

The Diplomacy of Korean Unification: Positive and Negative Reasons, Policies

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Preface

This year, 2015, marks the 25th Anniversary of the Reunification of Germany. The German unification still evokes admiration and envy among the Koreans. Before Germany was unified, the relationships between East and West Germany and those between North and South Korea had shared both similarities and differences. Both countries were divided by the occupation of separate Allied powers in the wake of World War II. Both countries turned into fields of East–West confrontation while being incorporated into the postwar alliance systems. In neither case, the surrounding powers seemed eager to have them unified. The neighbor countries to Germany feared that it might be reborn as a strong unified nation, whereas the countries around the Korean Peninsula were concerned about the possibly unstable aftermath of unification and the possibility for a unified Korea falling into some other nation’s sphere of influence.

At the same time, there have been several differences between the German and Korean divisions. Four such differences stand out. For one thing with the national division, while the Koreans were inflicted with what might be called “victim’s complex,” the Germans had what might be called a “guilt complex.” Koreans had the sense that they had done nothing wrong to deserve the tragedy of division but were simply the victim of power politics and backdoor understanding between the powers, especially the United States and the Soviet Union. In contrast, the Germans recognized and accepted the fact that their national division was the result of what pre-World War II Germany had done; the invasion of neighboring countries, persecution of some ethnic groups, particularly the Jews, and precipitation of World War II.

Secondly, during the period of national division, while the DDR, East Germany, was under effective control and protection by the Soviet Union and so posed no serious military threat on West Germany by itself, North Korea was a constant security threat to South Korea, what with an all-out military invasion of the South which resulted in the Korean War, smaller scale military provocations including commando attacks, and the development of nuclear weapons and missiles of various kinds.

Third, while West Germany was an important member and active participant of multilateral regional and security organizations such as the European Community and NATO, South Korea's main security link to the outside world was a bilateral alliance with the United States and it enjoyed no membership in regional organizations or communities. So when the unification came to Germany, the East Germans were prepared to join not only their Western brethren and sisters, but also the European Community and NATO, thereby diluting the sense that East Germany was being taken over by West Germany.

Finally, after 45 years of the German division and 70 years of Korean division in 1945, there is a big difference in the nature of the relationship between East Germany and North Korea on the one hand and the Soviet Union and China on the other, their respective benefactors and guardians. In 1990, the Soviet Union was a declining and disintegrating empire, in need of economic help from the outside world after overspending in arms build-up and competition with the West, and in the process of internal transition from autocracy and dictatorship to perestroika and glasnost. In 2015, China is a rising economic power still under an effective one party rule, challenging the domination of the United States and territorial status quo in East Asia, even as it has a strong interdependent relationship with the West. Nonetheless, East Germany was still under firm control of the Soviet Union and North Korea has been struggling for self-reliance and determination, even threatening Chinese security with nuclear weapons in fact there does not seem to be much love lost between China and North Korea these days.

Status of North-South Korean relations

Roughly speaking, since the end of the Korean War in 1953, inter-Korea relations have gone through seven different phases with various degrees of hostilities and engagements. The post-Armistice period of 1953-1960 can be characterized as one of internal recuperation from the war in both Korea and estrangement between the two Korea.

The second phase (1960-72) is one in which South Korea witnessed the emergence of a military government and North Korea became increasingly belligerent toward South Korea with occasional military (although small-scale) provocations both to South Korea and its ally the United States.

The third phase (1972-1984) could be characterized as one of co-existence in that a series of dialogue got started as the two governments tried to use inter-Korea dialogue for the consolidation of power in their respective home fronts.

Dialogue sputtered through the fourth phase, 1984-1992, despite the North Korean attempt at assassination of a South Korean president visiting Burma when the North Korean agents planted and exploded a bomb at the Aungmye Mausoleum in Rangoon. In late 1980s, faced with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the unification of Germany, North Korea felt obliged to reckon with South Korea which was broadening its diplomatic horizon starting with the hosting of the 1988 summer Olympics and thus engaged with South Korea in a serious bilateral dialogue. It resulted in such landmark agreement as Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges and

Cooperation (1991), and Joint Declaration on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (1992) Agreement.

But the apparent lunge toward reconciliation was superseded by another, fifth, phase of estrangement, 1993-1998, as North Korean nuclear weapons program became a focal issue of contention. I was serving as South Korea's Foreign Minister during this period.

The sixth phase, 1999-2008, that of "Sunshine Policy", was ushered in when Kim Dae-Jung, a long-time advocate of engaging the North became president in 1999. After his term of five-years was over, another "Sunshiner" president, Roh Mu-Hyun succeeded Kim for the next five-year term until 2008. But ironically during this period, North Korea resumed and accelerated its nuclear weapons development.

