

# **US Strategic Interests and Future Role in the Peaceful Unification of the Korean Peninsula**

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## **Abstract**

The United States has tried numerous approaches to dealing with the North Korean threat in recent decades. Neither negotiations nor economic aid have weaned the North Korean state away from building nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles or from ratcheting up tensions periodically with South Korea, Japan, and the United States to extract concessions from the West. All other policies having failed, it is incumbent on the United States to try the only policy with any conceivable chance of success: a policy of encouraging the peaceful demise of the North Korean regime followed by the unification of the Korean peninsula into a single democratic, free-market state. Admittedly US leverage to achieve this outcome is limited, but further sanctions on North Korea, especially on its finances, can help. So, too, would greater efforts both internationally and within North Korea to call attention to North Korean human rights abuses. The United States should also initiate a dialogue with Beijing over what a post-unification Korea will look like to make Chinese leaders more comfortable with that prospect and to wean them away from their policy of giving a blank check to Pyongyang. As a trump card, the United States can promise not to station its troops north of the present demilitarized zone (DMZ) in a unified Korea—or to withdraw its troops from the Korean Peninsula altogether—in order to win Chinese support for unification.

**Keywords:** North Korea, South Korea, US strategy and foreign policy, unification

## **Introduction**

This article addresses US strategic interests and the US role in the unification of the Korean peninsula. What are the risks and opportunities for US interests? What role should the United States play in bringing

about the unification of the Korean peninsula? Where might a unified Korea fit in the United States' conceptions of Northeast Asia in the long run? The existence of two separate Korean states—each with starkly divergent histories, national identities, and development paths—has long defined US policy. Decades of history, however, should not inhibit consideration of future strategic possibilities.

North Korea has proven to be one of the most vexing and persistent problems in US foreign policy ever since 1950. The threat has not declined with the end of the Cold War, as many once expected that it would. North Korea continues to pose major risks to US and regional security interests, including not just the threat of an attack on South Korea that would put US troops in harm's way, but also the ultimate threat of nuclear proliferation or even possibly in the future the threat of actual attack on the American mainland from a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) armed with a nuclear warhead (a capacity that North Korea does not yet possess but is busy developing).

Even though the United States has never had formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, three US administrations going back to the days of President Clinton in the 1990s have tried to address the threat through negotiations—at first bilateral and then multilateral through the six-party mechanism. Such talks, in whatever form, have completely failed in their goal of achieving North Korean denuclearization. While Pyongyang has been willing to make promises of ending its nuclear program in return for aid and recognition, it has not been willing to carry out its pledges.

The path of negotiations has proven no more promising in the era of Kim Jong-un than during the days of his father or grandfather. The first bilateral agreement concluded on February 29, 2012 with the new supreme leader of North Korea—the so-called “Leap Day” accord involving the provision of aid in return for freezing some nuclear and missile activities—fell apart after Pyongyang launched a satellite in April 2012 in a clear violation of that agreement as well as of several United Nations Security Council resolutions.<sup>1</sup> Prospects for negotiations dimmed further after Pyongyang launched another, more successful, long-range rocket launch in December 2012, conducted a third nuclear test in February 2013, amplified rhetoric against Washington and Seoul, and restarted the Yongbyon nuclear complex. In response, President Obama sent nuclear-capable B-2 and B-52 bombers to overfly South Korea, while deploying missile defenses to the region. For her part,

South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye, has made clear that any North Korean attack will be met with South Korean retaliation including targeting of command and control centers.

North Korea's refusal to negotiate in good faith with the United States or South Korea has been combined with an unwillingness to undertake fundamental reforms at home. Kim Jong-un, far from being a reformer, appears to be acting from the same old Stalinist playbook as his father and grandfather. In late 2013, he executed his uncle and North Korea's second-most-powerful official, raising renewed concerns about Pyongyang's internal political stability and Kim's unpredictability. Indeed, in spite of its impressive survival to date, cracks are appearing in the edifice of the North Korean state, including signs of growing elite discord and the regime's declining ability to control and block the flow of outside information to its citizens.

