Working Paper Series

"The Challenges of a Post-Reunification Korea: Lessons from Reconciled Civil Conflicts"

By William J. Long
Professor and Chair, Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, Georgia Institute of Technology

Note that these working papers may not be cited or referenced in any way.

"All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
    Leo Tolstoy

Introduction

The unhappy division of Korea is unique in many respects. When Korea contemplates reunification, however, it is necessary to look for family resemblances, drawn from history, that alert Korea to the challenges of unification that lie ahead. But which models and which historical cases provide relevant guidance? Does reunification with the North fundamentally present the challenge of transforming a closed, militant, industrial, pre-modern society into an open, democratic, knowledge-based, post-modern society? Does re-integration present problems most akin to those associated with rebuilding a weak or failed state? Or, is Korean reunification analogous to other civil conflicts seeking reconciliation and reconstruction after a long period of violence and estrangement?

The appropriate historical cases for drawing lessons for Korean reunification vary considerably depending on which model is employed. If Korean reunification is seen as transformation of a society from closure to openness, from pre-modern to post-modern society, then the case of post-Cold War German reunification or Korea's and Japan's encounter with the West in the 19th Century may be appropriate examples. If the North were viewed as authoritarian form of a "weak state" susceptible to eventual failure or collapse,[1] then the appropriate historical parallels would differ and might include post-Pol Pot Cambodia or the state reconstruction efforts underway in Iraq. If Korean reunification best resembles the reconciliation of national

---

[1] The potential for state failure in the DPRK is all too real. Although the state is currently stable, it provides very few political or economic goods to its citizens and is held together through repression and secrecy, not performance. Succession battles or an easing of repression could cause legitimacy to vanish and create sudden instability.

belligerents, then the recent spate of successfully resolved civil conflicts—such as South Africa and those in Latin America—might provide guidance.

Each model draws our attention to a somewhat different set of challenges, too. The literature on moving from pre to post-modernity, for example, identifies the following changes that often accompany societal transformation:

- a reduction in the importance of military goals and a growing emphasis on economic intercourse and global integration;
- an increase in the voluntary activities of individual citizens and a corresponding emphasis on self-reliance and self-realization;
- a growth in individual liberties, mobility, and autonomy from state control;
- a reduction in fixity of rank and centralized planning; and
- state legitimacy derived from participation and performance rather than ideology and repression.[2]

North Korea, some believe, is rapidly approaching the time when the regime can no longer hold back the tide of modernity.

The literature on weak or failed states offers a somewhat different set of requirements associated with rebuilding a functioning state. In reconstructing a failed state there is a hierarchy of necessary political objectives beginning with human security and culminating in citizen participation in viable institutions and civil society. Along the way, the host of challenges include: adjudicating disputes; creating an enforceable body of law; providing health, education, financial, transportation, environmental, and communications services; establishing fiscal and monetary stability; and starting and sustaining economic growth. In addition to these institutional challenges, trust must be created across political fault lines and between citizens and their government.[3]

The body of work on national reconciliation after protracted civil conflict emphasizes a somewhat different set of imperatives associated with re-establishing national unity and peace. For example, John Paul Lederach emphasizes the importance of "truth," "mercy," "justice," and "peace," as the building blocks of a reconciled society.[4] My own study of successful national reconciliations, discussed below, emphasizes a similar set of factors, including: truth-telling, partial justice, redefinition of identities, and a call for a new common future that must accompany rebuilding efforts.[5]

