

China and the United States in the Korean Reunification Process

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The Reunification-cum-Collapse Scenario Revisited

For the first time since the Korean War, and particularly in the wake of German reunification, the question of Korean reunification has generated a flurry of debate both inside and outside Korea, but usually with more heat than light. With North Korea constantly back in the news as East Asia's time-bomb, seemingly ripe for implosion or explosion, prospects for Korean reunification have quickly become conflated with the question of the future of North Korea—whether it will survive or will collapse, slowly or suddenly.

The popularity of this reunification-cum-collapse scenario has been evident not only in academic circles but also in the policy communities of some neighboring states. When North Korean Leader Kim II Sung died in July 1994, many predicted that the hermit kingdom would collapse within six months or in no more than three years, accompanied by a German-style reunification by absorption. South Korean President Kim Young Sam jumped on the collapsist bandwagon when he depicted North Korea as a "broken airplane" headed for a crash landing that would be followed by a quick reunification. The specter of collapse has even prompted behind-the-scenes efforts by the U.S. Department of Defense to coordinate contingency planning with South Korean and Japanese allies. At a summit meeting held on Cheju Island in April 1996, leaders of South Korea and the United States jointly agreed to promote a two-plus-two formula—the Four-Party Peace Talks, with the two Koreas, China, and the United States—even as they privately predicted that the collapse in the North could come as soon as two or three years.¹ Indeed, such a dichotomist endism debate, with many pundits selecting "soft" or "hard" landings and "collapse" or "muddling through" as quick and easy choices in the forum on the future of North Korea, has become a favorite sport that almost anyone, including North Korea's elite defectors in South Korea, can play.²

Despite the hype about an impending collapse, the shape of things

to come in post-Kim Il Sung North Korea is far from certain or predetermined. Much of the collapsist debate has been marred by tenuous on-the-fly speculation, by ideological polemics and presuppositions, by inattention to the full range of available empirical evidence and policy options, and above all by the "level of analysis" problem. There has been too much undisciplined speculation about the collapse, without prior delineation of any specifics such as what will actually collapse, when, how, and with what consequences. These speculations have erred in (1) treating "state," "system," and "regime" synonymously, (2) overstating the importance of domestic factors at the expense of external factors, (3) confusing underlying causes with surface symptoms, and (4) underplaying crucial "intervening variables" between system inputs and system outputs.³

Most collapsist arguments commit the fallacy of premature economic reductionism, based on the misleading equation of economic breakdown with system collapse or with the collapse of the North Korean state itself. The much publicized collapse of the Soviet Union was simply its collapse as a superpower and as a system, not its disappearance as a "state-turned-into Russia." As Robert Legvold argues, the collapse of the Soviet Union "was less the disintegration of a state than the decolonization of the last empire."⁴ Furthermore, many extremely poor developing (Fourth World) countries limp through sluggish or even negative rates of economic growth despite rampant bureaucratic corruption, ineffective or divided leadership, and endemic social unrest, without the kind of totalitarian control mechanisms North Korea employs. Despite these failings, these countries do not collapse, let alone disappear, because social unrest and political opposition do not overwhelm the repressive forces of the state or its coping mechanisms. Of course, the collapse of the North Korean economy could trigger the demise or replacement of the regime, which could in turn trigger the demise and replacement of the system. But both in theory and practice, collapse at the highest level entails the collapse of the state. The state is most resilient, however, often surviving the collapse of the economy, the regime, and even the system.

What is needed here is a more dynamic, process-oriented conception of several possible future scenarios, including (1) status quo of neither peace nor war, (2) peaceful coexistence, (3) collapse-cum-absorption, (4) conflict escalation, and (5) reunification. In this essay I take as a point of departure that there are a variety of what French futurist Bertrand de Jouvenal calls "futuribles" (possible futures),⁵ each of which seems compelling without being comprehensive from a particular perspective, and furthermore that the either/or endism debate needs to be enriched by the appreciation that the future of Korean

reunification is not providentially predetermined but rather a product of selective human behavior. There are at least four futurible reunification scenarios—reunification via force, via negotiations, via capitulation, and via collapse.⁶ These futurible scenarios should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, as one can flow into another.

The difficulties of predicting Korean reunification as a single event rather than as a long-term process are directly connected to the challenge of prognosticating the future of the post-Kim II Sung system, since any country's future will be significantly affected by the structures of regional and global politics that prevail. This is especially the case for North Korea, as a small state sandwiched in the strategic Northeast Asian crossroads where the United States, China, Russia, and Japan uneasily meet and interact. Paradoxically, the uncertainty of North Korea's future permits some hope and some room for alternative policy choices in Seoul, Washington, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow that would steer the post-Kim II Sung system and its future in a preferred direction.

The roles of China and the United States are of crucial importance in this respect. While the reunification process is for the two Koreas to make or unmake, China and the United States by dint of what they are and what they do can transform both the context and the conditions under which any given reunification scenario can be impeded or facilitated. The Korean Peninsula is widely regarded as the last remaining Cold War glacier. Even today, almost half a century after the Korean War "ended" with an armistice accord, the so-called demilitarized zone (DMZ) remains the most heavily fortified conflict zone in the post-Cold War world, where more than 1.8 million military personnel confront each other, armed to the teeth with the latest weapons systems. Consider as well the continuing, if somewhat dilapidated, Cold War alliance systems linking the two Koreas, China, and the United States in the bilateralized regional security complex. The Korean Peninsula has the dubious distinction of being the only conflict zone buttressed by the two competing Cold War alliance systems. North Korea is the one and only country with which China "maintains" its 1961 Cold-War alliance pact—whether in name or in practice—while the U.S.-ROK alliance codified through the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty seems to have stood the test of time. As a result, the shape of inter-Korean life to come is closely keyed to the state of Sino-American relations, which will in turn impact upon and shape the future of the emerging Northeast Asian order. And yet, in the absence of the East-West conflict, the relations between the world's lone superpower, with its creeping unilateralism, and the world's most populous country, with its rooted exceptionalism, have become the

single greatest source of uncertainty in the shaping of the future of the Korean Peninsula.

