Imagining Korean Unification: Some Preliminary Speculations

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The division between rival Korean states is the largest item of unfinished business in post-World War II East Asian politics. Although bearing some superficial similarity to the continued division across the Taiwan Strait, the situations are not comparable. Of the two conflicts, the separation of the two Koreas is far more pervasive and enduring. Unlike East and West Germany, which experienced close to two decades of normal relations prior to unification, the two Koreas continue to inhabit separate worlds. Not only is the pervasive military confrontation essentially undiminished; North Korea's accelerated pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities means that any future crisis could entail almost unimaginable consequences for both societies.

This paper will outline and briefly describe alternative scenarios that might alter the enduring division between North and South. The intent is less predictive than heuristic; I make no effort to project the likelihood of any particular path. Our analysis highlights three principal uncertainties: (1) the "how" of the unification process; (2) the security circumstances prevailing prior to and during the unification process; and (3) the dominant political and security identities that could emerge in the process of unification. If unification were to result principally from a non-coercive integration process between North and South facilitated by the major powers, then the resulting outcome would presumably be much more stable. However, if unification occurs amidst instability or military conflict or if it unfolds abruptly, with heightened contradictions among the major powers, the resulting security conditions would be very different and far more worrisome. Conditions and dynamics on the peninsula and responses and policies of surrounding powers will both be determinative in Korea's longer-term evolution.

This discussion paper outlines four different paths that constitute major departures from the status quo. All four scenarios assume pronounced shifts in leadership intention and action in both the South and North, albeit with widely differing assumptions about the outcome of these processes. Any appreciable changes in prevailing circumstances must also address the profound ideological and developmental divergences in state building in the two Koreas. Even if we posit that the future levels of interaction between the two societies is

qualitatively much greater and the societal and economic differences somewhat narrowed, the cumulative weight of their separate histories will weigh heavily on their respective futures. With this caveat in mind, we need to weigh the possibilities of a major transformation in inter-Korean relations, and the likely implications of such change for Northeast Asia as a whole.

Scenario One: Incremental Transition

The first possibility assumes leadership reassessment or transformation in North Korea, with internal reforms ultimately judged essential to the survival of the state. A reform-oriented DPRK would sharply curtail or cease outright its nuclear and missile pursuits and seek fuller engagement with the ROK as well as with the major powers, enabling a longer-term convergence between the two states. Expectations of extensive reform within the DPRK, however, understate the depths of the North's economic crisis and dysfunction, and the depths of the Kim dynasty's determination to uphold its claim to absolute power. Without a profound reduction of military activities and expenditure, the prospects for a lasting transformation in the North Korean economy will remain very limited. Moreover, a shift away from a highly militarized economy would challenge the prerogatives of the elites and security institutions that oversee the North's fate.

Expectations of incremental transition in the North were at the core of reconciliation efforts of previous progressive governments in the ROK. These efforts entailed increased economic assistance to the North; the ultimate commitment to large scale infrastructural renewal in the North (e.g. through road and railway construction); and ultimate steps toward national integration, if not outright unification. There are two fundamental impediments to realizing this scenario. First, it would require that the North treat the South as its primary negotiating partner, as opposed to bypassing the ROK to pursue normal relations with the United States. But there is no reason to believe that Pyongyang is prepared to view the ROK on equal terms. Conferring legitimacy to the ROK, a state whose existence has been anathema to the DPRK for close to seven decades, seems well beyond what the North would deem acceptable. This would only be imaginable if the ROK was also undertaking a profound shift in its political and economic directions, premised on the narrowing of the ideological divide between the two Koreas.

Second, a redefined relationship between the two Koreas posits the North's readiness to accept the potential adverse consequences of major internal change, including the presence of numerous South Korean citizens in the North, as well as of substantial numbers of non-Koreans. Despite the North's grievous economic circumstances, its leadership remains unprepared to take such steps. The loss of internal control in the wake of such widespread change would put the existing regime under mounting pressure. The edifice of absolute power could easily crumble, as information, ideas, and people flowed into the DPRK. Unless and until a leadership in the North sees no alternative but to accept major risks to their claims to absolute power, the logic of incremental reform appeals principally to those outside the DPRK, not to forces within it.