---

[2] For an example of this model as applied to North Korea see Aiden Foster-Carter, "North Korea in Retrospect," in The Korean Peninsula in Transition, Dae Hwan Kim and Tat Yan Kong, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, pp. 116-145.
[3] Robert Rotberg, "The Failure of Collapsed Nation States: Breakdown, Prevention and Repair," in When States Fail, Robert Rotberg, ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 1-49.
[4] John Paul Lederach, Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997.
[5] William J. Long and Peter Brecke, War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Whatever the model and analogies, the challenges associated with reunification undoubtedly will be both material (privatization, integrating markets, and financial reform, for example) and ideational (transforming identity, redefining the responsibilities of citizenship and government, and creating a new historical truth, for instance). The challenges will also have different temporal horizons, and some will naturally precede others while some must be pursued simultaneously. For example, disarming and demobilizing combatants is an early step toward ensuring basic security, and creating an enforceable body of laws is among the first political challenges following state failure.[6] In the literature on national reconciliation processes, some assert that a public, officially sanctioned truth and reconciliation commission is often one of the first and most indispensable elements of a successful national reconciliation,[7] whereas the process of securing a measure of justice begins with the step of truth telling, but is more protracted in nature.

This conference will undoubtedly reveal that all these models (and others too) are useful in conceptualizing the future challenges associated with Korean reunification. The balance of this paper, however, will focus on potential lessons to be learned from past cases of civil conflict and national reconciliation that have been the subject of my research. Although offering a distillation of lessons drawn from other cases of successful civil reconciliation, this paper recognizes that this perspective is but one of many ways of thinking about Korea's future.

The Nature of Civil Conflicts Today: Prevalent, Intractable, and Recidivistic . . . but Not Always

What do we know about civil conflicts and their resolution? First, intrastate conflict is the dominant form of warfare today. Since the end of the Cold War, the number of civil conflicts compared with international conflicts has increased considerably (see illustration below). Furthermore, today's civil conflicts have increasing international effects as they often destabilize their region through refugee flows, smuggling and organized crime, and opportunistic interventions by neighboring governments. Civil wars also engage the international community when they entail gross violations of international norms, such as the prohibition against genocide.
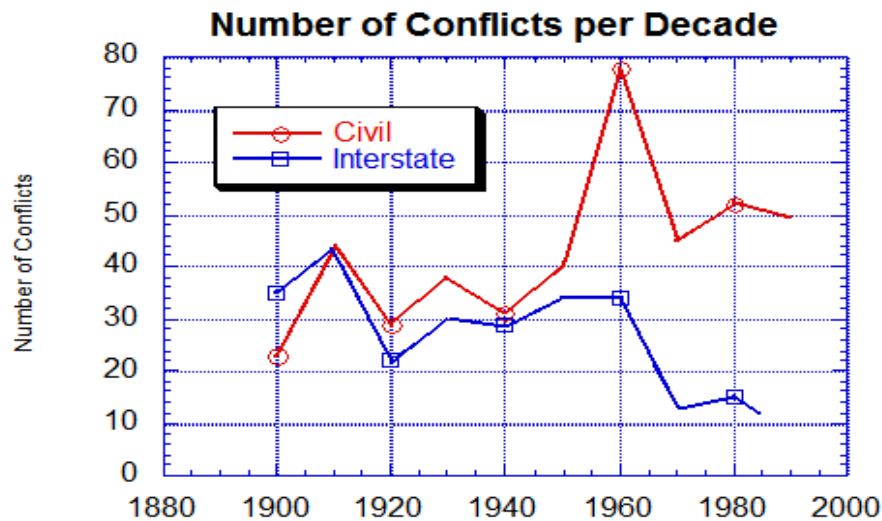
Second, research suggests that civil conflicts rarely end in political settlement, generally cycling back into conflict. Absent massive third-party intervention, most civil conflicts do not result in a restoration of an enduring social order. Relying on cases of civil conflict during the period of 1950-2000, my research found that the rate of recidivism in civil conflict exceeded 90 percent. Two major explanations attempt to account for the intractable and recidivistic qualities of civil conflicts. One proposition emphasizes the "acute security dilemmas" posed by intrastate war: the warring parties cannot make credible commitments to disarm and share power without the guarantee of security by an outside party. Simply put, the parties cannot maintain their independent armed forces if they decide to reconcile, and if they disarm, they face unacceptable vulnerability during a time of great uncertainty. Thus, civil wars, with their acute anarchic