The Shifting Role of China

Despite the lack of consensus on China's great power status or on the feasibility and desirability of various engagement or containment strategies to manage the rise of Chinese power through balancing, bandwagoning, capitulating, or ignoring,⁷ there is no mistaking the importance of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in post-Cold War Korean Peninsula affairs. Even some of the harshest critics of the rise-of-China thesis admit that "only on the Korean Peninsula do China's capacities seriously affect U.S. policy."⁸

Consider China's sources of power and influence in Korean affairs: 1) demographic weight: it is the world's most populous country (fifty-nine times the population of North Korea and nineteen times the population of the two Koreas); 2) continental size (the world's second largest, and forty-four times the size of the Korean Peninsula) and territorial contiguity, sharing with North Korea a border some 1,416 kilometers long, across almost the entire northern stretch of the Korean Peninsula; 3) military capability that is steadily being modernized, with the world's largest armed forces (2.94 million troops in active service) and the world's third-largest nuclear weapons arsenal after the United States and Russia; 4) veto power in the United Nations Security Council; 5) new economic status as the world's second-largest economy (with 2000 gross national income at \$4,966 billion, measured at purchasing-power parity);⁹ and 6) traditional Confucian cultural influence with strong historical roots.

Not surprisingly, Chinese strategic thinkers and analysts regard the Korean Peninsula as a vital strategic shield as well as the "core problem" (*hexin wenti*) of Northeast Asian security.¹⁰ Chinese leaders, including President Jiang Zemin, have stated on many occasions that without peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula there can be no genuine peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Even the looming conflicts in the South China Sea—a flashpoint in the Asia-Pacific region where no less than six states including China have competing jurisdictional claims over the potentially oil-rich Spratly Islands—pale in comparison to the potential escalation of military tensions and political instability on the Korean Peninsula.¹¹ The dynamic Northeast Asian political economy and an imploding North Korean economy have also combined to make the Korean Peninsula one of the central geoeconomic concerns of Chinese foreign policy.

Because the Korean Peninsula is also generally perceived as one of the persistently dangerous flashpoints in the Asia-Pacific region,

China's Korea policy is closely intertwined with its regional and global policy. Without Chinese support or at least acquiescence, the combined impact of policy initiatives stemming from President Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy" and the currently stalled Four-Party Talks in Geneva is likely to remain rather minimal. Of the four major powers that have been entangled in Korean affairs during and since the Cold War era, Beijing today is the only power with a full-fledged and multidimensional two-Korea policy.

The widening and deepening systemic crisis that reflects and amplifies the GDP decline since 1990 and the critical shortages of food, energy, hard currency, and new ideas has had far-reaching ramifications for political stability and even regime survival. As a result, the possibility of Korean reunification by Southern absorption or by system collapse in the North has found its way into China's foreign policy approach.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that China's thinking on Korean reunification, far from being cast in stone, evolves with the Chinese domestic, Northeast Asian regional, and global situation, including perhaps most importantly any changes in Sino-American relations. In 1993 Chen Qimao, a leading scholar and former president of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, stated China's position on the Korean unification issue in the following terms:

China supports President Kim II Sung's plan to reunify North and South Korea in a Confederal Republic of Koryo under the principle of "one country, one nation; two systems, two governments." This is not only because of China's traditional friendship with North Korea but also because the Chinese leadership believes this policy meets *the current situation* of Korea and supports Korea's national interest as well as the peace and stability of the region. By contrast, *a dramatic change*—which would be very dangerous and could easily turn into a conflict, even a ' war—would be a disaster for the Korean nation. Further, it would threaten not only China's security but the security of the entire Asia-Pacific region and even the world as well.¹²

China now wanted to have Korean unification both ways, supporting the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas under Kim II Sung's "Confederal" formula but also opposing any "dramatic change" (i.e., German-style reunification). This was seen as the most feasible way to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

A major 1995 survey of fifty Koreanists—five each from the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and Germany, and twenty-five

from South Korea—showed there was general agreement that Korean reunification would eventually occur, with 2.1 percent of the respondents predicting that it would occur within one year (1996); 8.3 percent before 2000; 29.2 percent in 2001-2005; 20.8 percent in 2006-2010; 16.7 percent in 2011-2010; and 16.3 percent after 2015. That is, half predicted that Korean reunification would occur during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Tellingly, as shown in Table 1 below, the United States and China occupy opposite extremes on Korean reunification with 66 percent of American respondents expressing support for Korean reunification compared to only 22 percent of Chinese respondents.¹³ A more recent survey found that "the Chinese tended to be most conservative about [Korean] unification, in the hope that the status quo could be maintained for a considerable period of time."¹⁴

Table 1. Experts' Views of Where the Big Four Stand on Korean Reunification

| | Strong Support | Slight Support | Neutral | Slight Objection | Strong Objection |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|------------------|------------------|
| United States | 38% | 28% | 12% | 22% | 0% |
| Japan | 8% | 18% | 28% | 36% | 10% |
| China | 8% | 14% | 22% | 32% | 24% |
| Russia | 14% | 12% | 40% | 30% | 4% |

Source: Lee Young-sun, "Is Korean Reunification Possible?" *Korea Focus* 3:3 (May-June 1995): 13.

