A second meeting between Kim and Trump was held in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the negotiations during this meeting did not reach the expected agreement. Trump rejected Kim's demand for the complete lifting of international sanctions against North Korea in exchange for dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear reactor (Landau & Stein, 2019). The third meeting between Kim and Trump took place on June 30, 2019, at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), with hopes of advancing denuclearization. Trump became the first U.S. president to set foot on the North Korean side of the DMZ, facilitated by Moon's diplomatic efforts (NBC News, 2019). The meeting appeared warm and historic, as Kim invited Trump to cross into North Korea.

These successive meetings, which signaled North Korea's openness and the prospect of peace on the Korean Peninsula, generated optimism among governments and societies alike. However, despite the summits involving Moon, Kim, and Trump, neither reunification nor peace was realized by the end of Moon's presidency. Tensions persisted, exemplified by North Korea's demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong in 2020, reflecting its disappointment with both South Korea and the United States (BBC Indonesia, 2020). The incident was triggered by propaganda campaigns carried out by North Korean defectors who launched balloons containing leaflets, food, U.S. dollars, radios, and USB drives with South Korean dramas and news—activities South Korea failed to prevent.

Although Seoul claimed to have attempted to stop such propaganda, it nonetheless called for renewed dialogue.

From the discussion of North–South Korean reunification efforts during President Moon Jae-in's administration emerges a research question: how did South Korea's perceptions of North Korea under Moon's leadership shape the formulation of a constructive foreign policy toward Kim Jong-un's regime? This paper focuses on examining the image construction advanced by President Moon that gave rise to various reconciliatory policies with North Korea.

Many studies have been conducted to explain the dynamics of the Korean division and the efforts to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula. Previous research on the division of North and South Korea cannot be separated from its geopolitical context. Influenced by the Cold War, the Korean War broke out from 1950 to 1953, with North Korea supported by the Soviet Union and South Korea backed by the United States. Although the war came to a halt, it did not end in peace; rather, it resulted in an armistice that remains in effect to this day (Koh, 2008). The Cold War rivalry between the two superpowers entrenched opposing political systems in North and South Korea, making reunification particularly difficult (McCormack, 1982). Throughout its history, North Korea did not always depend on the Soviet Union. Moreover, with the Chuch'e ideology it upheld, the country was able to foster and strengthen nationalism domestically (Agov, 2013). Chuch'e, or Juche, is a worldview of self-reliance in North Korea, derived from Marxism-Leninism and formulated by Kim Il-sung, the grandfather of Kim Jong-un (CNBC Indonesia, 2020). One manifestation of this self-reliance was North Korea's development of nuclear facilities to safeguard domestic security against external powers, rather than merely serving as a bargaining tool (Choi, 2018). This was one of the factors that motivated Moon to improve relations with North Korea, namely the pursuit of denuclearization. However, the rivalry between the United States and China made the North Korean nuclear issue increasingly difficult to resolve, as both powers framed it within their broader grand strategies rather than as a regional threat that required joint resolution (Choi, 2018). From these challenges, the North Korean nuclear crisis can be seen as a failure of systemic and multidimensional diplomacy. South Korea has often acted merely as a facilitator rather than a principal player in its resolution, allowing the crisis to recur and potentially generate new tensions. The opportunity for peace between North and South Korea emerged largely from President Moon's efforts to engage with the North. In February 2018, Moon also invited North Korea to participate in the Winter Olympics in South Korea, which led to Pyongyang's commitment to suspend intercontinental missile and nuclear tests as soon as possible. During the subsequent inter-Korean Summit, Moon and Kim pledged to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and to pursue lasting peace. Following this, dozens of South Koreans were able to enter North Korea

and reunite with long-separated family members (Kompas ID, 2020).

