

"The Korean Peninsula has been Asia's Berlin Wall, where communism and democracy have directly confronted one another."

# The Koreas, Unification, and the Great Powers

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Almost every Korean knows how to sing "our heartfelt wish is unification," but those who personally experienced and vividly remember a single Korea are fast disappearing. Over 86 percent of Koreans today were born after the peninsula was divided. Yet the possibility of unification continues to lurk.

Koreans themselves remain tantalized by the possibility. The major powers in the region—China, Japan, Russia, and the United States—have traditionally been less enthusiastic. But this attitude is beginning to change, and with the change in attitude Asia's oldest political wound could yet be sutured. It may not happen soon. But the process of reunification—and certainly reunification itself, if it does occur—could transform the geopolitical dynamics of Asia.

## LINES OF DEMARCATION

A demarcation line, differing ideologies, and the sadness of separated families were the main issues that divided the two Koreas in the early days after the Korean War. However, with time, North and South Korea became entirely different countries, politically, socially, and economically.

Today, the Republic of Korea, or South Korea, is a multiparty liberal democracy with a market economy. By contrast, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, has been under the grip of two communist leaders. Kim Il-sung ruled the North from the country's inception in 1948 until his death in 1994. His son Kim Jong-il, has ruled since.

South Koreans enjoy full religious freedoms. The North Korean regime is hostile toward religion. (Idolization of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il has replaced religious faith in the lives of most North Koreans.) The South Korean constitution guarantees freedom

of the press: currently 138 daily newspapers circulate nationwide. North Korea has about 30 daily and weekly newspapers, and all are published by the Workers Party of Korea or other state agencies. South Korea's broadband Internet penetration rate has been the world's highest for the past four years. Across the border, North Koreans cannot access the Internet without government permission.

The economic divide between the Koreas is even more dramatic. South Korea today is the 11th-largest trading country in the world. Its nominal gross national income (similar to GNP) is 33 times that of North Korea, one of the most underdeveloped nations in the world. Indeed, the people of North Korea are struggling with famine, with many fleeing to China in search of food.

## THE NEW WAVE

Yet, despite the stark differences and continued military confrontation, some positive changes have occurred in inter-Korean relations. First on the list are political and economic developments. A total of 155 rounds of talks have been held between the two Koreas since an inter-Korean summit meeting was inaugurated in June 2000. About 128,000 Koreans have crossed the north-south border during the past three years.

As part of a reunification effort, the two Koreas have launched cooperative projects, beginning with a resort hotel on North Korea's east coast, a massive industrial complex near Gaeseong (just north of the demarcation line), and the reconnection of road and rail links that had been severed at the border for over half a century. The volume of inter-Korean trade has grown to around \$1 billion annually.

The second major change has been in humanitarian aid to North Korea. In 1995, the North Korean regime publicly admitted that it was unable to feed its population adequately and appealed to the international community for food assistance. International aid started to flow into the North at that time. Over the following decade, the South Korean

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government has provided some \$736 million in aid (the sum exceeds \$1.16 billion when help from South Korea's private sector is factored in).

Finally, there have been changes in perception. A recent survey conducted by the South Korean Ministry of Unification revealed that, while 44 percent of South Koreans considered North Korea to be a threat a decade ago, 65 percent now regard the North as a country to be helped and with which the South should cooperate.

## THE NUCLEAR OBSTACLE

Can the two Koreas overcome their differences and become unified based on these internal changes? An answer can be found by looking at how the Koreas have learned the lessons of Vietnam, Yemen, and Germany, all of which have achieved national unification since 1975.

Of the three reunification models—warfare (as in Vietnam), absorption (Germany), and consensus (Yemen)—the last is the most desirable. The biggest obstacle to the consensual model is, however, the North Korean nuclear program. If the North Korean nuclear crisis persists, neither inter-Korean trust nor international trust in the two Koreas is possible.

The question of trust is especially salient when it comes to the United States and North Korea and the nuclear question. But here it is more a question of distrust. If the issue of North Korea's nuclear ambitions is resolved at six-party talks that include China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan, as well as North Korea and the United States, then other factors regarding Korean reunification could be managed through the talks as well.

In that event, a separate negotiation to transform the armistice treaty on the Korean Peninsula to a peace treaty could be opened (the representatives of the United States, China, and North Korea signed an armistice treaty on July 27, 1953, yet the two Koreas have remained technically at war for the past 53 years). If the six-party talks fail to solve the nuclear problem, however, efforts to unify the two Koreas would suffer a serious setback. In this regard, the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue is a key internal factor for reunification. It rests in the hands of Kim Jong-il.