Despite China's lip service to reunification, the central challenge of post-Mao foreign policy was and remains creation of a congenial external environment, especially in Northeast Asia, for its accelerated march to great-powerdom. By mid-1994, when Kim II Sung suddenly died, Pyongyang's reunification policy had turned into a kind of habit-driven trumpery, devoid of substantive relevance.¹⁵ The real issue for Pyongyang—and for Beijing—was how to avert system collapse, which would threaten not only the survival of the North Korean state but also China's security environment. With the balance of national strength having already shifted decisively in favor of South Korea, thus enhancing the prospects for reunification by absorption, one of Beijing's central strategic goals has become strengthening its ties with

the weaker North, albeit in a cost-effective way.

Beijing's opposition to the reunification-by-absorption scenario has also been heightened by its perception of U.S. strategy. "To put it bluntly," one pro-China newspaper in Hong Kong wrote, "the United States wants to use this chance to topple the DPRK, and this is a component of U.S. strategy to carry out peaceful evolution [*heping yanbian*] in the socialist countries." Accordingly, the United States "will practice a strategy of destruction against North Korea... with the aim of enabling South Korea to gobble up North Korea, like West Germany gobbling up East Germany." Such a perceived strategy posed not only an ideological challenge to China but, more importantly, a strategic threat since "China regards the Korean region as an important buffer zone between China and the United States."¹⁶

Given its realpolitik perspective and security concerns, there are other reasons Beijing takes a skeptical view of Korean reunification. It is hardly surprising that post-Tiananmen China assesses the global and regional situation in terms of impact on threats to the regime, both internal and from the near abroad. Of particular concern to China is that local and ethnonational conflicts, previously overshadowed by superpower rivalry, are breaking out throughout the world. Now that the threat of direct military invasion has subsided, China too is plagued by ethnic separatism and border disputes, and "hypernationalism" (*jiduan minzuzhuyi*) has made extensive inroads among China's separatists.¹⁷ From the perspective of Beijing, a "concerted Western plot to weaken China" is said to be another way of playing upon such internal divisions and serves as a more serious challenge to the PRC than does global interdependence.¹⁸ The point here is that a united Korea would add more *Chosunjok* (ethnic Korean) fuel to China's ethnonational conflict, especially in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (*Yanbian Chaoxian Zizhiqu*) in Jilin Province, which constitutes Korea's largest Diaspora.

From 1995 to 1997, a new round of Sino-American conflict introduced a highly charged nationalistic prism through which to redefine both the evolving security situation on the Korean Peninsula and America's Korea policy. Situated at the center of Northeast Asia, the Korean Peninsula was seen as the site where the four Great Powers were aggressively pushing their contending strategic plans. From the Chinese standpoint, Japan viewed a unified Korea as a great threat to its own military and economic security and was therefore aggressively involving itself in the Korean question in order to arrest the continuing strategic imbalance between the two Koreas. Russia, too, was trying hard to get back into the game in order to curb the growing influence of the other major powers, namely the United States, China, and

especially Japan. The United States was singled out as eyeing the other three powers as threats to its hegemonic position. The importance that the United States had attached to the Korean Peninsula had to do with containing China, Russia, and Japan by gearing up its military presence and strengthening its security ties with South Korea. The ultimate goal would be to put North Korea on America's strategic track in order to create a united Korea with an American-style political system. Consequently China, *faute de mieux*, had to respond to this ominous situation by stepping up its influence on the Korean Peninsula. China and North Korea are said to be two good neighbors who still enjoy strategic relations as close as "lips and teeth," in contrast to Sino-ROK economic relations. Hence China saw itself in a unique position to check the Great Powers' expansionism and American hegemonism in this region, considered to be China's vital strategic shield, and to safeguard effectively the peace and stability in Northeast Asia.¹⁹

With the improvement of Sino-American relations since 1997, such anti-American assessments of the Korean situation have subsided, especially in the wake of President Jiang Zemin's state visit to the United States. Changes also occurred in the policies of all peripheral players in 1996 and 1997, especially on the part of the United States. Probably reflecting a shift in America's North Korea policy from deterrence to "deterrence plus"—a policy of conditional engagement—the United States was said to have adopted a "coordinating and mediating attitude" instead of taking a concerted united-front position with its South Korean ally.²⁰

The Kosovo war marked another turning point in Sino-American relations, serving this time as the proximate catalyst for setting in motion the process of repairing the strained relationship with North Korea. In the wake of a rapid succession of seemingly threatening developments in the late 1990s—the new Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation and the growing U.S.-Japan cooperation in the development of the theater missile defense (TMD) system, the U.S./NATO air war against Yugoslavia, and the accidental American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade—China's relations with the United States in the military and security realm have been fraught once again with worsening threat perceptions, giving rise in China to images of an America bent on global hegemony through the containment of China. For many Chinese strategic analysts, the Kosovo war would establish dangerous precedents of bypassing the UN Security Council for American neointerventionism, of lowering the threshold for the use of force, and of replacing or trampling state sovereignty as the core principle of international relations. Worse yet, for some Chinese analysts, Kosovo served as a warning that the

struggle for a multipolar world order would now last far longer than previously thought—some twenty to thirty years longer—and that America-led war disguised as humanitarian intervention might not be as remote from China's home turf as they had previously assumed.²¹ Moreover, Kosovo was a turning point, according to one Chinese security analyst, causing "a shift in Chinese thinking on the matter of tolerance for U.S. forces in Asia. China now [felt] surrounded by the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances."²²