There is no question North Korea's future is bleak. There is no other country in the world that is more diplomatically isolated, politically repressive, or economically misguided. Even its closest ally and benefactor, China, is getting less tolerant of the current regime. And in the realm of diplomatic and economic competition as well as every measure of national power save military capabilities and nuclear weapons, the North has lost badly to the South, which is often cited as one of the most successful models of economic and political development in the postwar world.<sup>2</sup> South Korea is the world's thirteenth largest economy today and former President Lee Myung has even stated that the South should strive to become the world's seventh largest economy within the next decade. North Korea, by contrast, is one of the world's poorest states.<sup>3</sup>

The North, incapable of competing with an economically flourishing South Korea, can rely only on military and political brinkmanship and nuclear weapons to make up ground. It sees possessing nuclear weapons as essential for its national security and identity as well as achieving power and prestige on the international stage. In fact, the North has a long history of nuclear development, which strongly suggests that it can neither be cajoled nor persuaded into giving up its nuclear arsenal.<sup>4</sup> This is why, even though North Korea has been the recipient of well over \$1 billion in US aid and the target of dozens of US sanctions to date, Washington has not been able to coax the North to denuclearize. That goal remains as unachievable now as in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Given this reality, Washington's policy towards North Korea and the Korean peninsula cannot be limited to seeking denuclearization. This is an increasingly unrealistic goal to achieve. The current administration's "strategic patience" approach of waiting around for the North to change its mind and seriously return to the negotiating table is as likely to fail as the policies of past administrations. Then what should be Washington's policy in dealing with North Korea? To begin with, Washington should abandon an unrealistic hope that any negotiation with the North could lead to denuclearization. Even if there is a deal, Pyongyang would never accept the strict verification requirements needed to ensure compliance.

This article argues that what Washington needs is a long-term vision and strategy. It needs to fundamentally alter its strategic calculus when it comes to the future of the Korean peninsula. Although understandably the primary and most immediate focus of US policy towards North Korea will continue to be the North's nuclear and missile program and other immediate issues such as curbing the North's illicit activities, Washington must now proactively support a broader strategy: namely to actively promote and pursue policies that would bring about the collapse of the Stalinist state of North Korea and the reunification of the Korean peninsula into a single, democratic, free-market, pro-Western state that would be a bigger version of today's South Korea.

### **Current Situation: Where North Korea Stands Today**

The demise of Kim Il-sung in 1994, coming right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, led to widespread expectations that the state he founded, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), would die with him. It didn't happen. His son, Kim Jong-il, managed to carry on pretty much as before until his own death on December 17, 2011. After Kim Jong-il's demise, there was speculation throughout the Western media concerning whether the succession process would bring about the regime's rapid demise or at least discernible instability in Pyongyang. It was feared in South Korea that the transition could give rise to power struggles in the North Korean military, which might find expression in aggression against the South. The South Korean military was put on a state of alert and prepared for a possible escalation of the conflict with the North.

More than two and half years after the death of Kim Jong-Il, such speculation has not been borne out. Kim Jong-un appears to have consolidated his position among both the Workers' Party of Korea and the military. And today, North Korea looms as strong—and as weak—as ever: Notwithstanding its extreme poverty and repression (its GDP per capita ranks 195<sup>th</sup> in the world),<sup>6</sup> it is still able to threaten its prosperous and democratic neighbor to the south with its nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and massive conventional forces.

Amid this dire economic, social and humanitarian situation, the Kim Jong-un regime's options for addressing the state's profound internal problems are decidedly bleak. Amid acute deprivation, continuous militarization, and refusal to reform its command economy, North Korea grimly persists, while spending itself into massive foreign debt and without definitive indications of where the country is headed or how Pyongyang proposes to get there. Kim Jong-un has shown that he is unlikely to deviate from the policies his father and grandfather have pursued over the past 60 years as some Korea watchers may have hoped when he first came to power. The young leader appears pretty much bent on continuing the strategies and policies that have "worked" for the past sixty-plus years in the sense of allowing the Kim dynasty to stay in power.

Meanwhile, all the key pillars of regime stability are showing signs of erosion, including elite unity and support for the regime as the ruling class struggles for power and influence. In December 2013, Kim Jong-un publicly executed his uncle and the second most powerful man in the regime, Jang Song-taek, on charges of plotting against him. (South Korean intelligence reports Jang's execution came after a behind-the-scenes power struggle over control of North Korea's coal exports to China.)<sup>7</sup> Such an event is unprecedented in the 66-year history of the DPRK; never before has one of the ruling Kims executed such a close relative. This raises a legitimate question of whether Kim Jong-un is having more trouble consolidating his authority than previously believed. Moreover, while Jang's removal may help to strengthen Kim's rule in the short run by terrorizing potential rivals within the regime, Jang's execution likely has fundamentally corroded long-term elite support of the regime. In fact, it is probable that Jang's execution could raise questions in the minds of both the North Korean and Chinese elites, which have long supported the Kim family, about whether the thirty-one-year-old heir to the throne is not worthy of trust. The elites must know

that if Kim can turn on his uncle, any of them could be next in his gunshots. A key reason why the North Korean state was able to persist for this long has been the Kims' ability to maintain the support of powerbrokers in the party, the military and the government. All other priorities have been subordinate to this core interest. Jang's execution calls into question the loyalty of these key "shareholders" of the regime.

