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PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES FOR
KOREAN REUNIFICATION

Competing Regional Interests and Reunification

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As with many complex situations, any effort to address the question of how competing regional interests would play out in response to Korean reunification begins with “it depends.”¹ Countless reunification studies conducted by governments, think tanks and universities in a host of capitals have yielded policy recommendations that are heavily affected by case selection bias—specifically, an overreliance on the German reunification experience as a roadmap. As investment brochures warn, however, past performance is usually a poor metric when investing in stocks. The goal of this chapter is to provide readers with an analytical framework through which they can assess competing regional interests related to reunification and identify ways to address challenges and maximize opportunities.²

In the first part of this chapter, I outline two main factors that heavily influence the course of policy discussions regarding reunification. One is South Korea and the United States primarily responding to the situation through their military alliance. The other is China responding through the mechanism of the UN Security Council. I explain how the manner in which a party takes the initiative disproportionately affects the type of ensuing reunification path.

In the second part, I explore the under-examined potential role that the North Korean defector community in South Korea could play in response to reunification. The South Korean government’s current plan is to extend its jurisdiction over the former North Korean state in a reunification scenario. This plan predates the existence of the 24,000-member strong defector community now resident in South Korea. Small groups in this community have styled themselves as a North Korean exile government. Their plan is to return and launch political groups to help their former compatriots adjust to new realities in a distorted, democratic, market-oriented country. In the early days of Korean reunification, there is likely to be a question of legitimacy as the South Korean government and defector organizations vie for the hearts and minds of the new body politic in the North. The South Korean government will seek to implement its plan for gradual integration of the former North Koreans via economic development projects that utilize cheap labor. In contrast, the defector organizations will look to bring about an early realization of access to the full opportunities of a democratic, market-oriented country rather than Seoul’s plan of initially preserving a divided peninsula for the sake of gradual political, social, and economic integration. How this competition plays out will influence the manner in which regional neighbors respond to reunification.

In the third part, I lay out a policy recommendation on how to minimize competition and maximize cooperation in response to reunification. If reunification is framed in terms of the short-term collective mission of dismantling and verifying dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, it would be possible to develop a common focus and build nascent trust. The question then becomes how the countries involved could apply this trust-building activity to the broader goal of aligning and harmonizing competing interests.

HOW KEY PARTIES INITIALLY RESPOND TO REUNIFICATION WILL DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT THE REACTIONS OF OTHER COUNTRIES

A central pattern that emerged during Track 1.5 dialogues that the author directed—and others in which he participated³—over a five-year period was the high degree to which South Korea’s initial response to reunification was framed in the context of its alliance with the United States. This response triggered regional responses that played out in a zero-

sum gain manner. (Ho-Yeol Yoo addresses the South Korean perspective in his chapter). Seeking to avoid losing the initiative and yielding ground as security alignments began to transform, regional powers sought to preserve their respective definition of the status quo. Any perceived threat to this definition resulted in security actions involving armed forces or paramilitary police.

The driving force behind South Korea's utilization of its alliance was to demonstrate to all the regional parties that it had both the legitimacy and the resources to reunify the peninsula. It also provided the means to respond to humanitarian as well as security challenges. Rather than building international consensus around South Korea's reunification plan, Seoul presumed that the international community would grant de facto recognition of it. This assumption was largely based on the notion that this community would be sympathetic to Seoul finally resolving the chronic division of the Korean people. Given historical legacies and deep mutual distrust in the region, the absence of a high-level consultative process and the abundance of divergent assumptions do not bode well for realizing a smooth reunification.

Another major pattern was China's tendency to frame its response to reunification through the UN Security Council (UNSC). Seeking internationally recognized legitimacy of its actions, Chinese government think tank analysts who participated in these Track 1.5 dialogues pointed out that Beijing's priority was to support a UNSC resolution centered on promoting regional peace and stability during this transitional period. By doing so, Beijing sought to counter any perception of its efforts to respond to humanitarian or security issues in the early phase of reunification as a pretext to establish a sphere of influence in the northern part of Korea.

Beijing's focus on securing a UNSC resolution was also an effort to provide a multilateral reference point as various regional parties responded to a transitional period on the peninsula. In the absence of such a reference point, the likelihood of reaction feeding into reaction would rise significantly. The zero-sum mentality whereby one party's perceived gain would be at the expense of another party's national interests could be countered with a UNSC resolution that established common goals to bolster regional security and stability during the reunification process.

Overall, Beijing's objective was to foster an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competition as new opportunities and challenges arose on the Korean Peninsula. Wary of any country attempting to take advantage of the situation to the detriment of the other powers in an unstructured security environment, Beijing deemed the UNSC the primary international channel of interaction that could be tailored to the Northeast Asia region. Whether and how this channel is used by regional powers will largely determine if regional interests develop into patterns of competition or cooperation.

South Korea and the United States tend to underestimate the prime mover advantage of a coordinated international response to change on the peninsula. Although the United States possesses a veto on the Security Council, a transitional situation on the peninsula could provide opportunities for China and Russia to coordinate in calling emergency meetings in an effort to build early consensus on addressing security and humanitarian issues.