## THE OUTSIDE POWERS

The actions of the countries directly or indirectly responsible for the division of the Korean Peninsula are also important if reunification is to occur. Internal factors for reunification have made slow and uneven but clear progress through trial and error since the end of the Korean War. The four outside

powers that hold the most leverage over Korean reunification have provided support, but with the intention of maintaining the status quo. Recently, however, they have been moving gradually toward supporting a peaceful reconciliation on the peninsula.

### *The United States*

US influence has been the key to deterring war in Northeast Asia over the past six decades. American views on Korean unification during that time have had two components.

First, the United States does not want to see the Korean Peninsula fall under the influence of China, Japan, or Russia either during or after reunification. The United States did not view Korea as a security concern until the Korean War, which broke out in June 1950. Besides forging an alliance with South Korea, the United States has also mediated reconciliation between South Korea and Japan for regional security. The US alliances with South Korea and Japan have deterred Japan from advancing onto the Asian mainland and prevented the Communists in North Korea and China (and during the cold war, the Soviet Union) from expanding their influence to Japan.

Since the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, the United States has practiced a dual strategy to maintain a balance of power in Northeast Asia. It hopes to secure influence in the region by strengthening its ties with Japan, and it seeks security cooperation with China and Russia. At their summit in 2000, the two Korean leaders, Kim Jong-il and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, agreed that the US military presence would be necessary in the turbulent period after reunification “just in case” the Chinese, Japanese, or another power attempted to extend their influence on the peninsula.

On November 17, 2005, the presidents of South Korea and the United States, Roh Moo-hyun and George W. Bush, agreed that a reduction of the military threat on the Korean Peninsula and transition from the current armistice mechanism to a peace treaty would contribute to inter-Korean reconciliation and peaceful reunification. This was a positive event, signaling the possibility that the US-South Korea alliance can aim not only to maintain peace on the peninsula, but also to support the peaceful reunification of the Koreans.

The second component of US policy toward the Koreas is a desire to see the spread of democracy with unification. South Korea has served the role of an “outpost of democracy” in Northeast Asia. Since 1945, 11 different US presidents have applied differing strategies for dealing with the Korean Penin-

sula, but the overriding principle of spreading democracy has never changed.

South Korea's adoption of democracy and a market economy has been especially successful. In 2004, trade between South Korea and the United States exceeded \$70 billion, making South Korea America's seventh-largest trading partner—ahead of France and Italy—and seventh-largest export market. In 2005, the United States was Korea's second-largest export market, third-largest source of imports, and largest source of foreign investment.

Ironically, South Koreans' strong belief in democracy and regard for America helped give birth to today's anti-Americanism. North Korea has always viewed the United States as the "archenemy," whereas America was long the symbol of liberation, freedom, and equality in the South. In a 1965 US-sponsored survey, 68 percent of South Korean respondents cited the United States as their favorite foreign country; only 1 percent said that they disliked the nation.

However, a military coup in 1979 by South Korean General Chun Doo-hwan and his bloody suppression of an uprising in Kwangju a year later raised accusations of US complicity or negligence. South Korean college students began to perceive the superpower as an imperialist oppressing the third world. (A 1989 report by the US embassy explained that Washington was more concerned about a North Korean invasion during the turmoil in 1980 and that it did not have command over the Korean troops who were sent into Kwangju.)

Washington urged the Chun government to provide a public explanation and allow dialogue—to put in place, in other words, behaviors one would expect in a democracy. Yet anti-American sentiment in South Korea has never really been dampened since. It has flared up during trade disputes, with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (whose membership is more than 700,000) making an anti-American campaign part of its basic agenda. And the Democratic Labor Party has expressed opposition to US power in its foundation statement. The United States is facing an anti-American movement in South Korea that is better organized and more influential than ever. Although the Bush administration has officially announced that it endorses both a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, some fear the United States could attack North Korea as it did Iraq, driving the Koreas into another devastating war.

### *China*

China borders North Korea. It wants neither a war on the peninsula nor the collapse of the North.

Beijing's military alliance with North Korea would automatically involve the People's Republic in a war, and economic development, the foremost emphasis of the Chinese government today, would be jeopardized. In the event of a crisis, the problem of North Korean refugees would impose a huge economic burden on China while triggering social unrest and international criticism of Chinese human rights violations. Should North Korea suddenly collapse, the situation would not be much different from a war, and China would be left in an even trickier international position.

