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The Politics of Korean Unification: Three Scenarios

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When Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers on 15 August 1945, it left a power vacuum on the Korean peninsula. The Soviet Union occupied the northern half and the United States occupied the southern half. Shortly thereafter the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) were established by the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively. War erupted embroiling the entire peninsula for three years, 1950–1953.¹ In trying to overthrow a pro-United States and anti-communist regime headed by Syngman Rhee, the Communists created a civil war in the south. It was an international, inter-state war in the sense that the presence of active southern communists gave the excuse to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to infiltrate the Republic of Korea. Shortly before North Korea attacked South Korea, the United States gave a not-so-ambiguous sign that it might abandon South Korea in order to consolidate its anti-communist defense. Seeing this, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin apparently gave a go-ahead to Kim Il Sung to invade the Republic of Korea. The Republic of Korea was initially overwhelmed and driven to the thin pocket of the most southwestern part of its territory. Yet the reinforced United Nations forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, then also Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers occupying Japan, drove the northern Communists back to the most northern part of the DPRK. Syngman Rhee's call for reunification, the United Nations bombing of key installations Northeast of the recently established People's Republic of China, and Gen-

eral MacArthur's call for the nuclear bombardment of China all led China to militarily intervene in the Korean War, driving the United Nations forces further south again. A stalemate ensued. An armistice was concluded in 1953 with the present armistice line bordering the two republics.

Nearly half a century has passed since then. More than a decade has passed since the end of the Cold War. And the prospects for Korean unification can as easily seem bright as they seem bleak; it all depends on what standpoint one adopts. The current constellation of unification politics was initiated by Kim Dae Jung's accession to power in 1998, amidst the severe economic difficulties South Korea was experiencing.² His democratic credentials pushed him up to the position of power, thanks in part to the support of the United States and the International Monetary Fund. His Sunshine Policy is a sincere attempt to change North Korea. He offers positive incentives while threatening to punish North Korea for its "uncivilized" actions. Kim Dae Jung's North Korea policy is qualitatively different from that of most previous South Korean leaders. He has been persistent in moving toward long-term unification. Although North Korea under Kim Jong Il has seemingly not changed its policy line much, Kim Dae Jung has continued pursuing his Sunshine Policy against increasingly critical public opinion and despite the Bush administration's far more critical view of North Korea. In what follows I would like to set aside current and near future interactions among actors. Rather, I would like to speculate on what the Korean peninsula might look like circa 2015.³ I will describe three scenarios circa 2015 from the following three viewpoints: a state-centric, Westphalian scenario; a liberal, Philadelphian scenario; and a post-colonial, anti-Utopian scenario.⁴

Westphalian Scenario

The Westphalian scenario is a state-centric one in which war and diplomacy are enshrined on high. It focuses on two resilient regimes on both sides of the armistice line.⁵ It does not foresee an imminent collapse of the North Korean regime. North Korea has survived the obstacles of the early 1990s which might have led to its imminent collapse.⁶ It coped with the economic sanctions and quasi-military blockade led by the United States. It reached a major agreement in 1994 with the United States. It has received a large amount of food and energy supply from major countries and international organizations. It has been diplomatically recognized by numerous countries. According to former Clinton Administration officials, toward the end of their tenure, the United States was about to reach a dramatic agreement with North Korea—without giving away too much. All this seems to substantiate the argument that the North Korean regime is smart enough and strong enough to remain resilient in the future. This scenario does not foresee any dramatic change in the nature of the North Korean unification policy. It will

continue to pursue an autonomous and independent security policy. By this I mean a security policy focusing on the survival of the core elite and the state, while trying to exclude undesirable external intervention in determining the fate of Korea.⁷ Given South Korea's democratic credentials and its resilient economy, it would be impossible to foresee any dismemberment or disappearance of the South Korean regime. South Korea's reunification policy is a long-term one, coupled with short-term triggering and inducing mechanisms, as presented by President Kim Dae Jung. A few items are already in progress:

- Summit between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang.
- Reunion of separated families.
- Reconstruction and reintegration of railways and other transportation facilities.
- Facilitation of direct investment in North Korea.