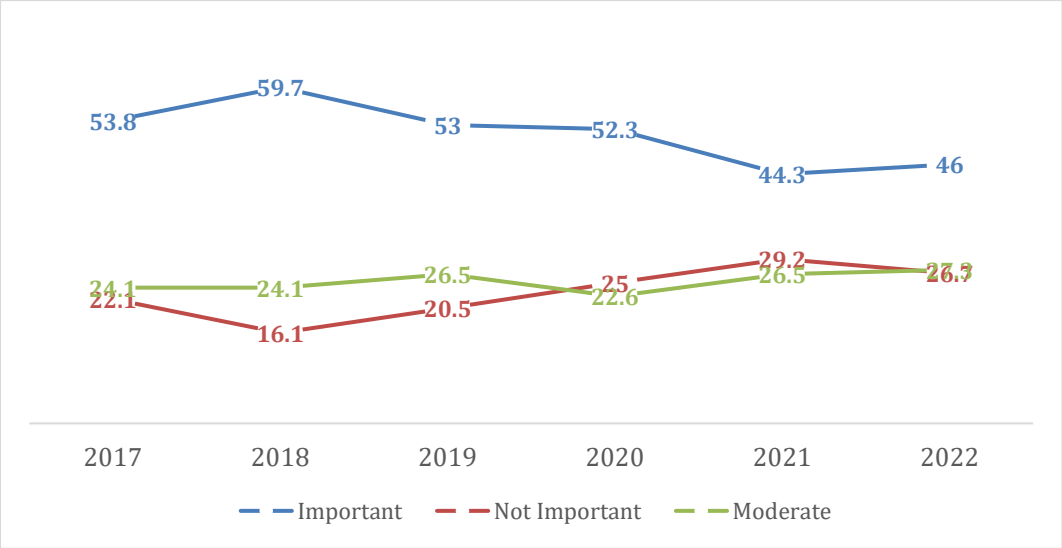
Although President Moon sought to cultivate better relations with North Korea, his role was often overlooked in Western narratives. Yet, the success of the meetings between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un was highly dependent on Moon's diplomacy as an active mediator, given North Korea's limited capacity to conduct such diplomacy independently. (Levkowitz, 2018). The sidelining of Moon in Western narratives can be attributed to the United States' divergent approach and expectations in dealing with the North Korean crisis. Nonetheless, the inter-Korean summits demonstrated a degree of success in de-escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, thereby fostering the possibility of a "peaceful land free from nuclear weapons" (Kimball, 2018). For the hegemon, peace on the Korean Peninsula is not merely a matter of regional stability but also a pursuit of its own strategic interests, which ultimately placed Moon in a difficult position and hindered the attainment of any concrete outcomes (Levkowitz, 2017).

Additionally, previous studies on North Korea and South Korea have been examined through the lens of diplomacy and foreign policy. South Korean President Moon Jae-in pursued a dialogue- and cooperation-oriented approach with North Korea, which was aimed not only at denuclearization but also at advancing economic interests, as well as fostering stable political and military relations between the two countries. In his strategy, Moon also sought to reduce entanglement in the rivalry between China and the United States. This effort was regarded as strengthening Moon's position on the international stage (Go, 2017). Moon sought to reduce reliance on the alliance with the United States that had traditionally been pursued by conservative South Korean administrations (Go, 2017). However, Moon Jae-in's position would become increasingly difficult if his strategy was not well-received by North Korea. In addition, Moon facilitated the 2018 meeting between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. Kim Jong-un's willingness to engage with the United States was driven by considerations of securing economic assistance, maintaining domestic legitimacy, and strengthening his bargaining position (Pratamasari, 2019). However, Pratamasari remains skeptical, assessing that Kim Jong-un's actions amounted merely to cyclical diplomacy rather than a genuine willingness to open up. This was further demonstrated during the second Kim–Trump summit in Vietnam, where North Korea requested the lifting of sanctions on the country in exchange for dismantling only one among its many nuclear facilities. This proposal was rejected by Trump, who insisted on the dismantling of all nuclear facilities in North Korea. Ultimately, no agreement was reached due to the significant gap in the bargaining process, rendering the summit largely symbolic without substantive outcomes (Easley, 2020).