North Korea also keeps its system going by overlapping and stove piped domestic intelligence and police agencies and by utilizing a pervasive web of informers along with coercive force and fear tactics. But what we are also seeing in the North is high levels of bribery and corruption, which is slowly eroding the strength of these security services. Moreover, the regime's ability to maintain tight control over the population by indoctrination and maintaining a monopoly on information is eroding. Unofficial information is increasingly seeping into the North over the porous border with China, chipping away at regime myths and undermining the solidarity of the North Korean people under the Kims. The South Korean wave of pop culture, known as "Hallyu," appears to be sweeping into the world's most reclusive country. The South Korean hit television drama, "My Love from the Star," is not only a mega-hit in China, it is reportedly also popular in the North. One South Korean academic who visited a region in China on the border with North Korea in late July 2014, noted that an MP5 mobile player, which costs about \$20 is currently being sold in the North, boosting the spread of South Korean dramas and film.<sup>8</sup>

The North Korean state has been able to survive through massive foreign assistance. For a long time, South Korea and China supported the regime. During South Korea's "Sunshine Policy" years, 1998-2008, President Kim Dae-jung and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, pumped approximately \$8 billion in economic assistance into the North. However, South Korean foreign assistance to the North has largely ceased since the Lee Myung-bak administration. China is now North Korea's most important ally and its biggest trading partner. It is almost North Korea's exclusive supplier of food (an estimated 45 percent of the total consumed) and energy (90 percent). North Korea's trade turnover is less than \$9 billion and two-thirds of that is with China. China also provides about half of all North Korean imports, including mineral fuels and oil, machinery, electrical machinery, vehicles, plastic, iron and steel, and provides about 80 percent of North Korea's consumer goods.<sup>9</sup>

There are indications, however, that today China's "special relationship" with North Korea is changing and that Beijing's patience with Pyongyang is wearing thin, particularly in the aftermath of the North's third nuclear test in February 2013. Beijing is also undoubtedly unsettled about the execution of Jang, who was the North's chief envoy to China and a proponent of Chinese-style reforms. Even before the third nuclear test and Jang's execution, the release of the "Wikileaks" documents from the US government in 2010 has shown that at least parts of the Chinese government have been extremely critical of North Korea.<sup>10</sup> According to one cable from early 2010, then South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Chung Yung-woo claimed that a number of Chinese officials had told him that they accepted as inevitable a North Korean regime collapse and reunification under South Korean control in the not too distant future.<sup>11</sup>

China is still unlikely to apply the kind of blunt pressure to the North that would be needed to swiftly topple the regime—such as cutting off food and fuel for more than a few days—because, aggravating as the current regime may be, China's leadership is more afraid of what will come afterward. China has historically supported North Korea virtually unconditionally and has sustained the Kim dynasty, now into the third generation, as the least-bad alternative in the North. China has done this in the hope of ensuring a friendly nation on its northeastern border that would provide a buffer against US forces stationed in South Korea. China's top priority always has been avoiding regime instability, which would raise the fear of American troops advancing to the Yalu River and of North Korean refugees flooding into China. Yet, at least tactically, Beijing has and is shifting its policy in some small but significant ways. Beijing has signed onto tougher UN sanctions after the third nuclear test, which included a provision requiring states to inspect any North Korean cargo that was believed to include items prohibited by previous sanctions against the North. President Xi Jinping has also met with South Korean President Park Geun-hye on numerous occasions, including a highly publicized summit in Beijing in June 2013 and in Seoul in June 2014. Significantly, Xi has yet to meet with Kim Jong-un.

This combination of factors precipitated by Jang's assassination, has called into question support for the Kims both from China and from their own regime "stakeholders." It has also increased the potential for instability in North Korea, which was already growing due to economic failure and the growing influx of outside information. While the popular

uprisings that have swept countries from East Germany and the Philippines to Egypt, Syria, Libya and Tunisia are unlikely in North Korea, they are still a reminder that sudden change is always possible. It is entirely possible, if not likely in the short term, that uncertainties surrounding the long-term prospects of the Kim regime could precipitate a cascading set of events that would end with swift and unexpected unification.