China is providing aid to North Korea to prevent an abrupt regime breakdown and is playing a significant role in the six-party talks to protect its interests. China's influence is reaching South Korea, too. South Korean visitors to China totaled 3.5 million last year, outpacing Japan for the first time. South Koreans form the largest foreign student group in China: 43,000 of the 110,000 international students in China are from South Korea. In 2003, China became the largest export market for South Korea, and in 2004, China replaced the United States as South Korea's top trading partner.

China is attempting in the six-party talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and is working to induce North Korea to reform and open itself up. China also supports the denuclearization and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Beijing changed its stance after recognizing the potential threat to its interests if it stands idly by while the two Koreas discuss reunification in talks with the other three powers. Reunification would weaken Chinese influence on the peninsula, however, especially if a unified Korea emerges as a formidable economic power like Japan.

### *Japan*

Japan is keenly aware of the Korean question. Over the years, a solid US-Japanese alliance provided the security needed for the Japanese economy to develop. The Japanese government's policy toward Korea does not seek Korean unification as a long-term goal. Rather, the focus is on issues such as the North Korean nuclear threat and Japanese citizens who were kidnapped by North Korea. The Japanese do not want to see any sudden change on the peninsula.

At a March 3, 2006, meeting of the Japanese House of Councilors, a lawmaker asked Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi how Japan would react to a closer inter-Korean relationship. He answered with reservations, saying he did not think that early unification of the two Koreas would be desirable. Yet South Korean concerns over Japan's distorted

history textbooks and military buildup are fostering sentiment in favor of early reunification among the Korean people.

Japan is currently the wealthiest nation in Asia. But its influence in Asia is impaired because it has not yet put to rest the legacy of aggression toward its Asian neighbors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The largest stumbling block to better Korean-Japanese relations stems from the brutal treatment of Koreans under Japanese colonial rule. Despite overwhelming evidence, Tokyo has never apologized for its role in abducting many thousands of Koreans to serve as “comfort women” (sex slaves) for the Japanese military during World War II. And history textbooks used in Japanese schools whitewash the actions of the Japanese military in Asia. Despite vehement protests from China, South Korea, and other Asian nations, the Japanese prime minister still pays homage at a shrine to the Japanese who have died in war. Another point of contention is the Dokdo islets in the sea between Korea and Japan. Korea’s claims to the islets date back centuries, yet the government of a Japanese prefecture insists that they are Japanese territory.

Such behavior can galvanize Korean nationalism. Koreans both north and south remember their common resistance to the Japanese colonial government. Differing ideologies or political systems can be transcended when all Koreans rally behind their sense of being a single people. Then the perception of North Korea as the common enemy of both South Korea and Japan breaks down. South Koreans would join with North Koreans in opposing Japan, and a chain reaction of anti-Japanese sentiment could spread to other Asian countries that suffered under Japanese colonialism.

Japan has not maintained diplomatic relations with North Korea, and the Japanese showed little concern for North Korea until it test-launched a missile over Japanese territory in 1998. That incident strongly impressed the Japanese, who reasoned that another war on the Korean Peninsula could subject them to a missile attack or even a nuclear strike—a second Hiroshima. This concern has prompted Japan to revise its constitution to strengthen national defense capabilities.

Many Asian nations view Japan’s economic, diplomatic, and cultural power as well as its peaceful intentions with suspicion, like a dormant volcano that could explode with military adventurism at any time. But anti-Japanese feelings boost reunification sentiment in the Koreas.

## Russia

Last November, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a letter to the South Korean people, stating that Russia supports inter-Korean dialogue. He expressed the hope that such dialogue would speed reunification. Putin sees a balanced policy toward both Koreas as the way for Russia to regain its influence in Northeast Asia.

When Boris Yeltsin was president, Russian military, economic, and diplomatic power was weakening. After South Korea and Russia established diplomatic ties in 1990, relations between Russia and North Korea were strained.

But Russian policy toward the Korean Peninsula changed dramatically after Putin was elected president in 2000. In February of that year, the Russia-North Korea Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed, and that July, Putin visited Pyongyang to discuss economic and security issues.

In February 2001, Putin visited Seoul and expressed his support for President Kim Dae-jung’s engagement policy with North Korea and the inter-Korean summit. Russia, like China, shares a border with North Korea and does not want a sudden North Korean collapse or another Korean war. Russia

hopes that North Korea will steadily change through reform and therefore is positive about North Korea’s establishing diplomatic relations with both the United States and Japan.