Thus, when the conservative government of Lee Myong-Bak took office in 2009, the Sunshine policy was replaced by a more balanced policy which was less unconditional, one-sided and indulgent toward North Korea. The seventh, and the current phase, 2009 until probably 2018 of North-South Korean relationship can be characterized by continuing advancement of North Korean nuclear weapons program, a fragile economic condition of the North, and the start of a third generational dynastic succession process.

Possibility for duplication?

Despite these differences between the divided Germany and Korea, however, South Koreans have been hopeful that they could duplicate the German path to unification. On the other hand, German unification provided North Korea with both incentives and perhaps the means to prevent a similar process from taking place on the Korean Peninsula.

In fact, North Korea had plenty to worry at the time of Germany unification: The Soviet empire was disintegrating; Both China and the Soviet Union officially recognized the Republic of Korea and established diplomatic relations with it, while the United States and Japan did not reciprocate for North Korea; the United States and the Soviet Union agreed on a *détente*; China and the United States agreed on *rapprochement*; and North Korea opposed the application of the German formula to Korea.

In that sense, German unification brought about retrogression rather than progress in the short term in the North-South Korean relationship by stiffening the North Korean attitude. This is a very tragic irony for a divided country. While both North and South Korea clamor for unification, neither side would think of turning over power to or sharing it with the other in the name of unification. Under such circumstances, a call for unification by either side would appear to the other as a desire to absorb or subjugate, if not conquer the other. Thus, North Korea, as a means to prevent regime change, chose to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) including nuclear weapons and missiles and to further insulate itself from outside influence.

Since 2006, that is, during the past last ten years, North Korea conducted three nuclear weapons tests and pursued what it named the byongjin policy, described as a parallel policy to become a nuclear weapons state while simultaneously reviving its economy.

In the meantime, the Park Geun-hye government that succeeded the Lee Myung-bak government pretty much continued the preceding government's "measured engagement policy" but with greater emphasis on cooperation with North Korea and search for "unification." The problem has been that the Park government had to overcome two hurdles to get positive results from its policy for promoting unification. One is the need to overcome North Korea's suspicion that Park's unification overtures are nothing less than a call for "unification by absorption," that is, by the German formula. The other is that it had to find a formula by which North Korea would suspend and then abandon its nuclear weapons program and refrain from conventional provocations.

Persuading major powers

Another important task for the Korean government is to persuade the four major powers, i.e., China, the United States, Russia and Japan, that have strong interest in how the situation on the Korean Peninsula develops, that Korean unification, when and if it comes, will actually be in accord with their respective interests rather than being against them.

So, how will Korean unification affect their interests? One can think of both positive and negative interests of the major powers on Korean unification.

Let me first talk about the interest of the United States. There are some positive reasons why the United States will think Korean unification to be in its own interest as well.

Positive Reasons:

1. War in or over Korea becomes less likely
2. North Korean threat of WMDs, missiles, etc. and provocations will be removed.
3. There will be emergence of unified Korea as a powerful ally
4. Korea's increased dependence on the United States in the short term and the need for economic and security support from the U.S. will increase.
5. There will be expansion of democracy, market economy, which will be an interest of the United States.

But there are also possible negative reasons why the U.S. could think Korean unification to be against its interest:

1. Weakening of the rationale and necessity for the U.S.–Korea alliance
2. Korea’s possible move closer into Chinese sphere of influence
3. Decrease in U.S. influence over Korea
4. Further deterioration of relations between Korea and Japan

Next, let’s have a look at opposing reasons Japan may have for and against Korean unification.

Positive reasons:

1. North Korean threat of nuclear weapons, missiles, etc. will be removed
2. Expansion of “free world,” that is, democracy and market economy, will be realized.
3. Korean will be preoccupation in internal matters during unification process, which may divert Korean attention from grievances toward Japan.
4. Increased need for Japanese support and help

Negative reasons:

1. Emergence of a powerful neighbor, economically and perhaps even militarily
2. Removal of Japan’s rationale for militarization (against North Korean threat in particular but overall)
3. Loss of opportunity for “divide and rule” between North and South Korea
4. Possibility for a unified Korea of moving closer to China

Russia may as well have contending reasons for welcoming or being reluctant for Korean unification.

Positive Reasons:

1. Increase in economic opportunities--gas, steels, railroads, transportation, trade, investment, etc.
2. Weakening of the U.S. alliance system
3. Assumption of a key role in the unification process as a member of the UN Security Council and the member of the regional collective security system.