---

[6] Robert Rotberg, "The Failure of Collapsed Nation States: Breakdown, Prevention and Repair," p. 33.
[7] Jose Zalaquett, "Confronting Human Rights Violations Committed by Former Governments: Principles Applicable and Political Constraints," in Transitional Justice, ed. Neil J. Kritz, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995, pp. 3-31.

conditions, pose a greater cooperation dilemma than international conflicts.[8] A second line of argument emphasizes that matters of race, ethnicity, and religion, in addition to material issues, often define civil disputes. Conflicts encompassing existential values such as ethnicity are believed to be more intractable because they are not easy to compromise in a negotiated bargain.[9] This feature is generally more pronounced in civil disputes rather than in international conflicts where material issues—such as the location of borders or access to resources—predominate and may be more amenable to finding the middle ground.

Number of Conflicts per Decade

My research suggests that, although civil conflicts are both more numerous and more intractable than interstate wars, a narrow subset of countries have restored lasting social order largely through their own efforts rather than those of third-party interveners. Specifically, during the last half of the 20th century, I found that out of 11 cases of civil conflict that experienced a "reconciliation event" seven did not return to violent conflict, a success rate of 64%. In contrast, during that same period, only nine percent of countries without a reconciliation event avoided a recurrence of conflict. See the chart below for a list of the countries and the date of their respective reconciliation events.

A reconciliation event is defined as one that includes the following elements: direct physical proximity between opponents, usually senior representatives of the warring factions; a public ceremony accompanied by substantial publicity or media attention that relays the event to the wider national society; and ritualistic or symbolic behavior that indicates that the parties consider the dispute resolved (or resolvable) and expect more amicable relations to follow.[10] I was led to

---

[8] Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization*, vol. 51, 1997, pp. 335-364.

[9] See, Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict, Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, eds., Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005.

[10] It is important to distinguish between reconciliation events and reconciliation. The former are a proxy indicator of reconciliation. I used them to identify potential reconciliations because they are *observable* indicators of possible reconciliations. Reconciliation events can be identified in the historical records, whereas reconciliation ultimately occurs within the minds of many, perhaps most, individuals in a society and is more difficult to identify and measure.

COUNTRY	DATE	SUBSEQUENT OUTCOME
Colombia	1957	War
North Yemen	1970	War
Chad	1971 1992 – 1993	War War
Argentina	1984	Peace
Uruguay	1985	Peace
Chile	1991	Peace
El Salvador	1992	Peace
Mozambique	1992	Peace
South Africa	1992 - 1993	Peace
Honduras	1993	Peace

suspect that reconciliation events were important in successful conflict resolution because these sorts of public gestures stay firmly in memory, receive widespread attention and acclaim, and carry a presumption that these symbolic acts were associated with a reduction in future conflict between groups (be they sub-national, national, or international) as represented by their leaders. Powerful examples include events like the public meeting between then President of South Africa F.W. de Klerk and ANC leader Nelson Mandela, or the public joining of hands among President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Prime Minister Manachem Begin of Israel, and President Jimmy Carter of the United States at Camp David.

These cases of successful conflict resolution after devastating civil wars constitute a significant and very positive qualification to the general notion that peaceful resolution of civil conflicts is extraordinarily rare. They prompted my colleague Peter Brecke and I to investigate the question, "*Why* do such events correlate with the long-run restoration of social order in most cases?" [11]

The contending explanatory models we developed, the hypotheses we generated, and the case studies we parsed for evidence will not be presented here. Rather, for purposes of this conference, I will "cut to the chase" and tell you our findings. We found that, although each case of successful national reconciliation was distinctive in its particular manifestation of these factors, they all included four essential and interrelated processes: (1) public truth telling; (2) a redefinition of the identities of the belligerents and the roles and relationships of important social groups and institutions; (3) limited justice (i.e., justice short of full retribution for all harms); and

---

[11] Restoration of order refers to the creation of "logical, symbolic, effective hierarchies . . . [that] enable society and culture to form organized units." Georges Balandier, "An Anthropology of Violence and War," *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1986, pp. 499-511. In terms of measurement, "order" equated with a reduction in political violence below the threshold of "conflict" defined as 32 politically motivated deaths or more per year. Lewis F. Richardson, Statistics of Deadly Quarrels, Pittsburgh: Boxwood Press, 1960. This definition of order is analogous to what Johan Galtung calls "negative peace," the mere cessation of physical violence, it is not the "positive peace" of mutually rewarding relations. Johan Galtung, "After Violence: 3Rs, Reconstruction, Reconciliation, and Resolution," http://www. transcend.org, December 2002.