By the same token, Kosovo triggered alarm in Pyongyang, filling the North Korean leadership with a sense of crisis that it, too, could become another Yugoslavia. With the worsening external security environment, Pyongyang was now more determined to build up its military muscle.²³ Kosovo also prompted Pyongyang to feel the urgent need to restore and improve its peripheral diplomacy, especially with Beijing and Moscow.

With such shared security concerns and fears, China's Korea policy made a subtle readjustment at a time when Pyongyang was launching an unprecedented diplomatic outreach. As a result, Beijing's displeasure with its unruly socialist ally in the strategic buffer zone was largely put aside as the Chinese leadership began to see the United States as the more clear and present threat to its own interests in Northeast Asia. In short, both Beijing and Pyongyang were sufficiently alarmed by America's military operation in Kosovo to bring back the allied relationship of strategic convenience.

There is far more than meets the public eye in Beijing's status quo policy anti-unification stance. Although China views North Korea as maximizing the PRC's leverage as a balancer in Northeast Asia politics; it also genuinely fears that North Korea could come to feel cornered and see no choice but to fight back, triggering a regional war, at minimum. Beijing does not doubt that Pyongyang would fight rather than succumb to German-style hegemonic unification. Even if the system in the North simply collapses, the result is likely to be bloody, triggering a civil war rather than immediate absorption by the South.

Until at least 1996, unification by Southern absorption was regarded by many Chinese scholars and policymakers as wishful thinking on the part of Western analysts. With the economic crisis in North Korea further reflecting and effecting the structural contradictions within the system, an increasing number of Chinese analysts began to acknowledge the possibility of system collapse, even if they doubted such a collapse was imminent.²⁴ In other words, not to think about the unthinkable came to be viewed in 1997 as an exercise of Chinese wishful thinking. In late October 1997, the *Beijing Review*, which toes the party line on every issue, published an unsigned article

in which it offered an unprecedented analysis (and rebuke) of the root causes of North Korea's food crisis:

What's more, a heavy military burden is using up much needed resources. . . . The present military expenditure of DPRK is US\$6 billion, bringing a huge burden to its economy. For the time being, the U.S., Japan and Republic of Korea (ROK) are three main forces in the aid of DPRK. Due to conflicting points of view, however, many political conditions are attached to the aid process. . . . Ultimately, it's up to the [North] Korean people themselves to resolve the grain crisis. It requires spirit and will power to meet the challenge of such reforms as introducing foreign investment and opening up, while maintaining a stable political situation. And Korea needs to be flexible while carrying out diplomatic policies.²⁵

Even if we accept the heroic assumption that Korean reunification will come about peacefully, without igniting a civil war or generating a massive refugee population, Beijing would still face a wide range of territorial disputes over fisheries and over mineral, oil, and gas deposits in the Yellow Sea. China's security dilemma today is largely shaped by the 80 million minorities in the strategically sensitive "autonomous" regions that comprise roughly 64 percent of Chinese territory. In this regard, what would a united and nationalistic Korea do about its territorial claims along the Sino-Korean border and in China's northeastern provinces, inhabited by the world's largest concentration of ethnic Koreans?

Despite the widely shared belief that system collapse in North Korea is not imminent, some Chinese analysts have given thought to various futuristic scenarios. According to one scholar, China's ultimate concern is not who will be the next "Great Leader" in Pyongyang, but "whether the DPRK will remain as a stable and friendly buffer state.... From Beijing's point of view, although Kim Jr. may lose the internal power struggle [if it occurs], there should be no reason why China cannot come out a winner."²⁶

Another scenario envisions factional infighting in a collapsed North Korea, with one factional group seeking help from the United States and/or South Korea and another seeking help from China. In such an event, Eric McVadon writes, based on extensive interviews with Chinese military officers, "Beijing would reject the appeal and urge Washington and Seoul to do the same."²⁷

As the world's seventh largest economy—or the second-largest economy on a purchasing-power parity basis—with a strong sense of

assertive nationalism, Beijing's fears of a unified Korea becoming an assertive "regional power" in Northeast Asia are reflected in its realpolitik approach towards the Peninsula. The new unified Korea would lead to a new geostrategic landscape in the region, we are told, fundamentally changing Korea's foreign relations with the four major powers and making the "power struggle and economic competition in the region more apparent and more intense."²⁸ Some Chinese analysts have even compared the nationalism of a rising Korea with that of Japan more than a half century ago.²⁹

As long as Beijing has profound concerns about the strategic orientation of a united Korea, particularly as it relates to the United States, maintenance of the status quo of the two Koreas means continued Chinese support of the weaker DPRK no matter what the cost. The tradeoff here is that Pyongyang provides an opportunity for China to project its great-power identity. As Campbell and Reiss aptly put it, "if the road to Pyongyang runs through Beijing, Washington should expect to be charged a toll. This toll could be quite high."³⁰

Ultimately, China is not opposed to Korean reunification, we are told, provided (1) it comes about gradually and peacefully; (2) it is a negotiated unification between the two Koreas, not a hegemonic unification by absorption; and (3) a unified Korea does not harm or threaten China's security or national interests. "China will use her influence to strive for the peaceful unification of Korea, and to keep unified Korea as a friendly, or at best, neutral neighbor."³¹ A united Korea would be expected, moreover, to be drawn within China's economic and military sphere; China should help shape developments in Korea, not merely follow the lead of the United States and Japan."³² In short, China has become and will remain a critical factor in North Korea's future—whether it will survive or collapse, or, more accurately, whether the trajectory it takes from here to there will be system-maintaining, system-reforming, system-decaying, or system-collapsing.