Negative Reasons:

1. Loss of opportunity to what I would call “fish in troubled waters” between North and South Korea.
2. Possibility for increased Chinese influence over Korea as they will continue to be some kind of rivalry between Russia and China despite the current honeymoon phase

China’s interests and reasons for its stance

Overall, a key factor in Korean unification would be what China thinks would portend for its own interest. What kind of calculus is China making in actuality about unification of the Korean Peninsula, and what role is it expected to play? Although we often speak of “China’s thinking,” no unified consensus seems to exist among the experts in China’s North Korea policy directly concerning unification. Their views seem to diverge into several ramifications:

First is that China has to render unconditional assistance to its blood ally of North Korea and safeguard its security. Second is to maintain the present policy of shielding North Korea and keeping it afloat on the one hand and of urging cooperative relations with other countries including Japan, South Korea, and the United States. The PRC wants to make the Pyongyang regime undertake reforms and refrain from provocations with a view to preventing military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula. The third view is to exercise stronger pressure on North Korea, partake in international sanctions, and abandon the defense of Pyongyang if necessary.

Among these three alternatives, the PRC government’s current North Korea policy may be seen as the second, i.e. to encourage reforms, opening, and restraint from provocations while supporting the preservation of the DPRK and its regime survival.

China’s North Korea policy, however, seems to have begun moving, though little by little, toward the third alternative, a policy of mounting pressure on North Korea. This is deemed to have a close relationship with China’s calculation of interests in Korean unification and perception of North Korea’s nuclear threat.

China thinks it would get the following short-term benefits should the Korean Peninsula be unified under the South Korean auspices:

First, if the peninsula is unified, China will be relieved from the burden of economic aid and military assistance for North Korea that has so far been greatly onerous.

Second, being relieved from hostilities and confrontations on the peninsula between North and South Korea, the PRC will become free from danger of military clashes and war it considers to be against its own interest. Third, when unification under South Korea’s initiative is premised, China will not only further expand and vitalize its economic relations that are already vibrant with the South but seize opportunities to secure its economic interests in the North Korean region in a stable manner.

In a longer term, Beijing may hope for the following benefits from Korean unification:

First, a major source of trouble and insecurity will have been removed.

Second, a unified Korea will not merely offer a greater economic opportunity for China but contribute to regional integration as well.

Third, a unified Korea will weaken the rationale and necessity for U.S. military presence in the region. At the same time, the rationale for a ROK–U.S.–Japan trilateral alliance to contain and encircle China will be weakened.

Despite such positive short- and long-term implications, China also has apprehensions over negative consequences and impacts from unification of the Korean Peninsula.

In a short term, China is concerned as follows:

First, should the peninsula destabilize in the vortex of unification, innumerable refugees will flow from North Korea into China. While crossing the Yalu River and entering the border zones of China's two Northeastern—Jilin and Heilungkiang—provinces. North Korean refugees will flow along the sea lanes to land on the Liaoning, Tianjin, Shandong coasts. The massive influx of refugees will not only impose a tremendous financial burden on China but constitute threats to regional security. The refugee problem will also be a thorny issue in relations with a unified Korea.

Second, unification of the Korean Peninsula will cause a short-term negative impact on economic relations between China's three Northeastern Provinces which account for 70 percent of China–North Korea trade.

In medium and long terms, China has the following concerns over the consequences of unification:

First, China will lose the presence of North Korea which can serve as a “buffer” to the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia.

Second, China's economic foothold in North Korea may shrink and weaken in the short term as South Korea will replace it. Although China–North Korea trade, approximately \$7 billion in 2013, does not constitute a big share of China's annual external trade since it corresponds to an extremely miniscule portion, that is, 1/600 out of its total trade volume (\$4.2 trillion). Korean unification would deal a sizeable blow at Liaoning and Jilin Provinces, in which Dandong and Yanji would suffer more seriously.

Third, there are uncertainties contained in such issues as alliance relationship--the ROK–U.S. alliance--and foreign troops' presence in a unified Korea.

I have discussed China's positive as well as negative incentives regarding the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Let me now further elaborate on the issues I mentioned earlier regarding Chinese views on the ROK–U.S. alliance and the U.S. forces stationed in Korea.

Originally, until the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, China had maintained a positive, or at least tolerant, position to consider as “necessary evil” not only the ROK–U.S. alliance but the U.S.–Japan alliance. The reason was that the U.S.–Japan alliance not merely had an effect of restraining Japan’s rearmament and nuclear armament, in particular but played a role as well in checking the military power of the Soviet Union, which China considers a regional rival. China also recognized the value of the ROK–U.S. alliance playing the role of deterring North Korea’s provocations on the Korean Peninsula.