(4) an explicit call to break with the past and dedicate to a new relationship and a new social and moral order, that is, the reconciliation event. The "fit" between the presence of these four factors and a successful reconciliation is seen in the chart below. The nature and function of each of these elements in successful national reconciliation is discussed in the next section.

COUNTRY	PUBLIC TRUTH-TELLING	PARTIAL JUSTICE	REDEFINITION OF SOCIAL IDENTITIES	CALL FOR A NEW RELATIONSHIP	OUTCOME
Colombia	No	No	No	Yes	Conflict
North Yemen	No	No	Partial	Yes	Conflict
Chad	No, partial	No	No	Yes	Conflict
Argentina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Peace
Uruguay	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Peace
Chile	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Peace
El Salvador	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Peace
Mozambique	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Peace
South Africa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Peace
Honduras	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Peace

The Essential Elements of Successful National Reconciliation

Although no two conflicts are identical, each of the conflicts that successfully reconciled went through a painful and protracted process that included four specific phases as illustrated in the simplified schematic below.

These four elements of successful national reconciliation serve particular, but interdependent, functions in the process of resolving conflict.

Truth Telling
First, a stage of truth telling, public acknowledgement of the harms inflicted by the conflict that serves as a means of recognizing the humanity and legitimacy of both parties, is required. Official acknowledgement of injuries appears to carry greater force than private or unsanctioned efforts at reaching the truth.

Truth telling, although potentially socially destabilizing, contributes to other factors associated with successful national reconciliation—redefinition of the identities of the belligerents, limited justice, and the call for a new relationship. In many cases, findings of truth commissions provided the evidentiary foundation and pool of witnesses for the pursuit of justice against those named in an official report. When the pursuit of justice is constrained, officially sanctioned truth can serve, to a degree, as a substitute for the realization of retributive justice.   The process is also linked to a different notion of justice: reparations for, and restoration of, the identity and good names of victims of violence. Furthermore, by recognizing the right of the other to the

Key:

———————	Truth telling
— — — — —	Partial justice
o o o o o o o	Redefinition of identities
x x x x x x x	Call for a new relationship

truth, truth telling begins a process of redefinition of the identity of the other from "enemy" to potential partner in a negotiated settlement and a new common future. Truth telling also strips away the impunity of some individuals or groups and begins a reorientation of their role in a reconciled society. Armed with the authority of official truth, truth commissions or other governmental bodies are often empowered to make detailed policy and institutional recommendations and push fundamental reforms and a redefinition of societal relations.

Truth telling does not complete the process of reconciliation. Instead it creates a public space for reconciliation by allowing formerly hidden or taboo information to become part of the basis for future reforms. Truth telling is usually one of the first and most indispensable elements of successful civil reconciliation.

Redefinition of Individual and Institutional Identities
Second, national reconciliation requires redefinition of the identities of the belligerents. Each party has to restore a sense of self and sense of the other that differs from those of the war years. In the end, each party must see themselves and the other in a more holistic and valued way. The method of changing identity varies. It often begins through recognition necessary to conduct negotiations. Truth telling, in turn, provides for a redefinition of identity. Truth telling remembers and restores the identity of the disappeared, helps survivors and kin to transcend the role of victim and assume a more complete identity as citizen, and punctures the impunity of many of the formerly powerful, thus beginning a process of redefining the roles of individuals.