The Shifting Role of the United States

It is of some historical significance that the U.S. diplomatic presence on the Korean Peninsula, which started in 1882 with the signing of a friendship and commerce treaty, was terminated in 1905 by a classical imperialistic deal—the Taft-Katsura agreement—under which Japan recognized America's dominant interests in the Philippines in return for U.S. recognition of Japan's dominant interests in Korea. Five years later, when Japan transformed its protectorate over Korea into complete annexation, the United States did not even bother to protest.

United States involvement in Korean affairs was resumed in 1945 with the most auspicious set of expectations on the part of the Korean people. First, the United States was perceived as having had no colonial or imperialistic involvement in Korea or elsewhere. Second, the traditional American values as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination captured the national imagination of Koreans and became a legitimizing symbolism for many Korean nationalists. Finally and most importantly, the United States was the leader of the Allied Powers which had defeated the hatred enemy state, Japan. Hence, the United States was pictured by many Koreans as the national savior with all the goodwill, responsibility, and promise that such symbolism entails.

And yet, as some argue, the United States bears the heavy historical burden of having engineered the Korean division in 1945. With his eyes partially shut to the rapidly changing reality on the ground (i.e., Soviet troops entering and rapidly advancing down the Korean Peninsula in early August 1945) and using Churchillian language, the late Gregory Henderson wrote in 1974: "No division of a nation in the present is so astonishing in its origin as the division of Korea; none is so unrelated to conditions or sentiment within the nation itself at the time the division was effected; none is to this day so unexplained; in none does blunder and planning oversight appear to have played so large a role. Finally, there is no division for which the U.S. government bears so heavy a share of the responsibility as it bears for the division of Korea."³³ "In North Korea and South Korea alike," as Selig Harrison argues in a similar vein, "it is an article of faith that the United States deserves the principal blame for the division of the peninsula and thus has a special responsibility for helping to restore national unity."³⁴

Herein lies a double paradox. On the one hand, the United States is perceived and acted upon by many as deserving the principal blame for the Korean division. On the other hand, as shown in table 1, the United States stands at the opposite extreme in expressing "strong support" for Korean reunification. Despite the on-again, off-again, situation-specific anti-American demonstrations in South Korea, the United States elicited the highest positive public perception of a national sample of 2,000 South Korean respondents (30.7 percent, compared to 11.0 percent for Russia, 22.6 percent for China, and 17.1 percent for Japan) in a major multinational citizens' opinion survey that was jointly sponsored by *Tong-a Ilbo* (Seoul) and *Asahi Shimbun* (Tokyo) in late 2000. What the survey shows with disturbing clarity is why Northeast Asia has little if any social and psychological foundation to forge truly cooperative multilateral security institutions. In addition, anti-Americanism in South Korea is not as wide or deep as some would

have us believe.³³

During the Cold War, Washington's overall foreign policy as well as its policy in this important region reflected America's anti-communism and its focus on "the Soviet threat." The impact of the Korean War (1950-53) upon national, regional, and global systems cannot be overemphasized. More than any other postwar international event, the Korean War enacted the rules of the Cold War game and congealed patterns of East-West conflict across East Asia and beyond.³⁶ The Korean War seems to have crystallized East-West conflict into a rigid strategic culture dependent on a Manichean vision of stark bipolarity, the same vision that was made evident most recently in President Bush's triangulation of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the charter members of the "axis of evil." It was this creed of global anti-communism that formed the postwar national symbol system, which in turn provided the ark and anchor of America's postwar national identity. It was this creed that imposed a measure of unity and coherence upon this region, without any sense of shared cultures and ideologies, via a series of geopolitical and geoeconomic ties stretching from Japan and South Korea to the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) states, Australia, and New Zealand.

With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet threat, the United States too had to reformulate its role in the new but uncertain security environment in East Asia. During the first half of the 1990s, the U.S. East Asian security strategy was revised three times: in 1990, 1992, and 1995. A 1990 Department of Defense report defined America's role as that of the "regional balancer, honest broker, and ultimate security guarantor." Even if the Soviet threat were to decline substantially, the American military presence in East Asia would continue to check the "expansionist regional aspirations" of "second tier" states.³⁷ The 1995 report, entitled *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, is said to have been designed to rejuvenate America's leadership strategy, halting the planned reductions in the region through the end of the decade (i.e., keeping the existing level of about 100,000 troops in the region, stationed mostly in Japan and South Korea, for the foreseeable future), reinforcing American bilateral alliances in the region with Japan as the linchpin, and developing regional multilateral security dialogues and mechanisms as a supplement to, not a substitute for, "American alliance leadership" in the region. Tellingly, all of this is justified as financially cost-effective. "In fact," as Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph S. Nye, Jr., the chief architect of the 1995 report, put it, "because of the host-nation support provided by Japan and South Korea, it is cheaper to base the forces in Asia than in the United States."³⁸

By any reckoning, the United States remains the most powerful external power in inter-Korean affairs. In the post-Cold War era, the United States has come to play the rather unusual role of the "honest broker" in the resolution of the Korean conflict, without first dismantling its Cold War U.S.-ROK alliance, without addressing the issue of U.S. troop presence in South Korea, and without normalizing its relations with North Korea. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the great-power politics on the Korean Peninsula is that none of the three neighboring powers has a military presence on the Peninsula. Only the United States, the lone superpower, maintains some 37,000 troops on South Korean soil.