This policy does not mean to achieve reunification in the foreseeable future, but instead to set reunification on course. No less importantly, South Korea will not forget about the use of force. Whenever North Korea behaves "in an uncivilized fashion," South Korea punishes it. The South Korean security policy is parallel to the North Korean security policy. South Korea pursues an autonomous and independent policy wherever feasible. Vide the South Korean success in getting President Bush to back the Sunshine Policy despite all his reservations. The South Korean–Russian joint communique shortly before the South Korean–United States summit noted that both parties observe the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, implying that they are at odds with the United States, which plans to revise the Treaty to allow for its Missile Defense program. President Kim Dae Jung escaped from criticism by saying that the reference to the anti-ABM Treaty should have not been included. South Korea has expressed its intense interest in Russian supply of petroleum and other natural resources through Eurasian continental railways and pipelines.⁸ The South Korean–United States agreement has settled a number of longstanding issues favorably for South Korea. In particular, South Korea has been allowed to build missiles that would reach Pyongyang. The Westphalian scenario argues essentially that Korean unification politics evolve in accordance with the basic Westphalian features of state-centric diplomacy, followed by small-scale economic and non-governmental interactions steadily growing between the two systems.

Philadelphian scenario

By Philadelphian, I mean some sort of mix of confederalism; economic interdependence and integration; and democratic peace.⁹ The Philadelphian scenario

envision these three mechanisms uniting the two systems gradually. The confederal approach has been proposed by North Korea for a long time but has never been supported by South Korea, primarily because North Korea presumes the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from South Korea before it starts the confederative process. However, of late Kim Jong Il has hinted at the possible acceptance of the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula. Of course, it depends on what kind of security environment prevails on the Korean peninsula when such an arrangement is created. Nevertheless, it is significant that North Korea can envision U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula restricted to peacekeeping operations.

Economic interdependence and integration have been progressing in small steps.¹⁰ South Korea has been active in this regard, and in 2001 Kim Jong Il started to express his own interest in Chinese-style modernization of the North Korean economy, slowly and partially marketizing the economy, while the regime remains Communist-dominated. It is significant that Kim Jong Il's recent change of mind coincided with his visit to Shanghai and Beijing. The United Nations Development Program has been trying to bring interested parties—including North Korea, China and Russia—together at the mouth of Tumangan [Tumenjiang] River for joint economic development. However, progress has been slow because of the political environment, most specifically North Korea's cold relations with the United States and Japan. The tourism of Golden Diamond Mountain in North Korea started with fanfare but its business has registered big deficits to its main investor, the Hyundai Corporation. The reconstruction and reintegration of railways through the armistice line has already been vigorously undertaken. The Republic of Korea armed forces has been working very hard on this task. It aims at linking Pusan and Paris via Russia with trans-Siberian pipelines and railways.¹¹ How far it will be able to trigger the mechanisms of reintegration is unclear, however. Railway connections between North Korea and Russia and between North Korea and China do not have discernible positive impacts on North Korean economic development and will not as long as North Korea pursues its closed-country policy. One can argue that with the wealthy South Korean economy's injection of capitalist logic and practice, North Korea might well become at least more efficient in running the economy. In theory there can be two types of economic interactions. One is Taiwan's economic relationship with China and the other type is the Republic of South Africa's economic relationship with such countries as Lesotho and Botswana. In the former a rich economy invests in a poor economy directly; despite all the political difficulties involved with Beijing's One China Policy. The Taiwanese have set up their factories and shops in China. In the latter, impoverished Lesotho and Botswana allow their citizens to commute daily to factories and shops in the Republic of South Africa. It seems that the former is easier to actualize than the latter. It also looks as

if even the Chinese type of economic integration would take years longer than the Taiwan-China economic integration did. After all, the North Korean regime will be vigilant to any South Korean subversive operations in North Korea. The South African type of economic integration seems easier, generating lower wages without infrastructural development expenditures from South Korean business, as long as North Korean workers commute to South Korea. Once real mutual confidence is achieved, economic integration both ways seems possible. But if not, the Philadelphian scenario remains hard to realize.