### **Review of US Strategies, Goals and Policies toward the North**

The United States has spent massive resources since 1945 in maintaining a strong military presence in South Korea. In a sense, the United States has effectively used its powerful military to maintain the status quo on the peninsula and prevent another Korean war from breaking out. Washington can claim that military action has not been required; the presence of overwhelming military power has been a sufficient deterrent.

At the same time, the United States has been decidedly unsuccessful in restraining North Korea's nuclear ambitions, preventing the North from building, and threatening the use of, nuclear weapons either against US forces in the region or against South Korea or Japan. The United States was also unable to stop North Korea from stockpiling, using and distributing other weapons of mass destruction, specifically chemical and biological munitions, or from selling increasingly sophisticated ballistic missiles to other nations.

The United States, for all its stalwart deterrence, has a long history of insufficiently responding to the North's various provocations over the years and giving concessions to the North in response for its provocative behavior. In March 1993, during the Clinton administration, when Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty, it precipitated its first nuclear crisis with Washington. After lengthy negotiations, on October 12, 1994, the United States and North Korea signed the "Agreed Framework" in which the North agreed to freeze its plutonium production program in exchange for an American-led consortium providing ten years' worth of heavy oil deliveries and building two modern, electricity-generating light-water nuclear plants at an estimated cost of approximately \$4 billion.<sup>12</sup> The cover story for the North's pursuit of nuclear plants, actually guided by its desire for geopolitical power, was a purported desire for more electrical power. Unfortunately, despite the Agreed Framework, the North would continue



to stage provocations to extort more benefits from the West.

Four years later in 1998, the North launched its multi-stage, long-range missile over the main island of Japan, leading to another burst of diplomatic activities. This resulted in Washington pledging to send 400,000 tons of food worth approximately \$177 million to the North for the privilege of inspecting a hollow cave which was not, as widely suspected, a covert nuclear site.<sup>13</sup> Initially when US diplomats demanded access to the suspect site, Pyongyang's representatives loudly and strenuously resisted such access.<sup>14</sup> It turned out that North Korea's actions had been an elaborate charade—by the time inspectors arrived at Kumchang-ri, there was nothing to see save a hole in the ground. The North did continue working on nuclear weapons, just not at this site.

In October 2002, the Agreed Framework officially collapsed following the US discovery that while the North stopped plutonium enrichment, it was undertaking a second, uranium-based nuclear program. Escalating reaction from the United States eventually led North Korea to end its cooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards and withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, causing the collapse of the Agreed Framework.<sup>15</sup> But the North's first nuclear test in October 2006, coming at a time when the war in Iraq was at a critical phase, painted the George W. Bush administration into a corner, causing the administration to shift away from its hardline stance.

In response to stinging criticism that his “hardline” policy in the first term had led to the North testing its first nuclear weapon, and not wanting to be seen as a “warmonger,” President Bush, at the insistence of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, chose to abandon his one effective policy of financially squeezing the North Korean elites' cash flows—a policy which began with the imposition of sanctions on Macao-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA). The US Treasury ordered US companies and financial institutions to cut links with BDA, where the North reportedly kept \$25 million in various accounts.<sup>16</sup> After easing the BDA sanctions, the Bush administration then negotiated a nuclear agreement with the North in February 2007 and went even as far as to remove North Korea from the state-sponsored terrorism list and to resume food aid in 2008, at the cost of straining the United States' relationship with its closest ally in the region, Japan. In return, the North blew up the dilapidated plutonium cooling tower in Youngbyon while continuing to enrich uranium at separate facilities.

It must have come as a surprise to the North Koreans, then, when its tried-and-true brinkmanship tactics failed to yield concessions from President Obama. Obama has been more unyielding than either Clinton or Bush, which is likely one of the reasons why the North has been compelled to ratchet up its rhetoric and actions ever higher in the past year. Hoping for similar concessions from the Obama administration, Pyongyang initially greeted the Obama administration with a series of provocations, while ignoring the new president's stated desire to engage with North Korea and even to meet with its leader personally. During the first six months of the Obama administration, the North's provocations included short- and long-range missile tests, an announcement that it was withdrawing from the Six-Party Talks for good, a declaration that it planned to pursue uranium enrichment program, and a second nuclear test in May 2009.

