

Korean Reunification: An American View

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Reunification is highly desirable, but it is not the most urgent or most important challenge we face in Northeast Asia. Rather, it is part of the much larger challenge of building new institutions to preserve peace and prosperity in the region. Failure to achieve reunification is an impediment to building new institutions and arrangements better suited to twenty-first century realities and requirements. The division of the Korean Peninsula and the Korean nation is a national and human tragedy, but it is the actions of the North, not the failure to achieve unification, that imperil the region and pose a major obstacle to building a new regional architecture that includes China as well as the United States.

Given the difficulty of moving toward better regional arrangements when the North continues to act as it does, transformation of the regime may be a prerequisite for reunification and for building a better future.

THE PROSPECTS FOR UNIFICATION

Though I wish it were otherwise, I judge that prospects for reunification of the peninsula in the foreseeable future are not good. The systems and societies in the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the DPRK are diverging, not converging. Developments in the ROK are moving in directions that expand individual freedoms, official accountability, and participation in the global system. The North remains a repressive and unaccountable dictatorship unable to meet even basic needs of its people. Moreover, there is no evidence that Pyongyang is willing to work with Seoul to achieve shared goals. Official rhetoric—and I believe public opinion—on both sides continues to call for

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North Korea’s potential to destabilize the region and inflict enormous damage on the Republic of Korea and on other countries and American citizens in the region makes it imperative to maintain and enhance our military capabilities, alliances, and other forms of cooperation needed to deter, defeat, or in other ways deal with threats from the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK). Some misconstrue the U.S. response to the North as an attempt to contain China and/or an impediment to reunification. I believe those who do so are mistaken. But perceptions matter a great deal in international politics. Moreover, utilizing existing modes of cooperation to address immediate dangers impedes efforts to develop a shared vision of a more integrated regional system, and to build new institutions better suited to future needs.

reunification, and there is no doubt that reunification, if it occurs peacefully and under conditions that would allow it to be successful, would pave the way for greater prosperity and greater Korean influence in the region and the international system. But the transition to a better future and greater benefits over the long term appears to be precluded by calculations of short-term costs and consequences.

Prospects for a negotiated path to reunification may be worse today than in the past because the political, economic, and social systems of North and South have become so different that it is difficult to imagine any “compromise” or “hybrid” arrangement that would preserve key elements of both systems. The systems are now fundamentally different, not variants of a shared model. This means, I believe, that a reunified Korea would have to embody one system

or the other—that of the South or that of the North—not some combination of the two. From an American perspective, the ROK system is clearly better—for Koreans and for the world—but it is doubtful that the ruling elite in the North shares this view.

Pyongyang probably has not abandoned the goal of reunification through incorporation of the South into the DPRK, but the elite must realize that this is highly unlikely to happen as the result of ROK citizens deciding that they would rather be governed by the Kim family dictatorship than by officials they have elected and choosing to exchange prosperity and freedom for privation and constraints of life in the North.

What about prospects for peaceful reunification through incorporation of the North into the ROK? That would certainly be preferable from an American perspective, but that also seems highly unlikely because it would require, in effect, regime suicide and admission that most of what the DPRK had believed and done during the past seven decades had been wrong. It is difficult to imagine how that would happen without regime collapse. However, although the DPRK is badly flawed and could implode or collapse at any time, I think it unlikely to do so and would not recommend basing ROK or U.S. policy on the assumption that the North will or can be made to collapse. In other words, reunification is unlikely to be achieved as a result of inherent weaknesses or external pressure. We can make the DPRK suffer and we can make it more dangerous, but we cannot make it go away without the prospect of unthinkable violence.

Reunification through conquest is even less appealing. The North must understand that the balance of forces makes it impossible for it to win a conventional war with the South, and that defeat would end the regime. To avoid defeat, the North would threaten, and probably use, nuclear weapons. The resultant destruction would be a disaster for Koreans and almost certainly result in the demise of the DPRK. This is not a reason for complacency. Preparedness and vigilance are the best ways to avoid war. But precisely because war would be disastrous for all Koreans, reunification through conquest of one side by the other is not a rational alternative.