Democratic peace will be most difficult to realize as long as North Korea is strictly Communist. One line of argument which does not preclude democratic peace on the Korean peninsula is argument that with per capita income exceeding \$US 2,000 the society starts to move forward to democracy. This argument has been used recently in China.¹² Most Chinese farmers have been quasi-capitalist since the time of the Cultural Revolution and state-run farms have been privatizing themselves steadily over the last two decades. The time will not be far away, proponents of such arguments say, when China becomes an illiberal democracy, not so different from Singapore. Again Kim Jong Il's interest in China's modernization is useful in developing the Philadelphian scenario. After all, North Korea might not be an exception to this old-fashioned causal rule of thumb: As a recent study of democratization shows, once a non-democratic regime is surrounded by democracies, the former finds it hard to sustain its non-democratic nature (Midlarsky, 1999). This might as well be the case with North Korea. Yet, the argument on democratic peace itself as applied to a democratic North Korea and a democratic South Korea might be questioned anyway, given the historical and geopolitical evolution of both regimes.

Anti-Utopian Scenario


What I call the anti-Utopian scenario has three elements: (1) a failed state, (2) a bankrupt economy, and (3) international vulnerability. The picture of North Korea created by the United States around mid-1990s was close to this scenario. The North Korea economy was near bankruptcy and large-scale famines took place. Deficits were and required accumulated foreign reserves. Energy sources were difficult to obtain. The state was not able to function with all power concentrated in the hands of either Kim Il Song or Kim Jong Il. This secretative and dictatorial power structure inevitably created potentially dissident elite groups which might want to overthrow the dictator. Internationally, the United States had the potential to bring about changes in North Korea by economic embargoes and coercive diplomacy. With this kind of scenario in mind the United States government reached an agreement with North Korea in 1994 whereby North Korea allowed international inspection teams to monitor the development of nuclear energy

and weapons research, and in turn received oil and light-water nuclear reactors enabling North Korea to have nuclear energy in addition to food and other necessities.

This approach toward North Korea was apparently abandoned by the United States government by the late 1990s. Two events were sufficient to produce this change. In August 1998, North Korea launched missiles over Japan to demonstrate its military capabilities. In the fall, South Korea declared its bankruptcy to the International Monetary Fund. The former convinced the United States government of North Korea's resilience and agility. The latter took the United States by surprise because it had thought that South Korea would not need the helping hand of the International Monetary Fund. With President Kim Dae Jung's ascension to power late in 1998, the United States sought to draw further concessions from North Korea in nuclear weapons development in return for carrots, i.e. the Perry Process. It reached this stage when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited North Korea and left it with very favorable impressions in 2000. The final discussion on the highest political items did not materialize in the final days of Clinton's presidency due in large part to the confusion generated by the counting of votes for the two Presidential candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush.

The new Bush Administration does not place much confidence in North Korea. Therefore the Perry process was scaled down to a far lower level, if not terminated. The scenario that the Bush Administration intends for North Korea is not sufficiently clear at this moment. But it is clear that the Bush Administration will not engage North Korea as much as the Clinton Administration and that it might even try to freeze some of the points contained in the 1994 agreement between North Korea and the United States. It seems that the United States government under President Bush sees North Korea as a state that would be best handled by the mixture of containment and engagement and awaits the eventual moment at which North Korea leaves Communism, sometime in the very nebulous future. The nature of the far-off democratic transition is unknown.

Conclusion

The politics of Korean reunification are highly complex. The situation simultaneously has the features of the Westphalian, Philadelphian and anti-Utopian scenarios. One scenario sometimes becomes prominent while others recede. What is most important is that observers do not adopt a single scenario in trying to understand the politics of Korean unification. Koreans may eventually attain one Korea but watching it from the above three angles is essential to maintain sight of oft-hidden developments. 

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