Other previous studies have discussed public perceptions and the sociohistorical factors underlying the division between North and South

Korea. The difficulty in pursuing reunification is the exclusion of citizens from such efforts. Reconciliation and the potential realization of Korean reunification will not succeed if pursued solely through structural or elite-driven approaches. Strengthening socio-cultural contacts between the peoples of both countries would create networks of trust and cross-border understanding necessary for achieving shared peace (Jonsson, 2018). On the other hand, public attention is not strongly focused on North Korea. South Korean society has increasingly disengaged from concerns about the North, a phenomenon of desensitization stemming from fatigue with continuous media coverage of North Korea (Einhorn & Rich, 2020), Moreover, generational factors have led younger South Koreans to lose interest in the discourse of peace and reunification with North Korea. Direct interactions between South Korean citizens and North Korean defectors are also not particularly positive, as long-standing stereotypes have resulted in discrimination (Chun, 2022). This is understandable, as the two Koreas share the same historical and cultural background; however, the divergence of their political, economic, and social systems for more than seventy years has created a profound gap in public perceptions and mutual trust (Manojlovic, 2020). This perceptual divide could be overcome through direct interactions that encourage a more inclusive social atmosphere, rather than relying solely on formal political discourse. Nevertheless, the summits between North Korea and the United States had a relatively positive impact on South Korean public perceptions toward reconciliation (Kim et al., 2018), However, statistical data indicate that such positive perceptions occurred only in 2018, while in the following years the trend declined again, largely due to the lack of tangible outcomes from the summits.

Figure 1. Chart of South Korean Public Support for Korean Reunification
Source: processed from Opinion on the Necessity of Unification between South and North Korea from 2007 to 2024



According to the data, during President Moon's administration in 2017, 53.8% of the public considered unification an important issue. The number rose to 59.7% in 2018, before declining again to 53% in 2020. It can thus be concluded that the summits initiated by Moon Jae-in had a positive impact on public perception, while their failure also led to a subsequent decline in public sentiment in the following year.

From previous studies in geopolitical, foreign policy, and public perception approaches, there has been no research that specifically examines South Korea's perception of North Korea during Moon Jae-in's administration, which consistently pursued peace on the Korean Peninsula through the Panmunjom Declaration with North Korea.

This study will be divided into several sections. The first section discusses the background of South Korea's foreign policy toward North Korea in its efforts to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula, followed by the research problem and a review of previous studies on inter-Korean peace efforts. The next section presents the analytical framework using image theory and the research methodology. The subsequent section provides an analysis of South Korea's perception of North Korea, and the final section offers the conclusion and recommendations.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Image Theory in International Relations studies explains how states form perceptions of other states based on the structural relationships between them. This theory views states not merely as political or economic entities, but also as social groups that are characterized through certain perceptions. These perceptions or images then serve as justification for the policies adopted by a state (Alexander et al., 2005). Image theory helps provide an understanding of how a state's—or a particular actor's—perceptions can shape foreign policy and security strategies.

Richard Cottam, in his book Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and A Case Study, divides perceptions into five ideal types: enemy, allied, imperial, colonial, and complex (Jervis, 1978). Building on Cottam's typology, Herrmann and Fischerkeller (1995) further developed these images into enemy image, degenerate image, colony image, ally image, and imperialist image, based on descriptions of motivation, capability, and decision-making processes (Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995).

First, Herrmann and Fischerkeller explain the enemy image. This image perceives the target actor as a threat with comparable capabilities and cultural dimensions to the subject actor. The target actor is also perceived as strong, aggressive, and continuously seeking to exploit the weaknesses of its opponent in its efforts to expand influence in the international arena. Within the context of the enemy image, the subject actor refrains from cooperating with the target actor, fearing that the latter would gain disproportionately from such cooperation. Although perceived as an enemy, the subject actor does not immediately resort to attacking the

target, but instead exercises caution in dealing with it.

The next image is the degenerate image, in which the subject actor perceives the target actor as having similar capabilities and as presenting opportunities that can be exploited. However, the subject actor views the target as poorly organized due to its cultural deficiencies. As a result, the subject actor tends to adopt revisionist strategies in its relations with the target.

The third image is the colony image, where the target actor is perceived as weak in both capability and cultural dimensions. In states characterized by this image, internal divisions within the government are apparent, leading the subject actor to believe it possesses the capacity to intervene in the affairs of the target actor.