DETERMINING INTERNAL LEGITIMACY IN REUNIFICATION: THE DEFECTOR FACTOR

How reunification evolves internally will influence the ways in which competing external interests play out. The long-held assumption is that the South Korean government would be the sole actor in terms of extending its sovereignty in the event of the North Korean regime's collapse. In determining Korean legitimacy there is now the defector factor. Implicit in the South Korean government plan is de facto continuation of a divided peninsula in order to utilize the large pool of cheap labor in the North. Doing so would give South Korean companies a competitive edge in the global economy and slowly raise living standards in the North.

This approach, however, runs counter to the democratic ideals of equality and economic freedom. U.S. expectations of walls—physical and political—coming down would be met with new barriers—economic and social—going up instead. China is likely to adhere to its primary principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, while, in economic terms, it may prove to be more appealing as a labor market for former North Koreans. A 2013 South Korean report estimates that approximately 79,600 North Korean workers are in China.⁴ While there may be some short-term decline in that figure in the aftermath of North Korea's February 2013 nuclear test, the overall trend line points upward. As wages continue to rise in China, the demand for guest workers keeps rising too. It is likely that Chinese and South Korean interests will compete with respect to the new political economy reality of reunification.

A different situation could emerge if the defector community effectively and quickly mobilizes the new political base in the North. Their collective experience trying to cope in South Korean society has enabled them to develop basic organizational skills that can be applied to politically mobilizing residents in the North. These unique characteristics may give them an early advantage on three key fronts: forming local political parties to advocate political and economic freedoms in the North; seeking to add a local voice to the development of the vast mineral deposits in the northeastern corridor of the peninsula; and promoting the integration of the local economy with neighboring economies in the South and in the Chinese border region. A defector, community-led, local political configuration could conduct its own commercial relations and become a distinct voice amid competing interests regarding reunification. How the competition for legitimacy between Seoul's plan and the defector community's plan plays out will influence the manner in which regional neighbors respond to reunification.

BUILDING TRUST BY VERIFYING DISMANTLEMENT OF NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR ARSENAL

In the security sphere, near-term competing interests regarding reunification could be more aligned if Seoul takes the initiative in framing an important aspect of it—achieving the collective goal of dismantling and multilaterally verifying the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. In a region with recurring security tensions regarding issues ranging from territorial disputes to Beijing's containment fears to the rise of China, this task-specific objective could provide a formative experience for regional powers in substantive security cooperation. Since comprehensive nuclear dismantlement and clean up could take many years in multiple stages,⁵ the prospect for regional cooperation will require multilateral planning and implementation. Such an undertaking is unprecedented in a region that has traditionally lacked a multilateral security organization. The requirements of nuclear

dismantlement offer the unique opportunity to build trust among countries that have long-standing mistrust of each other.

The question then becomes how the countries involved could apply this trust-building activity to the broader goal of managing competing security interests in response to reunification. In practice, a dismantlement-focused multilateral security organization will require the operation of a dialogue mechanism that will help inform the development and coordination of national policies. These patterns of interaction could continue if effectively associated with a neutral multilateral security organization. Rather than launching a regional organization that is solely centered on nuclear dismantlement, there is the opportunity for Seoul to think in a long-term strategic manner and view the task of dismantlement as the foundation for this elusive stabilizing, regional security body.

CONCLUSION

Although reunification is likely to initially trigger competing interests, regional players contending with the challenge of navigating through the turbulence of major short-term changes will also encounter the opportunity to leverage clear common goals like nuclear dismantlement in the North to foster patterns of consultation and policy coordination. In a region with a chronic misalignment of shifting policy priorities, managing these patterns will be fraught with setbacks. Sustained political support and leadership will be crucial. A visionary group of leaders will need to invest their scarce political capital to leverage reunification as a catalyst for creating durable security in the region. Such a path will, in effect, maximize their respective country's national interests as myopically focused management of the reunification process could exacerbate historic animosities and mistrust, thereby deepening other divisions in the region.

ENDNOTES

1. Although dynastic succession to a third generation of the Kim family in North Korea is now complete, there is a growing consensus among North Korea watchers from various countries that regime cohesion will not be sustainable in the medium term. For the purposes of this chapter, I will not examine the main North Korean regime collapse scenarios discussed in policy circles, but rather focus on reunification in terms of South Korea extending its sovereignty over a post-collapse North Korea.
2. From 2007-2011, the author directed Track 1.5 dialogues in Washington, Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo with government think tank partners in the region. Participants in these "policy R&D" workshops included current and former policymakers, military officials, diplomats, Congressional staffers, and select think tank analysts. Agenda topics covered traditional and non-traditional security issues, as well as economic policy. In developing an analytical framework for this chapter, the author draws on key findings from Korean reunification-focused policy discussions during these Track 1.5 dialogues.
3. David Kang and Victor Cha, *Approaching Korean Unification*, December 2010. Accessed: http://csis.org/files/publication/101217_Cha_ApproachingUnification_WEB.pdf.
4. "China tightens oversight over migrant N. Korean workers," Yonhap News, Feb. 28, 2013. Accessed at: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2013/02/28/59/040100000AEN20130228004300315F.HTML>.
5. David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, "Dismantling the DPRK's Nuclear Weapons Program: A Practicable, Verifiable Plan of Action," *USIP Peaceworks No. 54* (Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, January 2006).



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