Successful reconciliation also redefines the roles and relationships of important social groups and institutions. Existing institutions are rarely eliminated. Typically, certain prerogatives of the

7

military or other armed groups are constrained and the institutions of civil society strengthened through long-run legislative, constitutional, or institutional reforms. The cases vary in their forms of institutional redefinition to include: judicial reforms, strengthening or creating democratic institutions such as legislatures and political parties, separating the military from the political process, among others. In every case, however, countries that experienced a successful reconciliation established a set of new identities for key social actors.

Limited Justice
Third, national reconciliation typically includes limited justice, something less than full retribution for harms committed during the conflict. Although frustrating to some, incomplete justice (often limited by a form of amnesty to certain groups or individuals) reforms society and reaffirms justice as a value without repeating the cycle of violence and retribution of the conflict itself. Often, the inability to secure justice in full measure is a practical necessity because of the weakness of judicial institutions after a civil war and the residual power of particular groups implicated in the violence. Full judicial accountability is often inhibited by the possibility of a backlash from a still-powerful military or other group involved in civil violence that could endanger the larger process of restoration of peace. This fact is lamentable, even tragic, from certain legal or moral perspectives.

On the other hand, limited justice may have hidden virtues. Limiting retribution for wrongs may be valuable for the society as a whole when so many share guilt for the action or inactions during the period of conflict. To prosecute fully all the sins of omission and commission committed during a civil conflict could destroy the society justice seeks to restore. Furthermore, in the fog of war and the passage of time, there will be situations in which culpability cannot be fully resolved, and more injustice than good can result from attempts to punish the guilty. Finally, limited justice encourages individuals or groups who have suffered to consider extending the gift of mercy to former enemies as a powerful contribution to a new social order.

Many practitioners ask, "How much justice is enough?" That question cannot be answered in the abstract because the issue is not justice qua justice, but justice for restoration of social order. Considered in itself and as a moral question, no injustice is tolerable. But that is not the question my study asked or that practitioners need to answer. Rather, the question I investigated empirically is "How much justice is best for restoring lasting social order?" The answer appears to be enough to reestablish justice as a viable element of the new society but not absolute justice, because however desirable in theory, in practice justice either cannot be secured or seeking it would destroy the emerging social order.

The actual level of justice obtained between this minimal and maximal point varies considerable from case to case, as do mechanisms and obstacles for securing it. When justice is rendered, it is usually delivered through truth telling; material reparations for some victims or groups; and limited prosecutions of individuals, with punishment being loss of impunity, reputation, moral standing, office, or privileges, more often than incarceration.

The Reconciliation Event
Finally, at some point along the way, or at the end of the process, the parties (typically their official representatives) call for a break with the past and dedicate themselves to a new

relationship that transcends the antagonism of the war years. In this phase, symbolic words and gestures help mark the trajectory, but not the end point, of the new relationship. Legislative resolutions, peace accords, and memorials can underscore the event subsequently.

Conclusion

Given the prevalence, intractability, recurrence, and spillover effects of civil conflicts, these findings on reconciliation may be important for national and international peace. Since the period covered by my study, truth commissions as part of a national reconciliation process have been launched in a wide variety of countries, including: Peru, Panama, the former Yugoslavia, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Canada, Fiji, Liberia, Morocco, and the Philippines. Indeed, South Korea also has a truth commission! These many attempts to pursue truth and reconciliation as a path away from national conflict or unrest and toward a strengthened society suggest that nations recognize the potential power of reconciliation processes. In evaluating the value of truth and reconciliation as a mechanism for resolving civil conflict, perhaps imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

Note that the process of national reconciliation, although remarkable, is not equivalent to the creation an effective, prosperous, just, or even secure society (in terms of non-political violence such as crime). As the papers for this conference discuss, a fully functioning modern state requires creating a stable security sector; reforming judicial systems; and providing critical public goods such as energy, education, social security, environmental protection, and health. The process of national reconciliation, I would suggest, makes an essential contribution to a more peaceful and unified society and polity and makes the provision of essential services less problematic and more enduring.