The fourth image in Herrmann and Fischerkeller's (1995) framework is the ally image. This image portrays a situation in which the subject actor believes that its relationship with the target actor will yield mutual benefits. These benefits are considered more important than assessments of capability or cultural dimensions. Within the ally image, the target actor is perceived as benevolent and as having the intention to engage in mutually advantageous cooperation. Policies shaped by this perception are designed to maximize joint gains and collective well-being, ultimately leading to the institutionalization of cooperation between states that view each other as allies.

The final image is the imperialist image, which depicts the target actor as a threatening entity with stronger capabilities, though not superior in cultural dimensions. The target actor in this image is believed to be motivated by a desire to dominate the subject actor. In response to such a threat, the subject actor adopts an "independent fortress" strategy. Rather than launching a direct attack against the target actor, the subject actor usually directs its efforts toward undermining the target's supporters.

Tabel 3. Hypotheses on the Relationship between Ideal Perceptions and Strategic Choices (Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995)

Image	Foreign Policy Strategy	Main Strategic Objective
Enemy	Containment	To deter and protect, maintaining credibility as a major power.
Ally	Institutional cooperation	To enhance capabilities and mutual trust toward joint actions, minimizing threats from other parties that may challenge the target actor's capabilities.
Degenerate	Revisionism	To weaken and eliminate the subject actor's threats through expansion, forming larger alliances to protect shared geopolitical interests.
Imperialist	Independent fortress	To control the target actor by preventing

		interventions as well as limiting the target's access to resources possessed by the subject actor.
Colony	Intervention	To ensure the presence of a cooperative regime remains intact.

In image theory, several structural factors can influence the formation of images in the study of International Relations: (1) goal compatibility, (2) relative power, and (3) relative cultural status (Alexander et al., 2005). These three features in image theory determine how the subject actor perceives the target actor, which in turn shapes the policies adopted by the subject actor. The verbal language of the subject actor's leaders is also used to assess their perceptions of the target actor (Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995), through statements that point to an ideal image representing their perception. However, verbal language cannot serve as the sole standard for evaluating the subject actor's perception of the target actor, as it must also be considered alongside the policy-making process, including domestic political dynamics.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study will employ a qualitative method to align with the analytical framework based on image theory. By using a qualitative approach, the research will emphasize verbal language (words) rather than numerical data (Bryman, 2012). The verbal expressions of the President of South Korea regarding peace efforts with North Korea, as well as the responses of the North Korean leader, will be used to investigate those perceptions.

The data come from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources will be obtained from official documents on South Korea's policy toward peace with North Korea published on the website of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, statements by both leaders as reported in the media will be treated as primary data. Secondary data will be drawn from the literature on peace efforts and reunification on the Korean Peninsula, such as articles, books, documents, and media reports. The temporal scope of the study is limited to 2017–2022, corresponding to the Moon Jae-in administration.

The collected primary and secondary data will be analyzed through triangulation. Triangulation is used to provide a comprehensive understanding from multiple perspectives (Neuman, 2014). Data will be analyzed using causal process tracing (CPT). The CPT approach is applied to examine the sequence and situational interaction between causal conditions and mechanisms, showing in detail how causal factors produce particular outcomes. Through CPT, in-depth investigation and empirical observation will be conducted so that causes and effects can be examined comprehensively (Blatter & Haverland, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The President of South Korea from 2017 to 2022, Moon Jae-in, demonstrated strong determination and commitment to improving relations with North Korea through diplomatic engagement and reconciliation efforts.

Tabel 4. Series of Meetings between South Korea, North Korea, and the United States 2018–2019