The most recent cycle of provocations began with a successful test of a long-range rocket used to launch a satellite (the second satellite launch of the year) in December 2012, followed by the North's third nuclear test on February 2013, which, by some assessments, was two and a half times larger than the previous test, with a yield between 5 and 15 kilotons.<sup>17</sup> The North followed the third nuclear test by declaring that its nuclear weapons are "not a bargaining chip" and would not be relinquished even for "billions of dollars."<sup>18</sup> These tests have moved the North closer to its goal of developing a viable, long-range, nuclear-weapon delivery system, which it believes will force the international community to recognize it as a bona fide nuclear-weapons state. Along with the increase in weapons testing also came an escalation in rhetoric, with the North threatening to launch a nuclear attack on the United States and South Korea.<sup>19</sup> Despite its continuing financial hardship, the North even pulled its workers temporarily out of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), an undertaking run jointly with South Korea, which generated, by some estimates, \$90 million in hard currency each year. (The South and North have since resumed operations at KIC).<sup>20</sup>

Despite the North's provocations, however, it is receiving relatively little attention in Washington compared with other crises from Ukraine to Syria and Iraq to China's confrontations with its neighbors. In the absence of sustained attention in policy circles, the United States is on default mode, effectively prioritizing denuclearization as its top concern in North Korea even if it is not doing much to bring about that goal. Washington's secondary goal is to maintain stability in Northeast Asia

which effectively makes the United States reluctant to do very much to destabilize the Kim regime. The United States did for the first time formally commit to Korean reunification as a desirable end state in the June 2009 US-ROK Joint Vision Statement, but there has not active discussion or planning in Washington for how to bring about this objective.

### **Risks and Opportunities of Unified Korea for US Strategic Interests**

Should the United States in fact do more to bring about reunification? It is true that for the United States and the region, even under the best of circumstances, the reunification of South and North Korea will be more expensive and more challenging than the unification of East and West Germany, because the two Koreas are further apart when measured by standard of living, education, and a variety of other indices? Some may also argue that a divided Korean peninsula is in America's interest because it justifies a continuing US military presence in South Korea (which can be used to contain China) and because the United States will likely find a unified Korea harder to influence than today's South Korea which depends on the United States for military support.

But it is a mistake for the United States to conclude that continued division of the peninsula is the preferable alternative. In fact, there is good cause to question the widely held belief that reunification would be a disaster and provide an unacceptable risk not only for the United States but for South Korea and the region. Unification of the Korean peninsula will be a great boon not only for Korea and the region but for the United States as well from an economic, security, and human-rights perspective.

To be sure, there will be numerous significant short-term challenges, the most pressing from the American standpoint being securing North Korea's nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems. A related challenge will be to maintain the command structure of the Korean People's Army to prevent the emergence of factional fighting, attacks by diehard elements against US and South Korean forces, or the kind of chaos which has gripped post-Qaddafi Libya. There will also be a pressing need to avert a potential humanitarian crisis. This would require the provision of food, security, and basic public services (especially water, electricity, and telecommunications) to the long-suffering North Korean population. If left unaddressed, these needs could prompt hunger and disease in the North and send floods of refugees pouring out of the country, especially overland into China and by sea to South Korea and

Japan—a potential new exodus of “boat people.”

The ultimate fear of reunification is that the financial and social bill from assimilating North Korea will prove ruinous for South Korea; the United States will mostly certainly be tapped to pick up part of the tab. Many economists warn that total bill of unification likely will be higher than the cost of German unification, estimated to be \$1.9 trillion over twenty years (1989-2009). Whatever the exact figure (which, of course, is unknowable in advance), there is little doubt that the expenditure will be significant and that the difficulties of long-term assimilation will be exacerbated by the social difficulties of integrating an isolated, impoverished population that has been raised on worship of the Kim family and its Juche ideology.

Yet such challenges could be overcome if the United States and South Korea, among other interested parties including the United Nations, undertake the kind of planning now that did not take place prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact South Korea's Unification Ministry has spent decades preparing for just such a scenario in cooperation with the Defense Ministry and US Forces-Korea. There is every reason to believe that South Korea's large, well-equipped and well-trained armed forces will be able to rapidly assume control of North Korea in the event of a regime collapse and to provide basic services until civilian government functions can restart.

The probability of successfully addressing an instability scenario in the North would be heightened if the United States and South Korea could involve China in talks about how all of the neighbors would deal with the fallout from North Korea's collapse—something that has not happened to date because Beijing has refused to publicly entertain the possibility that the Kim regime may not last forever. Even without Chinese participation, however, South Korea will be helped by having learned valuable lessons from the collapse of dictatorships in such countries as East Germany, Libya, and Iraq.