The point here seems clear enough. A divided or united Korea would hardly matter in American foreign policy were it not for three factors: its strategic location at the vortex of Northeast Asian geopolitics, Pyongyang's asymmetrical military capabilities (i.e., WMD or weapons of mass destruction), and the clear and continuing danger of a system or state collapse with destabilizing regional spillovers. Since the mid-1990s, North Korea's growing weakness and instability, combined with the dangerous asymmetry of power on the Korean Peninsula, has paradoxically set in motion an agonizing reappraisal of America's North Korea policy. It has become increasingly clear that America's deterrence policy alone is no longer sufficient for coping with the threat of a third kind—a North Korean "hard landing" (i.e., a reunification-via-collapse leading to an absorption of North Korea by South Korea). America's North Korea policy shifted in the late 1990s from deterrence to "deterrence-plus." The logic of the deterrence-plus policy, associated with the Perry process, is neither to prop up the North Korean system nor to seek its collapse, but to promote a process of dialogue and confidence-building relations that move beyond deterrence.³⁹ With the deterrence-plus policy has come a shift from a reactive to a more active role in the management of inter-Korean affairs. And yet it has not been easy to pursue the deterrence-plus policy because of a mismatch between desirability and feasibility in two scenarios: the hard landing scenario is the least desirable but most likely outcome, while the "soft landing" is the most desirable but least likely outcome.⁴⁰

Does Washington still figure prominently in Pyongyang's calculations, to place the world's lone superpower in the economic and security role previously played by the Soviet Union and China during the Cold War? Or has there been a subtle but significant reorientation in Pyongyang's great-power strategy, as showcased in the rejuvenation of Sino-DPRK and Russia-DPRK relations since 1999? Is Pyongyang playing multiple cards—the China card, the Russia card, and the U.S.

card—in the strategic games of Northeast Asian international relations?

In the post-Cold War era, as Robert Manning argues, the United States has become the focal point of Pyongyang's efforts at regime survival, the key to enhancement of international legitimacy, economic aid, investment and increased trade, and tactical benefits in its relations with South Korea.⁴¹ Indeed, the United States is at once a strategic life boat, a mortal threat, and a Rorschach test, calling for an ever larger array and variety of threats (asymmetrical military capabilities) as bargaining chips as well as for existential deterrence. Yet the successful execution of such an America-centric survival strategy has encountered a host of problems, all stemming from the different priorities and incentive structures that drive each party's respective policies toward the other.

For Washington, the central concern has remained the same: how to deal with Pyongyang's asymmetrical threats in an alliance-friendly and cost-effective way. The North Korea policy of the United States, as the lone superpower in the post-Cold War era, is shaped by global concerns (such as maintenance of the integrity of the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime), but also by East Asian regional and U.S.-ROK bilateral concerns and by fractious partisan politics at home.

Contrary to the conventional realist wisdom, in asymmetrical negotiations the strong state does not ipso facto exert greater control than the weak state. If a small and weak state occupies territory of strategic importance to a larger and stronger state, or if the "field of play" is on the weak actor's home turf (as was the case in the U.S.-Panama negotiations and British-Iceland Cod Wars, and as now is the case in U.S.-DPRK asymmetrical negotiations), the weaker state can display bargaining power disproportionate to its aggregate structural power.⁴² Pyongyang's proximity to the strategic field of play, its high stakes, resolve, and control, its relative asymmetrical military capabilities, and its coercive leverage strategy have all combined to enable the DPRK to exercise bargaining power disproportionate to its aggregate structural power in the U.S.-DPRK asymmetric conflict and negotiations.

The Clinton administration learned the hard way that the United States had no alternative but to retreat by accepting North Korea's package deal proposal that culminated in the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework. Reflecting on his involvement in the emergency national security meeting of June 16, 1994, on the most serious North Korean nuclear brinkmanship crisis of his tenure as Secretary of Defense, William Perry writes about a third-way option for a negotiated deal in the face of the extremely limited alternatives available to U.S. policymakers: "We were about to give the president a choice between

a disastrous option—allowing North Korea to get a nuclear arsenal, which we might have to face someday—and an unpalatable option, blocking this development, but thereby risking a destructive nonnuclear war."⁴³ Given all the constraints on America's issue-specific power, the rise of a cost-effective foreign policy, and the collapse of a bipartisan foreign policy consensus in the 1990s, the Agreed Framework could be said to be the worst deal, except that there was no better alternative.

At the same time, Pyongyang's normalization efforts are best seen as part of a Cold War habit of manipulating major powers to gain maximum security and economic benefits. It is becoming increasingly clear that Kim Jong II's agreement to hold the historic inter-Korean summit in June 2000 was a major concession not so much to Seoul as to Washington. Pyongyang was exploiting the new connection with Seoul to speed up normalization talks with the United States and to gain access to bilateral and multilateral aid and foreign direct investment.⁴⁴ Indeed, the second half of 2000 witnessed a flurry of Pyongyang-Washington interactions, including two quasi-summit meetings—one between President Clinton and Vice Marshal Jo Myong-Rok in Washington and another between Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Chairman Kim Jong II in Pyongyang. Despite significant progress toward a U.S.-DPRK missile accord, at the end of the year Pyongyang stopped short of diplomatic success, due partly to on-site verification issues and partly to rapidly changing U.S. political circumstances beyond its control.