No	Date	Event
1	1 January 2018	North Korea expressed its intention to participate in the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games.
2	9 January 2018	North Korea and South Korea confirmed North Korea's participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games and Paralympics.
3	9-11 February 2018	Visit of North Korea's High-Level Delegation to South Korea.
4	25-27 February 2018	Visit of North Korea's High-Level Delegation to South Korea.
5	5-6 March 2018	Dispatch of South Korea's Special Envoy to North Korea.
6	27 April 2018	Summit I – **Panmunjom Declaration** for Peace, Prosperity, and Reunification (and Denuclearization) on the Korean Peninsula.
7	25 May 2018	Summit II – Meeting between the leaders of North Korea and South Korea.
8	26 May 2018	Meeting between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un in the Demilitarized Zone.
9	1 June 2018	Inter-Korean High-Level Talks I.
10	12 June 2018	Meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un in Singapore.
11	13 August 2018	Inter-Korean High-Level Talks II.
12	18-20 September 2018	Summit III – Meeting between the leaders of North Korea and South Korea in Pyongyang, resulting in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration.
13	15 October 2018	Inter-Korean High-Level Talks III.
14	27-18 February 2019	Meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un in Vietnam.
15	30 June 2019	Trilateral meeting between Donald Trump, Kim Jong-un, and Moon Jae-in.

Source: Diplomatic White Paper, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea

In striving for peace on the Korean Peninsula, Moon Jae-in undertook various initiatives by involving North Korea in numerous activities and meetings that were also attended by the President of the United States, Donald Trump. The South Korean government sought to secure international community support for the meetings and cooperation that had been carried out between North Korea and South Korea. These efforts were consistently pursued on various occasions, including directing the foreign diplomatic corps in Korea, as well as through bilateral and multilateral consultations.

Moon Jae-in consistently demonstrated strong commitment to pursuing peace and reunification with North Korea through a series of bilateral and trilateral meetings. Both South and North Korea actively conducted reciprocal visits. Moon also played an active and cautious role in facilitating meetings between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. Moon sought to avoid escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula throughout this process.

It began with the invitation to the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, North Korea agreed to participate, indicating a positive causal relationship between the two countries. Subsequently, reciprocal visits between North Korea and South Korea reflected both side's positive intentions to rebuild the peace after Korean War in 1950-1953. This process culminated in the Panmunjom Declaration, which aimed at reunification and denuclearization in North Korea. Moon further acted as a facilitator in the meetings of Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump those held at the Demilitarized Zone, as well as in Singapore and Vietnam.

Although there was a thaw in relations between the two countries that had long been in tension, the pursuit of reunification remained difficult to achieve. Using the framework of image theory, this paper will analyze how South Korea perceived North Korea during Moon Jae-in's administration, which will be explained through three main variables: goal compatibility (intentions), power relations, and cultural dimensions.

Goal Compatibility: Reunification Amid Contrasting Perceptions

From the beginning of his administration, President Moon consistently sought a reconciliatory approach toward North Korea in pursuit of peace on the Korean Peninsula. His government played a key role in sustaining inter-Korean dialogue and even facilitated the first historic meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump, marking a significant effort in the pursuit of North Korea's denuclearization (South Korea. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The first variable shaping perception within the framework of image theory is goal compatibility, which serves as the basis for South Korea's assessment of whether North Korea represents a threat or an opportunity. In reviewing the timeline, North Korea continued its provocations in 2017 through a series of nuclear weapons tests and ballistic missile launches. Nevertheless, President Moon extended an olive branch by inviting North Korea

to participate in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, thereby providing space for its athletes' participation (Tempo, 2018). North Korea's presence at the Winter Olympics gradually helped ease tensions with South Korea.

Subsequently, a series of meetings between Moon and Kim, marked most notably by the Panmunjom Declaration, created a historical record suggesting hope for unity and peace on the Korean Peninsula. The contents of the Panmunjom Declaration (South Korea. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) emphasized the commitment of both South Korea and North Korea to pursue national unity. Both sides agreed to reconnect their "blood ties" as one people sharing long-standing historical roots, in pursuit of prosperity and reunification supported by their respective populations. They also pledged to reduce inter-Korean tensions through dialogue and to build a permanent, stable peace regime on the Peninsula.

Follow-up meetings were conducted to sustain the commitment made in the Panmunjom Declaration, with the involvement of the United States—long regarded as one of the Cold War actors contributing to Korea's division. The historic meetings between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump were held three times. In 2018, North and South Korea also established the Kaesong Inter-Korean Liaison Office as a channel for communication, though it was ultimately demolished (BBC, 2020).