Assuming that transitional problems can be successfully addressed, there are manifold benefits of a unified Korean state, not only for the Korean peninsula and the region but for the United States. In the first place, the disappearance of North Korea would eliminate one of the biggest sources of instability and weapons proliferation in northeast Asia. Gone will be concerns about North Korea selling its nuclear weapons or missiles abroad, staging armed attacks against South Korea, kidnapping Japanese citizens—or drawing the United States into a second major war

on the Korean peninsula. The disappearance of North Korea could even allow for better relations between Beijing and Washington by removing a major irritant from the relationship—China’s support for the Kim regime.

Needless to say, the disappearance of North Korea would also be a tremendous human-rights boon. As a result of the Kim regime’s collapse, 23 million people would get to enjoy freedom after suffering for decades under the most despotic regime on the planet. That change that would be especially welcomed by the estimated 200,000 inmates of North Korea’s slave labor camps.<sup>21</sup> This would be a big win not only for American interests but also American values.

It’s true that a unified Korea would not be as closely aligned with the United States as South Korea is today. But the odds are it would still be democratic, capitalist, and broadly aligned with the United States if careful (as South Korea is today) to maintain amicable relations with China as well. The model here is unified Germany which, despite its relatively warm ties with Moscow (at least until the Ukraine crisis), remains a member of the NATO alliance and a close US ally even after the disappearance of the Soviet Union and its proxy state in East Germany. Like unified Germany unified Korea would be a particularly valuable trade partner for the United States; South Korea’s success in utilizing the North’s untapped mineral resources and workforce could boost not only the Korean economy but also the economy of its close trade partner, the United States.

### **Looking Forward: Policy Recommendations for the United States**

Even granted that unification would be in America’s interests, the question remains of how to bring it about? There is no easy answer to this question. The president of the United States cannot snap his or her fingers and make North Korea disappear—unless the United States is willing to wage preventative war for regime change, something that no one seriously advocates given the risks of another Korean conflict, this time against a nuclear-armed regime. But there are still many non-military steps the United States can take to hasten this desirable objective.

To begin with, the US government simply needs to recognize that Korean unification is in the interest of the United States and is a long-term goal to be desired not feared. This means, at the very least, that the United States and its ally, South Korea, should not do anything more in the future, as they have done in the past, to prop up the Kim dynasty in return for fleeting promises of better behavior that Kim Jong-un is no

more likely to keep than his father or grandfather.

The United States should make it clear to the North that it will pursue a zero tolerance policy in the face of future provocations. For decades, North Korea has been taught that it faces virtually no penalties for its choreographed and calculated acts of provocation. That lesson must be untaught. The North will have an incentive to discontinue its aggression only when it knows that its bad behavior will not be rewarded—and might even trigger devastating retaliation that could threaten the survival of the regime. Words alone will not convey a strong enough message to the North. The United States must show it is serious about what it says. To demonstrate this, United States could enhance missile defense systems around the Korean peninsula (including in Japan and at sea), introduce more air and naval assets into the region, and stage more frequent and more robust US-South Korea joint military exercises, while also enhancing counter-proliferation measures including the interdiction of all North Korean ships and aircraft suspected of complicity in sanctions violations, criminal acts, arms sales, or nuclear and missile proliferation.

The United States should also keep the pressure on North Korea by cutting off all the regime's illicit sources of revenue, especially drug-smuggling and currency-counterfeiting, while also expanding financial sanctions aimed at ending all banking transactions related to the North's weapons trade, and halting most grants and loans. There is a myth that US sanctions on North Korea are already tight. That's not the case. There is much more the United States can do to freeze many of the North's overseas bank accounts, cutting off the funds that the leadership has used to secure fine Cognac, smart phones, Swiss watches, and fancy flat-screen television sets so valued by the North Korean leadership. The Banco Delta case showed how effective even relatively small scale financial sanctions can be in inflicting pain on the North Korean elites. Congress can take the lead on this, as it has on Iran sanctions, by passing legislation by such overwhelming majorities that the administration will be forced to implement it. The House has already passed H.R. 1771 (the North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act sponsored by Rep. Ed Royce with more than 140 co-sponsors) which will go to the Senate next for consideration. The financial sanctions at the core of H.R. 1771 would give teeth to existing trade sanctions at the heart of the UN sanctions by allowing the US government to impose effective financial penalties not only on North Korean individuals and firms but also secondary sanctions

on anyone doing business with them.

Ideally, these measures would be enacted in cooperation with China. If Washington sustains this vigorous approach, the accumulated pressure would most likely minimize Chinese obfuscation and may even induce Xi Jinping's government to cooperate in protecting the integrity of the international financial system. There have been glimmers of hope in the past year that China may finally get tough with North Korea. But even if China does not cooperate, the United States, South Korea, and their allies should adopt these measures, many of which—missile defense, deployments and exercises, interdiction, covert measures, and sanctions—are beyond Beijing's control.