The low probability of peaceful reunification and unacceptable costs of reunification through military means reinforce my judgment that prospects for reunification in the near term are poor. But the

deplorable state of the Koreans who live in the North and the imperative to manage and contain threats from the DPRK cannot be ignored. There is a perceived need to “do something” to make the situation better. This is natural, even inevitable, but it creates an unavoidable dilemma with respect to reunification. If it is correct, as I have argued, that peaceful reunification cannot be achieved unless the North decides to “throw in the towel” and accept incorporation into the ROK, then actions to alleviate tensions, reduce the danger of conflict, and improve the lot of ordinary people in the North have the unintended but likely consequence of prolonging the existence of the DPRK and making reunification less likely. This is not a happy judgment.

AMERICAN EXPECTATIONS AND CONCERNS

The United States desires Korean reunification. I do not speak for my government, but I think it important to make this point very strongly because I so often encounter baseless assertions that the United States seeks to perpetuate the division of Korea in order to “contain China,” “maintain dominance over the ROK,” “maintain hegemony in Asia,” or some other imputed objective. Such assertions are wrong. Indeed, as I noted above, the continued division of the peninsula impedes attainment of higher-priority U.S. objectives in the region. Americans want reunification, but we cannot make it happen and we cannot want it more than Koreans do.

Given my pessimism about early reunification, we will likely have to live with a divided Korea for the foreseeable future. This is a problem that must be managed because it cannot be solved now and cannot be solved by the United States alone. For Americans, managing the problems of a divided Korea involves managing three types of challenges:

1. Those related to the defense of the ROK and development of coordinated positions on issues affecting the peninsula;
2. Those related to DPRK behavior; and
3. Those associated with the North’s nuclear capabilities and intentions.

The first category subsumes all the “normal” challenges of managing relations between close friends with extensive economic, political, and people-to-people ties as well as those subsumed under the rubric of alliance maintenance. Our relationship requires continuous attention because it is so multifaceted, not because it has insuperable problems.

Managing challenges associated with DPRK behavior requires skill, constant attention, and political sensitivity because what each of us does can have significant consequences for the interests of the other. Illustrative examples include finding the best way to deter DPRK provocations without increasing the risk of miscalculation, unintended consequences, and political backlash; and devising ways to transform the regime through engagement without rewarding misbehavior. This category includes cooperation to improve prospects for reunification, a subject on which Americans are predisposed to support ROK initiatives.

Challenges resulting from DPRK nuclear and missile activities are the most difficult and the greatest source of friction in our bilateral relationship. One source of friction is a tendency for Americans to focus on nuclear and proliferation issues that happen, in this case, to be located on the Korean Peninsula; and for Koreans to regard nuclear issues as a subset of a broader North Korea problem. Both sides agree that reunification would resolve concerns about the nuclear problem, but Americans tend to view nuclear concerns as urgent and reunification as unattainable in the foreseeable future. Koreans, on the other hand, often view U.S.-preferred efforts to address the nuclear problem as likely to further delay reunification. The nuclear issue is so central to American policy and politics that it must be addressed in any proposed strategy or initiative to achieve reunification if the proposal is to obtain the support of the U.S. government.

Other American concerns associated with division of the peninsula include the danger that DPRK leaders will misperceive ROK and/or U.S. actions and intentions or miscalculate how we—and others—will respond to provocations or more benign initiatives. DPRK leaders are not suicidal, but they are risk takers and we worry that they will initiate or respond in ways that entail consequences that neither they nor we wanted. We also worry about the dangers of instability and regime collapse in the North. Though we think the latter unlikely, it could happen. If it does, the ROK, the United States, probably China, and possibly other nations will react. From my perspective, there has been inadequate discussion or attempt to coordinate possible responses to ensure that they are not misinterpreted or counterproductive. For obvious reasons, it would be desirable for the ROK, the United States, and China to talk about contingencies. But for

equally obvious reasons, this has not happened. That makes the situation worrisome.