Moon Jae-in's approach toward North Korea was not limited to the goal of denuclearization, which was considered a threat to regional stability. South Korea also sought to initiate stable economic, political, and military cooperation with North Korea (Go, 2017). However, some assessments suggest that North Korea's openness was merely a strategy to strengthen its international bargaining position and to avoid economic isolation resulting from international sanctions (Pratamasari, 2019).

Skepticism toward North Korea became evident during the second summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. Although both sides had committed to peace under the Panmunjom Declaration, the meeting in Vietnam failed to produce the expected results. Denuclearization, the central agenda, could not be achieved because Kim demanded the immediate lifting of all international sanctions on North Korea, while offering only to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. In contrast, Trump insisted that all of North Korea's nuclear weapons be eliminated. While South Korea continued to push for regional stability through denuclearization, North Korea did not demonstrate a strong commitment to peace and reunification.

The vision of reunification as a shared future for Korea is perceived differently by the two states. This underscores how difficult—if not nearly impossible—the process of uniting North and South Korea remains. Although North Korea's constitution proclaims reunification as a national aspiration, Kim Jong-un's policies reveal inconsistencies. Within this framework, it becomes clear that North Korea seeks to preserve its sovereignty against

external powers demanding complete nuclear disarmament. Despite its stated interest in peace, North Korea refuses to dismantle the nuclear capability it has long built as a safeguard against external threats.

The Panmunjom Declaration, signed by Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, represented a potential starting point for Korea's future reunification. However, the role of great powers such as the United States remains a crucial factor in the reconciliation process. Even though Kim and Trump held symbolic meetings—including one at the world's most heavily fortified border, the DMZ—these gestures did not soften Kim's stance on relinquishing nuclear weapons. By the end of Moon Jae-in's presidency in 2022, reunification had not been achieved. Toward the close of his term, Moon sent a letter expressing hope for improved inter-Korean relations in the future, to which Kim responded by appreciating Moon's efforts for peace during his tenure. Both leaders verbally expressed goodwill toward peace, yet these intentions ultimately failed to materialize.

Tabel 5. Table of Goal Compatibility: Reunification Amid Contrasting Perceptions

Goal Compatibility		
Indicator	**Image Type**	**Policy Implication**
1. South Korea pursue reconciliatory approach amidst provocation by North Korea. 2. Willingness of North Korea and South Korea to engage in dialogue and cooperation between two countries.	Ally	1. Engagement through participation in PyeongChang Winter Olympics Game in 2018. 2. Panmunjom Declaration as a part of efforts toward permanent peace in Korean Peninsula.

Power Relations between South Korea and North Korea

Although North and South Korea share common historical roots, more than 70 years of division has created a sharp rift between them. Politically, economically, and militarily, the two countries differ significantly, often in opposing directions. North Korea possesses nuclear capabilities that are regarded as a major threat on the Korean Peninsula. Despite ranking only 52nd in terms of population size, North Korea is considered to have the fourth-largest military force in the world (BBC, 2017). Its extensive nuclear capacity poses a threat to regional stability, even though it lags far behind South Korea economically.

North Korea's nuclear arsenal creates a regional dilemma, as it is viewed as undermining stability on the Korean Peninsula, particularly through repeated provocations such as ballistic missile launches. While North Korea is perceived as a security threat because of

its nuclear weapons, economically it remains isolated from the international system. This is evident in Kim Jong-un's repeated demands for the complete lifting of economic sanctions imposed on his country. A comparison of overall capabilities reveals an asymmetry between the two Koreas: structurally, South Korea is far stronger, but politically and in terms of security it remains vulnerable due to the nuclear threat posed by the North.

The imbalance in power relations is also reflected in South Korea's alliance with the United States. Although North Korea arguably holds an advantage in the security domain with its nuclear arsenal, the presence of the United States as South Korea's ally represents a counterweight and a constant source of pressure on Pyongyang. Consequently, South Korea's foreign policy in coordination with Washington must be carefully implemented to avoid potential failure.