As the Cold War ended and the Soviet threat largely died down, Beijing began to disparage the U.S. alliance system in Northeast Asia as a Cold War relic while judging that the ROK–U.S. and U.S.–Japan alliances targeted China.

China also stays vigilant against the possibility for such current bilateral arrangements as ROK–U.S. and U.S.–Japan alliances with the United States as a possible help to develop into a NATO-type multilateral alliance.

Showing sensitive responses as well to the U.S. provision of so-called extended deterrence, that is, “nuclear umbrella” to Japan or South Korea. China retains an opposing position to it. China obviously thinks that the United States, by providing its nuclear deterrent to Japan and Korea, offsets or weakens China’s own nuclear deterrent capability.

From an objective perspective, however, neither the U.S. extended deterrence nor the ROK–U.S. alliance is always disadvantageous to China. I think this is true both at present and even after Korean unification. The nuclear deterrence and the ROK–U.S. alliance, along with the U.S.–Japan alliance, will have the effect of continuing to bind Japan as a nonnuclear state. This will tend to obviate the need for Korea’s arms expansion by evoking a reunified Korea’s confidence in its security, and even arms reduction can further be expected as well. Furthermore, they will also enable the United States to play a peacemaker’s part between its allies, Japan and Korea, even after the Korean unification let alone now. At the same time, Korea will be able to assume a useful role as a constructive mediator for cooperation between the United States and China by maintaining close relationships with both great powers.

As far as the U.S. forces in Korea are concerned, China may expect that the justification or necessity could either diminish or be reduced for their continued presence in the Korean Peninsula after unification. At a minimum, China may expect that the U.S. forces would not advance north of the present military demarcation line, even if the ROK–U.S. alliance is maintained and the U.S. troops continue to be stationed after unification. This may not be unacceptable to the ROK or the United State, although it is foreseen that a certain level of direct U.S. military role is considered as indispensable in the process of dismantling North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear arsenal and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

In consideration of long- and short-term interests as well as positive and negative reasons for China to be in favor of or against Korean unification, it may be worthwhile to keep in mind what China would consider as its own “Red Lines.”. China would want the following conditions.

First, South Korea and the United States will agree that the U.S. troops would not advance north of the Demilitarized Zone.

Second, the United States will not install a new military bases north of the DMZ.

Third, as the ROK Army’s activities in North Korea do not belong to the category of a war, they are beyond the scope of U.S. wartime operational control even before the OPCON is transferred back to Korea. China may also wish the ROK forces avoid areas bordering China and retreat after disarming the North Korean army. Fourth, China would want South Korea and the United States share with China critical and “exclusive” information on North Korea such as on weapons capabilities, and personal data. Fifth, when securing North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biochemical arms and their delivery systems), the ROK–U.S. allies would allow international organizations such as the United Nations and IAEA to take charge of the procedures.

Sixth, China would insist on a unified Korea honoring treaties and agreements made with it (particularly regarding territorial borders) by North Korea or South Korea before the unification.

Finally, a unified Korea must pledge to be a non nuclear weapon state.

Conclusion

All the above interests of the major powers in Korean Unification having been mentioned, it can be said that just as in the case of the German Unification, the possibilities for unification would increase as the United States could actively support Korean Unification, Japan’s unfavorable reactions could be assuaged and China could accept Korean Unification as palatable.

It would prove nearly impossible to convince China or Japan without active cooperation and support and commitment from the United States in promoting unification it is essential for South Korea to consult and coordinate quietly but proactively with his four major neighboring powers.

German unification was not initially welcomed by some of its neighbors including France and Great Britain as they regarded it to be against their interest but they were ultimately persuaded mainly by the United States to change their stance. It turned out that German unification ultimately was in the interest not only of the larger European Community and the individual countries in it but also of East European countries including the Soviet Union later Russia. The unified Germany is the main source of energy and leadership and European integration providing economic resources and serving as a bridge between integrated Europe and the rest of it including Russia.

In the case of Korea, regardless of what each country considers Korean unification to be for or against its own interest there several selling points for a unified Korea. For one, it will be a sure way to solve the problem of nuclear weapons proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

Secondly, a unified Korea will surely contribute to peace and stability of the region by removing a critical source of tension and conflict.

Third, a unified Korea would become an economic powerhouse that would contribute to expanding economic scale vitality and activities in the region. It can also accelerate regional integration peace and prosperity by becoming a major basis and source of political and economic cooperation.

This is why all the interested parties not only Koreans should support and be in favor of the Korean unification.

Thank you very much.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.