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Hope for Health: Optimism for Korean Unification and Resolving Healthcare Inequity

When I joined the Garfield Center for Public Leadership, I wrote my letter of interest citing a great concern with the impact of global events on healthcare. While the political unrest that dominates the Korean Peninsula is a highly dynamic situation that provides a multi-faceted political science problem as theorists consider potential paths forward –either to peaceful unification or to establishing a strong, independent government in Pyongyang– it underscores an issue much closer to home for me in my native field of study, medicine. The North Korean government, among other alleged human rights violations, has been accused of rendering subpar medical care to its citizens. Malnourishment is one of the surface level concerns, since the nation is relatively poor and imports very little. However, the medical issues that North Korea faces are much graver. Thus, I spent my time in Korea reflecting on the timeframe of reunification and what that might mean for the population of North Korea medically. North Korea presents an eminent medical challenge, one that depending on who you ask, is several months or several years from being resolved.

On November 13, 2017, Oh Chong Song was brought to a South Korean military trauma bay with five bullet wounds. He was a soldier, shot running from North Korea. During a five-hour procedure that would fix plummeting blood pressure, shock, and stabilize him, his surgeon ran into worms in his intestine and bowel. Worms as long as ten inches were removed from the

intestine. Further, the patient suffered from complications relating to tuberculosis and hepatitis B¹, two incredibly dangerous (and completely preventable) conditions that threaten the liver and will eventually become fatal. Song probably would have died of liver failure had he not defected. This type of story is not particularly rare among defectors, either. In addition to physical illness, psychiatric illness is prevalent in defectors. Unsurprisingly, PTSD and depression are in high prevalence and severity, according to one literature review. Risk factors for patients involve traumatic experience, stays in a third country (i.e. not North or South Korea), forced repatriation, and poor physical health. Protective factors involve educational level, social support, family quality, and innate resilience². Unfortunately, almost every North Korean is born into the conditions that involve risk of PTSD and depression but are only randomly exposed to some protective factors.

How quickly can reunification happen? This question surrounded all of the meetings I attended during my time in Seoul. It seemed to be on the minds of all of the government employees we met with, both American and South Korean. However, the proposed timeline for reunification changes based on whether one was talking to an American official or a Korean one. At the risk of a paraphrased quote, Ambassador Harris seemed to imply that reunification was not the goal and that rather a state of harmony between the two governments should be achieved as soon as possible. However, many of the Korean officials had a more lighthearted and optimistic approach to the issue (barring the minority party official we met with who seemed to think military force was the appropriate route to the future, though as his opinions are from a

¹ Newton, Paula, and Taehoon Lee. "North Korean Soldier: Surgeon Says Defector 'Was like a Broken Jar'." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 5 Dec. 2017, www.cnn.com/2017/12/04/health/north-korea-defector-doctor-intl/index.html.

² Lee, Yeeun, et al. "Mental Health Status of North Korean Refugees in South Korea and Risk and Protective Factors: a 10-Year Review of the Literature." *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, vol. 8, no. sup2, 2017, p. 1369833., doi:10.1080/20008198.2017.1369833.

minority party, I write with the perspective that the majority of the country is not in agreement). The Minister of Foreign Affairs in particular did not seem to think the current political chaos between the US, South Korea, and North Korea would be a permanent roadblock to reunification.

A study of North Koreans conducted by Beyond Parallel indicates that 94% (34/36) of North Korean respondents think unification is necessary. In comparison, a survey of South Koreans finds that 57.8% find unification necessary. Further, the percent of North Koreans living in South Korea who find unification necessary is relatively constant over the years while the percent of South Koreans has decreased nearly four percent from 62.1% in 2016 and nearly eleven percent from 69.3% in 2014³. This indicates that while prospects for unification may exist, the window of opportunity may be closing, especially if the downturn in reunification hopes from South Koreans continues. Instead, it may become the case that North Korean citizens want unification, but they live in a nation of South Koreans who, due to time and passing of generations, feel no personal connection to North Korea, and therefore see only economic and military obstacles in unification.

An interesting counterpoint to the apparent downturn in interest in unification is the use of tourism at the Demilitarized Zone in order to fund efforts for peace and unity. The sociological impact of building an amusement park less than ten kilometers from the DMZ is worthy of its own paper, but it should be noted that as long as such efforts to keep awareness for the unification alive, the interest in Korean unification will probably survive in some form.

One other estimate for a timeframe for unification comes from the Asan Institute. President Chaibong of the Asan Institute suggested that North Korea is one of the only “normal”

³ Cha, Victor, and Marie DuMond. “On Unification: North Koreans' Hope for the (Near) Future.” *Beyond Parallel*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 Apr. 2018, beyondparallel.csis.org/unification-north-koreans-hope-near-future/.

countries in the world, as it kept true to isolationism and nationalism, generally considered WWII era values. It also held fast to its cultural values in Neo-Confucianism and *juche*. This persistent state of “normalcy” in a state of “abnormal” Asia indicates a similar state to the 1930’s in Asia, again citing an urge for normalcy as the driving force of nationalism. As Kim Jinwoo says “History does not repeat itself, but it sometimes does rhyme”⁴. This model estimates a time frame of 10-20 years until unification as a wide window, as that represents roughly the amount of time that it took for WWII era ideals to transform into precursor global ideals.

These estimates help to predict when unification may happen, however they aren’t guarantees. Putting numbers to the time frame suggested by Korean sources for unification sparked another question for me: when do the Korean and potentially the American governments force unification for the benefit of the people? Should they ever? Spending a week in Seoul gives me the impression that the general Korean population doesn’t spend every day worrying about when the unification will come. Admittedly, a week in a country where I don’t understand the language is not enough of a sample to determine this, however I did leave with a strong enough impression to mention the fact.

Perhaps it isn’t unreasonable for the South Koreans to want to avoid enforcing human rights law on North Korea at an inevitable military cost. In their minds, the government is working on it, and diplomacy is safer for South Korean lives than force. However, at least some part of the country feels force is better for one reason or another, as represented by the minority party leader we met with. It is difficult to determine what the military cost would be to any nations who would try to force North Korea’s hand. It is even more difficult to determine how many lives would be made healthier by such force. A pure interest in medical progress suggests

⁴ Jinwoo, Kim. “The Quest for Normalcy in East Asia.” *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, 16 Aug. 2017, en.asaninst.org/contents/the-quest-for-normalcy-in-east-asia/.

that North Korea should be forced to comply with human rights guidelines and made to provide proper healthcare, but that statement triggers alarm bells in the minds of political philosophers, military professionals, and anyone literate enough to realize “force” and “North Korea” cannot appear in the same sentence in the current global climate.

I learned that healthcare is not an isolated effort on this trip. One cannot expect doctors to be the vanguard of negotiating difficult political terrains; just as one cannot expect politicians to make perfect moves to preserve health of as many people as possible at all times. Moving forward as a future medical professional, I see the importance of understanding global politics and understanding how to work with politicians. Purely medically, I shouldn't care what the political state of a nation is as long as its citizens are being taken care of, but the Korean peninsula provides an example of why that type of thinking is reductionist and dangerous. When looking at public health in nations that don't welcome aid from the world, the effort must come from a mix of politicians and physicians. Estimates suggest that time may be running out in order to access North Korea and provide much needed aid to its citizens, and I believe that either a pure medical or pure political approach is insufficient for the needs of either Korean nation. Rather, as North Korea collapses, as many academics and several of the figures we met believe it will do, the global community – with South Korea at the spearhead – must prepare to accept North Korea, providing service to its citizens as a first effort to return unity to the peninsula.