The presence of 37,000 American troops on South Korean soil, coupled with President Kim Dae Jung's public declaration on several occasions that U.S. troops must, for the sake of peace and security in Northeast Asia, remain even after the two Koreas are unified, have become symbols of allied credibility, resolve, and commitment. As President Kim Dae Jung has explained, "The US forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula and in Japan are decisive to the maintenance of peace and balance of power not only on the Peninsula but also in Northeast Asia. By the same token, the U.S. forces in Europe are an indispensable factor for peace and stability of all of Europe."⁴⁵ The United States and South Korea have agreed publicly that U.S. forces in Korea will remain even after the disappearance of the North Korean threat: "The US welcomes the public statements of ROK President Kim Dae Jung affirming the value of the bilateral alliance and the US military presence even after reunification of the Korean peninsula. The US strongly agrees that our alliance and military presence will continue to support stability both on the Korean Peninsula and throughout the region after North Korea is no longer a threat."⁴⁶

Although the United States and South Korea share the common

goal of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, their interests and strategies are not identical. Even under the best of circumstances, it is not easy to harmonize competing global, regional, and bilateral interests. But the demise of the Soviet threat, accompanied by the rise of contentious partisan domestic politics—in American foreign policy in general and East Asia policy in particular—has increasingly become a moving target on turbulent trajectories of competing and mutually conflictive ends and means. Post-Cold War American foreign policy is marked not only by the traditional discrepancy between ends (purposes) and means (power), but also by multiple discrepancies between ends and ends—neo-Wilsonian multilateralism, mercantile realism (economic nationalism), strategic realism, humanitarianism, and neo-isolationist minimalism—as well as between means and means—unilateralism, bilateralism, neo-multilateralism (bilateralism-cum-multilateralism), and U.S. hegemonic leadership.⁴⁷

With the coming of the hardline "ABC" (All But Clinton) Bush administration, it was Clinton's North Korea policy, not North Korea itself, that first experienced a hard crash landing, with the paradoxical consequence of a remarkable role reversal in the U.S.-ROK alliance relationship. More than ever before, Washington's and Seoul's North Korea policies are out of sync with each other. All the same, the Bush administration has initiated a major paradigm shift in its military and strategic doctrine from a "threat-based" to a "capabilities-based" model, better to cope with the asymmetrical advantages of its adversaries, including North Korea.⁴⁸ Pyongyang has held Washington's new hard-line administration hostage to the resumption of inter-Korean dialogue for more than a year (from early 2001 to mid-2002). This America-centric effort not only breaches the letter and the spirit of the North-South Joint Declaration of June 15, 2000 (Article 1), but also contradicts North Korea's own longstanding party line that Korean affairs should be handled without foreign intervention or interference. With the Bush administration openly threatening to launch a preemptive military strike against Iraq, one of the three charter members of the "axis of evil," will North Korea be next on America's hit list?

Concluding Remarks

There is no simple answer to the question of how long the post-Kim II Sung system will survive and in what shape or form, because the interplay of North Korea and the outside world is highly complex, variegated, and well-nigh unpredictable. What complicates our understanding of the shape of things to come in North Korea is that all the neighboring countries involved, including China and the United

States, have become moving targets on turbulent trajectories of their respective domestic politics, subject to competing and often contradictory pressures.

Still, the interplay of China and the United States in inter-Korean affairs leads to an obvious and somewhat paradoxical conclusion. For its part, post-Tiananmen China as a rising power is arguably a more influential player than at any time since the Korean War, and more so than any other peripheral power in the reshaping of the future of the Korean Peninsula. For its own geopolitical interests, Beijing has played a generally positive role in Korean affairs, not only by providing necessary if insufficient (in Pyongyang's eyes) diplomatic and economic support to the DPRK, but also by making it clear to Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo that it is now in the common interest of all to promote the peaceful coexistence of the two Korean states on the Peninsula, rather than having to cope with the turmoil, chaos, and even massive exodus of refugees that would follow in the wake of system collapse in the North. Thus, Beijing seems determined to manage the threat of a North Korean collapse and the costs of regional spillover in the form of refugees or even armed conflict escalation. Washington, however, is determined to eliminate the threat of Pyongyang's asymmetrical capabilities (weapons of mass destruction) once and for all, even at the risk of igniting armed conflict escalation on the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

Although Beijing and Washington today command a rather unique position and rather unique influence as holding the key to regime survival, the future of North Korea is not for China or the United States to make or unmake. Both countries can help or hinder North Korea in taking one system-rescuing approach instead of another, but in the end no outside power can determine North Korea's future and the future of the Korean Peninsula.

That said, however, we may proceed from the premise that the way the outside world, especially Beijing and Washington, responds to Pyongyang is closely keyed to the way North Korea responds to the outside world. To say that North Korea's future is unpredictable is to say 'that its future is malleable, not predetermined. Herein lies the potential of external factors in the reshaping of North Korea's future in a preferred direction. Such a nondeterministic image of the future of the post-Kim II Sung system opens up some space for the outside world to use whatever leverage it might have to help North Korean leaders opt for one futuristic scenario or another in the coming years. The jury is still out as to whether post-Kim II Sung North Korea can ride out its economic difficulties by means of a tenuous external life-support system without forfeiting its *juche* identity or without a sudden crash

landing. Final note: to paraphrase Campbell and Reiss, if the long and bumpy road to Korean reunification runs through Pyongyang, Beijing and Washington should expect to be charged a heavy toll.