Russia wants to play a role in achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula, given its geopolitical and security implications. For the long term, it continues to espouse the formation of a cooperative, multiparty security body for discussing stability and peace in Northeast Asia.

Moscow currently maintains two different tripartite alliances in Asia. One is among Russia, China, and India. The other is economic cooperation among the two Koreas and Russia. The framework for cooperating with China and India, both of which have rising statures in Asia, allows the Russians to maintain influence with each country while pursuing a new balance of power to keep the United States and Japan in check.

The balanced policy toward the two Koreas also opens the door to large-scale projects of national importance. Russian officials visit both countries to promote developing gas fields in Siberia, building gas pipelines, and connecting the Trans-Siberian Railway with the rail systems that serve the Korean Peninsula. Russia, in short, is using the Korean Peninsula reuni-

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the question is how.*

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fication process as an opportunity to gain both security and economic benefits.

### IDEALISTS AND REALISTS

All Koreans dream of reunification: the question is how. North Korea is perhaps the world's most closed and repressive society, making it impossible to know what the people who live there truly expect concerning reunification of the peninsula. In the South, the viewpoints of idealists and realists are far apart.

The idealists put the Korean people ahead of economic or political systems. They contend that Koreans have been a united people for many, many centuries, and their division is but a short time in comparison. Thus, overcoming the division is seen as a return to normalcy. They say it is not a matter up for discussion. Korean division was imposed by international dynamics. Reunification is the process of regaining the Korean people's homogeneity and autonomy, marking the end of the cold war in Northeast Asia.

From an economic perspective, the idealists say that the funds now spent on defending the two Koreas from one another could be used for economic development and enhancing social welfare. By 1996, South Korea was already a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; the idealists suggest that combining South Korean economic strength with North Korea's largely untapped potential would maximize the development possibilities for the Korean Peninsula. A reunified peninsula, they say, would become a dynamic power that could lead an era of peace in Northeast Asia. Some even contend that Korea can achieve the same fast growth that China has experienced since its opening and reform.

The realists, meanwhile, put equal weight on both the justification for and the practical details accompanying reunification. They argue that South Korea was able to achieve remarkable growth from its liberal democracy and market economy and that a retreat from those systems is undesirable. They raise troubling questions: Can Kim Il-sung and his son be forgiven for starting the fratricidal Korean War? Is reunification possible if North Korea refuses to give up communism in the process? Who will bear the burden of the enormous costs for reunification?

A recent Rand study estimates the cost of Korean reunification as somewhere between \$50 billion and \$670 billion. This would suggest reunification is not the foundation for economic development but a huge quagmire that would bog down the Korean economy. Internationally, the realists say, Korean reunification

might not usher in a new era of peace but rather invite a repeat of the late nineteenth-century struggle among the major powers over hegemony on the peninsula. The realists also stress that reunification does not guarantee a return to a homogenous nation of people who get along. Instead, more tragedy and division could ensue.

There is also the question of nuclear weapons. South Korea and Japan are the only two major nations without nuclear weapons in Asia. If the two Koreas are unified with North Korea still keeping its nuclear arsenal, it could lead to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and technology to the entire peninsula. This, in turn, could escalate nuclear tension in Northeast Asia by providing a rationale for Japan to acquire nuclear arms.

Whether a reunified Korea will be a new growth engine for Asia or a headache for Northeast Asian security depends on a variety of factors. They include how and when the two Koreas are reunified, which political system they choose, and with whom among the four powers they would cooperate in the process. Korean reunification could return the security landscape of Northeast Asia to what it was 50, 100, or 200 years ago. For this reason, it is a central concern for the two Koreas and the region.

The Korean Peninsula has been Asia's Berlin Wall, where communism and democracy have directly confronted one another. At the moment, early unification of the peninsula is unlikely. Abrupt unification by an unexpected event is always possible, but the progress in inter-Korean reunification talks to date has been disappointing. The four powers with interests in the peninsula do not have a concrete roadmap for Korean reunification while they carefully indicate their hopes for a peaceful solution.

Every opinion on reunification elicits numerous counterarguments. However, the overall differences in views on reunification suggest new problems of discord not only between North and South but also among the people in the South. The realists apply stricter criteria for reunification than the idealists do, and the results could vary widely depending on how well North Korea persuades the realists in the South.

If North Korea does not show the changes that the realists are looking for, they will want to abandon the reunification dream for the time being. Instead, they are likely to choose the second-best option, which is to maintain the status quo rather than accept the huge risks that would accompany reunification. In this sense, the Koreas are on the road to reunification but the destination remains distant. ■