In addition to tightening sanctions on North Korea, the United States should also take concerted action to bring its crimes against humanity to the attention of the world. Washington's current policy of downplaying the dismal human rights record in the world's most brutal and cruel regime is no longer viable. Washington should step up its efforts to draw global attention to the North's vast prison camps and other egregious violation of the most fundamental international human-rights standards. The Bush administration tried to more on this front with the 2004 creation of the Office of the Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea and with some White House meetings for North Korean refugees. But the Bush administration dropped this focus after concluding a deal with Pyongyang, and the Obama administration never stressed it at all even after that deal fell apart. A robust international human-rights campaign in support of the world's most hideously abused population would further isolate the regime, just as the anti-apartheid campaign did with South Africa in the 1980s.

This human-rights campaign should be not restricted to the world outside North Korea—it should also be directed to help the people of North Korea break the information blockade imposed by the state. The United States and South Korea can step up radio broadcasts and other means, some of them covert, to transmit information to North Korea about what is going on in the rest of the world and how North Korean government propaganda does not reflect reality. The Kim regime's control on information, as previously noted, has already been slipping because of the porousness of the China-North Korea border. That trend can be accelerated by concerted, covert action from the United States and South Korea.

While Washington waits for such measures to shake the very

foundations of the North Korean state, Washington should launch a deliberate and intensive diplomatic effort with interested regional powers to promote coordination and preparedness for unification contingencies. The process should start with the United States and South Korea augmenting current joint military planning with a coordinated political, diplomatic, economic, and legal strategy to tackle the core unification issues likely to arise. Both sides have much to gain from this process: South Korea's Unification Ministry and other agencies could contribute years of expertise devoted to precisely this scenario, while the United States could contribute lessons learned from its experiences, good and bad, with nation-building in states such as Germany, Japan, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Once a common vision is developed, the United States and South Korea should then actively encourage Japan's participation in trilateral talks. Japan has important and legitimate interests in the future of the peninsula and the United States and South Korea would benefit from its logistic support and economic assistance, while Japan would benefit from planning to address its concerns, such as the possibility of large-scale refugee movements. As a final step, the trilateral contact group of Seoul, Washington, Tokyo should be to include Beijing.

Pursuing unification of the Korean peninsula, admittedly, will be a hard sell in China, whose leaders fear that the collapse of North Korea would mean the disappearance of a buffer zone against the encroachment of American power. But while Beijing's core strategy toward North Korea has not changed, the strains between Beijing and Pyongyang and Beijing's worries over the increasing possibility of instability in the North suggest there is an opportunity to launch more serious talks with China to take advantage of its concerns. Instead of standing by, hoping that China will change its policy toward the North on its own, the United States should be working hard in behind-the-scenes talks to make China understand that a unified Korea—or at the very least a North Korea with a new, reformist regime on the Chinese model—could be in its interest as well as ours, and that continuing to provide the Kim family dynasty with a virtual blank check is a strategic liability for China. Reaching such an understanding with Beijing is, to be sure, a long shot, but I believe it is more feasible now than in the past.

Even if such talks don't succeed in the short term, simply the process of initiating them and continuing them over a long period could increase China's comfort level with regime change in North Korea and could



eventually pave the way for Beijing to dramatically scale back or even end its subsidies to Pyongyang. As a half-way step toward unification, the United States and South Korea could even try to convince China of the need to back a reformist leader in the North as an alternative to the third generation of Kims to rule with Stalinist brutality. Finding such a leader who would be acceptable to the North Korean elites would, of course, be very difficult, because Kim has made sure to eliminate any potential rivals. But the point would not be necessarily getting a kinder, gentler communist regime in the North; it would be to make China see the error of offering a blank check to the Kims and make it more open to the possibility of unification.

As a potential trump card to win over China, the United States could offer private assurances that in a unified Korea, US troops will not go north of the current DMZ. And if that isn't enough to get Beijing's interest, the United States could go so far as to promise to remove all of its troops from Korea post-unification—something that the Korean government may insist on in any case once it no longer faces an imminent threat from North Korea. Many Americans would no doubt be aghast at the prospect of their troops leaving South Korea while others (of a more isolationist hue) would welcome it as long overdue. Such a change would be hard to process given that US troops have been on the Korean peninsula since 1945. But their removal need not be seen as a defeat for Washington. It would, instead, be a vindication of United States' success in promoting its democratic, free-market vision on the Korean peninsula. And it would not be much of a strategic setback vis-à-vis China since it's doubtful that a unified Korea would have much interest in cooperating with an American policy of containment of China. It's hard to imagine, for example, in the event of a Sino-American war that unified Korea would allow its bases to be used for attacks on China, knowing the likely retaliation that would result from the People's Liberation Army. But then it's doubtful that *South* Korea would allow bases to be used for such a purpose today. The United States could still pursue a policy of containment from bases in Japan, Guam, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and elsewhere in the region. Thus the loss of South Korean bases—which in any case do not loom large in war plans with China—would not be much of a strategic setback for the United States.