Tabel 6. Table of Power Relations between South Korea and North Korea

Power Relations		
Indicator	**Image Type**	**Policy Implication**
North Korea's nuclear capabilities became a security threat on the Korean Peninsula, while the alliance of South Korea and United States perceived as a threat for North Korea.	Mixed (Ally-Threat)	Engagement and detterence

Cultural Dimension of South and North Korea: Ideological Distance

In pursuing reconciliatory foreign policy toward North Korea, President Moon sought to construct a shared identity between the two Koreas. By emphasizing historical ties and familial bonds, Moon portrayed North Korea as a separated brother rather than an enemy to be fought. However, one key obstacle is that both states claim to be the legitimate representative of the Korean nation—South Korea as the Republic of Korea (ROK) and North Korea as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This raises difficult questions for reunification: if unification were to occur, which side would concede, and what political system would govern a united Korea? For Moon, however, promoting ethnic kinship and a shared historical legacy took precedence over ideological differences.

Although Moon consistently highlighted the common historical and cultural roots of the two Koreas, his administration also recognized the wide gap in values upheld by each state, such as differing views on human rights, individual freedoms, and governance. Nevertheless, in Moon's perspective, these differences were not depicted as

insurmountable threats but as challenges to be overcome in the pursuit of peace. This was reflected in his consistent actions: even when North Korea showed reluctance to continue peace and reunification dialogues, Moon still sent letters to Kim Jong-un expressing his hope for future inter-Korean integration

Tabel 7. Table of Cultural Dimension of South and North Korea: Ideological Distance

Cultural Dimension		
Indicator	**Image Type**	**Policy Implication**
Shared identity and common history between North Korea and South Korea that were continuously promoted by Moon Jae-in.	Ally	Reunification based on reconciliatory approach rather than absorption.

CONCLUSION

This study examines South Korea's perception of North Korea during the administration of Moon Jae-in, particularly in relation to foreign policy direction embodied in the Panmunjom Declaration. The policy reflected Seoul's aspiration to pursue a more peaceful and reconciliatory approach toward Pyongyang. However, despite both countries speaking of peace and reunification, fundamental differences in perspective made such efforts difficult to achieve.

To analyze this dynamic, the study employs image theory to explore how South Korea perceives North Korea, which in turn influenced President Moon to adopt a dialogic foreign policy toward Kim Jong-un's regime. The findings reveal that South Korea holds an ambivalent view of North Korea: on the one hand as an ally (a separated brother or partner), yet on the other still regarded as a threat. This dual perception is evident in President Moon's consistent pursuit of peaceful engagement, even when North Korea repeatedly violated agreements, including the destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong. For Moon, North Korea remained part of the "family," which explains his persistent messages of peace even as the prospects for reunification grew increasingly slim.

The ally image dominated Moon's policy from 2017 to 2022, as reflected in several direct meetings with Kim Jong-un as well as his role as a facilitator of the historic dialogues between Kim and Donald Trump. Moon placed hope in Kim's cooperative gestures during these meetings as a possible opening toward peace. However, resistance surfaced when Kim rejected an agreement with Trump during their summit in Vietnam, reigniting tensions and ultimately leading to the failure of reconciliation efforts. Nevertheless, until the end of his presidency, Moon consistently conveyed

peace messages, underscoring his intention to leave behind a legacy of stability on the Korean Peninsula.

This demonstrates how Moon maintained a positive perception of Kim Jong-un despite unfavorable political developments. Within the framework of image theory, it can be understood that goal compatibility, power relations, and cultural dimensions shape how one state perceives another—as an ally, enemy, degenerate, imperialist, or colony. The theory proves useful in explaining how an actor state perceives a target state and the historical as well as emotional dynamics that underpin that perception. However, its limitations lie in its subjectivity, difficulty of verification, and its inability to comprehensively predict the success of resulting policies.

As a recommendation, future research could compare Moon Jae-in's administration with earlier liberal governments, such as during the Sunshine Policy era (1998–2008). Such comparison may help identify key variables that explain why reconciliatory foreign policies between South Korea and North Korea have repeatedly failed to achieve their goals. In doing so, research would not only consider the perceptions of policy-making actors but also account for how the target state's perception plays a decisive role in determining the success of diplomacy

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