Notes

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3. See Samuel Kim, "Introduction: A Systems Approach," and Chung-in Moon and Yongho Kim, "The Future of the North Korean System," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 1-37 and 221-258.

4. Robert Legvold, "The Three Russias: Decline, Revolution, and Reconstruction," in *A Century's Journey: How the Great Powers Shape the World*, ed. Robert A. Pastor (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 158.

5. Bertrand de Jouvenal, *The Art of Conjecture* (New York: Basic Books, 1967).

6. See William M. Drennan, "The U. S. Role in Korean Reunification," *Korea and World Affairs* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 159-176. and Pollack and Lee, *Preparing for Korean Unification*.

7. See Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

8. Gerald Segal, "Does China Matter?" *Foreign Affairs* 78, 5 (September/October 1999): 24-36; quote on 32.

9. The World Bank, *World Development Report 2002* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 232.
10. Song Dexing, "Lengzhan hou Dongbei Ya anquan xingshe de bianhua," (Changes in the Post-Cold War Northeast Asian Security Situation) *Xiandai guoji guanxi* (Contemporary International Relations), No. 9 (1998): 34-38.
11. Hu Weixing, "Beijing's Defense Strategy and the Korean Peninsula" *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14:3 (Fall 1995): 50-67 and Zhang Xiaoming, "The Korean Peninsula and China's National Security: Past, Present, and Future," *Asian Perspective* 22:3 (1998): 259-272.
12. Chen Qimao, "The Role of the Great Powers in the Process of Korean Reunification," in *Korean Unification: Implications for Northeast Asia*, ed. Amos A. Jordan (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1993), p. 70, emphasis added.
13. See Lee Young-sun, "Is Korean Reunification Possible?" *Korea Focus* (May-June 1995), p. 13.
14. Park Young-ho, "International Perceptions of Korean Unification Issues," *Korea Focus* (January-February 1998): 72-80, quote on p. 78.
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16. See *Hsin Pao* (Hong Kong), 8 April 1994, 24, in *FBIS-Ch*^ 12 April 1994, pp. 13-15, and *Hsin Pao*^ 24 June 1994, 25, in *FBIS-China*^ 24 June 1994, pp. 7-8, quotations on pp. 14 and 7, respectively.
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19. See Wang Chunyin, "Chaoxian bandao anquan xingshi zhanwang" (Prospects for the security situation on the Korean peninsula), *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, No. 6 (1996), pp. 10-12.
20. See Yu Shaohua, "Chaoxian bandao xingshi de fazhan yu qianjing," (The Evolving Situation and Future Prospects of the Korean Peninsula) *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (International Studies), No. 4 (1997), pp. 12-16, especially 12.
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22. Quoted in Eric A. McVadon, "China's Goals and Strategies for the Korean Peninsula," in Henry D. Sokolski, ed., *Planning for a Peaceful Korea* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2001), 170.
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24. Wu, "Managing the Korean Issue" 81 and Yong Deng, "Chinese Perceptions of U.S. Power and Strategy," *Asian Affairs* 28, 3 (fall 2001), 151-52.
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26. Yi Xiaoxiong, "China's Korea Policy: From 'One Korea' to 'Two Koreas'," *Asian Affairs* (Summer 1995): 133.
27. Eric A. McVadon, "Chinese Military Strategy for the Korean Peninsula," in James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh, eds., *China's Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 287.
28. Fei-Ling Wang, "Joining the Major Powers for the Status Quo: China's Views and Policy on Korean Reunification," *Pacific Affairs* 72:2 (Summer 1999): 181.
29. Ibid.
30. Kurt M. Campbell and Mitchell B. Reiss, "Korean Changes, Asian Challenges and the U.S. Role," *Survival* 43, 1 (spring 2001): 62.
31. Zhao Gancheng, "China's Korea Unification Policy," in *The Four Powers and Korean Unification Strategies*, ed., Tae-Hwan Kwak (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 1997), p. 82 (emphasis added).
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39. See "Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," Unclassified Report by Dr. William J. Perry, U.S. North Korea Policy Coordinator and Special Advisor to the President and the Secretary of State, Washington, DC, October 12, 1999 at the Department of State home page on the World Wide Web at http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012_northkorea_rpt.html [accessed October 30, 2001].

40. See Drennan, "The U.S. Role in Korean Reunification."
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44. For analysis by Russia's Korea experts based on their discussions with North Korean representatives, see *DPRK Report*, no. 24 (May-June 2000) and *DPRK Report*, no. 26 (September-October 2000), at the Nautilus Institute home page on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nautilus.org/pub/ftp/nasnet/russiadprk> [access October 30, 2000]. Interestingly enough, Han Sik Park of the University of Georgia, who has extensive connections and who regularly visits North Korea, argues that the Pyongyang summit is a continuation of "legitimacy war" by other means, not the end of it. See Han S. Park, "The Nature and Evolution of the Inter-Korean Legitimacy War," in Kyung-Ae Park and Dalchoong Kim, eds., *Korean Security Dynamics in Transition* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3-17.
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