Initiating discussions with China is a job for the executive branch but Congress can push the administration along and private citizens

(especially former policymakers and think tankers) can engage in Track II discussions of their own. South Korea, which has a good relationship with China, can encourage such dialogue by privately assuring Chinese leaders that it would be in their interest.

### **Conclusions**

Promoting unification between North and South Korea is no panacea. It is a hard course to pursue because the United States or any other outside power has only limited leverage over the “hermit kingdom” built by the Kims. It could take a long time to show results and there are risks along the way even before we confront the obvious, much-discussed risks involved in regime change in the North—for example, we run the risk of making North Korea even more belligerent by increasing its sense of existential threat.

But the case for making Korean unification the lodestar of American policy is not that this is a quick or easy solution to the problems presented by North Korea’s existence. It is that it is the *only* conceivable solution, because all of the alternative approaches—such as negotiating with North Korea or propping it up with economic aid—have been tried and found sadly wanting. It is high time for policymakers and policy analysts in Washington stop engaging in wishful thinking—to stop imagining that North Korea will reform itself under the current regime to become a miniature version of post-1979 China or that, even failing such reforms, it will somehow voluntarily give up its nuclear weapon and ballistic missiles. It simply isn’t going to happen. A more productive line of reasoning for Washington policy hands to pursue would be to think about what the United States and other outside actors can do to destabilize North Korea, heighten its internal contradictions, and hasten its inevitable demise. Because for all the risks involved in regime change the outcome—a unified and free Korea—is one that the entire world should fervently desire.

### **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Fitzpatrick, “Leap Day in North Korea,” *Foreign Policy*, February 29, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed overview, see Jonathan D. Pollack, “The Strategic Futures and Military Capabilities of the Two Koreas,” in *Strategic Asia 2005–06: Military*

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*Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis and Michael Wills (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005), pp. 136–72.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Cunico, “The Bulldozer Moves In: Lee Myung-bak Is Inaugurated as the Republic of Korea’s President,” *Korea Insight* 10, no. 3 (March 2008): 1; see also “South Korea’s Election: What to Expect from President Lee,” International Crisis Group, Asia Briefing no. 73, December 21, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Pollack demonstrates with ample historical evidence and rigorous analysis that the North Korean leadership did not embark on the nuclear path on a whim, nor does it treat nuclear weapons as bargaining chip. Jonathan Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons, and International Security* (Routledge, May 17, 2011). The germination of Kim Il-sung’s nuclear aspirations dates to the 1950s when North Korean scientists gained basic knowledge by

<sup>5</sup> Mark E. Manyin and Mary Beth Nikitin, “US Assistance to North Korea,” CRS Report for Congress, July 21, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> “North Korea,” *Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook*, page updated on December 3, 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html>.

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<sup>8</sup> “Analysts say Hallyu is Moving Fast in the North,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, July 31, 2014. <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2992779>.

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<sup>11</sup> Mitch Lerner, “Wikileaks on North Korea Reveal Nothing New,” *History News Network*, December 5, 2010. <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/134160>.

<sup>12</sup> “The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance,” August 2004. <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework>; “Agreement on Supply of A Light-water reactor Project to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Between the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization and the Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” *The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization*. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/>

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<sup>13</sup> “Uncovering the truth about North Korea’s alleged underground nuclear facility: the Kumchang-ri controversy,” *CNS*, archived material. [http://cns.miiis.edu/archive/country\\_north\\_korea/uncover.htm](http://cns.miiis.edu/archive/country_north_korea/uncover.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Edith M. Lederer, "US Gets Access To N. Korea Site," *AP*, 16 March 1999; in *NAPSNet Daily Report*, 16 March 1999. [www.nautilus.org](http://www.nautilus.org).

<sup>15</sup> For an assessment of the breakdown of the Agree Framework, see Wade L. Huntley, “Ostrich Engagement: The Bush Administration and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” *Nonproliferation Review* 11:2 (Summer 2004), pp. 81-115.

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