It is much easier to diagnose the problem, articulate concerns, and make judgments about the likelihood of early reunification than it is to devise new approaches to a problem that has defied solution for decades and appears to be becoming even more intractable. It is also easier to state what we want than to prescribe how to achieve what Americans and South Koreans desire, namely, reunification in the shortest possible time by peaceful means that protect the freedoms and prosperity of the ROK and immediately improve the lot of Koreans in the North. I am no cleverer than the thousands of people who have worked on this problem for decades and regret that I have nothing new to offer. But old ideas sometimes acquire new relevance because circumstances or political calculations change. My ideas are not new, but they may warrant renewed attention.

PUSH CHINESE-STYLE REFORMS

One possible approach would be to buttress Beijing's efforts to persuade Pyongyang to adopt Chinese-style reform and opening to the outside world. China has been pressing the North to do this for almost two decades, and there have been modest but aborted attempts to do so. Previous efforts have failed, in my view, for three reasons:

1. The timing was unpropitious and the reforms too timid to elicit cooperation from the international community;
2. Pyongyang concluded that pressing ahead without broader international engagement would lead to unacceptable dependence on China and/or the ROK; and
3. Pyongyang judged that, under existing conditions, reform and engagement with the outside world posed unacceptable risks to the regime and elite interests.

The DPRK is now a few years into another period of modest reform and somewhat greater opening to the outside world, albeit thus far limited almost entirely to Chinese investors and, possibly, Russian entities, but there is little reason to think that this attempt will be longer lived or more successful than previous ones unless we—the ROK, United States, Japan, and others—act to make it succeed. The key to success may be to engage in ways that provide early and substantial benefits to the North and begin to build incentives and

interdependencies of the kind that helped transform the ROK, Taiwan, and China.

This would be hard to sell in the United States without indications from the North that the goal of reform was more than preserving the regime and that it was prepared to take meaningful steps to reduce

is to occur. The package of incentives would probably need to include such inducements as immunity from prosecution for past behavior, meaningful roles in transitional and possibly permanent institutions in a reunified country, and the ability to access ill-gotten wealth whether remaining in Korea or choosing exile in China or another country. The very idea of protecting,

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the nuclear threat. Anything less would be stigmatized as rewarding an awful regime for bad behavior before it had abandoned its nuclear weapons. But the approach has worked with other countries with similar cultures and histories and might help pave the way for reunification by helping the two Korean systems to become more similar.

BUILD INCENTIVES FOR THE ELITE

My second suggestion is really a variant of the first, namely, to combine efforts to strengthen the DPRK economy, improve the well being of DPRK citizens, and increase the North's stake in regional stability and participation in the global system with a package of incentives targeted at the DPRK elite. If I am correct that previous attempts at reform ran aground, in part, because the elite concluded that continuing would jeopardize their own privileged situation, and that this group would have the most to lose from reunification through incorporation into the ROK, securing their buy-in will require imaginative efforts to elicit its support.

Doing so would be unpalatable to many because it would seem to reward past abuses, but the elite is the group that must be won over if peaceful reunification

rewarding, and utilizing such people will be anathema for many. But unless something like this is in the package, it is difficult for me to see a peaceful path to reunification. Finding an acceptable formula will not be easy.

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ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the August 2014 conference on International Cooperation for the Unification of the Korean Peninsula, co-sponsored by the Institute for National Security Strategy and the Korean Association of International Studies. The paper is structured to provide an American view on questions posed by the organizers. Although the author served in the U.S. government for many years, the views expressed here are his own and are not necessarily the same as those of the U.S. government or the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center.