Scenario Two: Extinction

The second prospective path to unification presumes the end of the North Korean state, or at least of extant regime led by Kim Jong-un. This could occur either through war or through internal collapse. A second major military conflict, possibly triggered by a major crisis related to the North's nuclear and missile behavior, would almost certainly result in the end of the system, though the potential disruption and damage to the ROK would also be exceedingly high.

There has been ample speculation among analysts to the prospect of internal breakdown in the North, with the Kim regime experiencing acute stress and intra-elite conflict that ultimately results in the loss of absolute power. Expectations of the ultimate demise of the DPRK have occurred in repeated cycles since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But there is a need to distinguish between economic breakdown and outright political collapse. In the latter case, the loyalty of elites and growing numbers of citizens would increasingly erode, with the major institutions of state power losing the ability to control people's lives and actions.

The policy debate over policies toward North Korea highlight very different views of state failure, with those geographically closer to the North perceiving these issues much more keenly than those farther removed from the peninsula. (These would also inevitably involve China, as well.) The primary anxieties in the ROK concern (1) how the end of the regime might unfold; (2) managing the near-term implications of such a crisis; and (3) apportioning the liabilities and

responsibilities that could confront a unified Korean state following DPRK collapse, including the role of outside powers.

The unification of the peninsula under ROK auspices would constitute an unprecedented change and policy challenge. Despite the daunting tasks that a successor state would face, a unified government would be strongly opposed to any major infringement on national sovereignty. The securing of nuclear materials and nuclear weapons would be matters of extraordinary sensitivity and complexity. At the same time, China and the United States would be mutually wary of the potential role of their respective armed forces on the peninsula, unless there was explicit agreement among all relevant parties about the purposes, duration, and operational responsibilities of such deployments.

Quite apart from the immediate challenges of crisis management, the strategic identity of a unified successor state would also loom. The end of an adversary regime in the North would represent an enormous vindication and validation for the ROK. Would the cessation of national division convince the citizens of Korea that the country's longer-term prosperity, security, and stature would best derive from a cooperative security order and continued non-nuclear status? Alternatively, might the Korean people, emboldened by the end of more than a century of national division and frequent subjugation to powerful external forces, conclude that nuclear weapons are essential to ensuring Korea's strategic autonomy and control of its own destiny? The answer is far from certain.

Scenario Three: Virtual Unification

A third prospective outcome posits North Korea's increased isolation and marginalization, resulting in an ever wider gap in the economic capacities of North and South. The absolute and relative asymmetries between the two Koreas in economic power are already vast. However, an ever greater shift toward the ROK would find the South serving as the unquestioned center of gravity on the peninsula. The DPRK would not necessarily cease its existence as a separate state, but there would be a non-trivial risk of its becoming an appendage of Chinese and South Korean economic power.

This issue pertains directly to the North's pursuit of a nuclear weapons. The cumulative effect of UN Security Council sanctions on the DPRK and on additional sanctions imposed by individual states will ultimately constrict the

economic space within which North Korea operates. Pyongyang seems to believe that the outside world will ultimately have no alternative but to acquiesce to its weapons capabilities, much as it has to Israel, India, and Pakistan, the three nuclear weapons states who are not signatories to the NPT. But prevailing trends do not substantiate this judgment. The prospect for meaningful economic engagement with the outside world (with the possible exception of China) would continue to dwindle, leaving it very dangerous in a military sense but ever more impoverished. Can the North Korean economy and society sustain this outcome over the longer term? Is Kim Jong-un even fully cognizant of the tradeoffs?

Scenario Four: Appeasement

The fourth scenario posits the ability of the DPRK to secure its core strategic objectives by playing off the ROK's fears of instability and conflict and by successfully exploiting Korean nationalism. This is a decidedly inauspicious scenario. It posits the ability of the North to outmaneuver the South and to feed off the South's anxieties about peninsular instability. It clearly presumes the election of a left of center president to succeed Park Geun-hye, a prospect that seems increasingly likely if not absolutely guaranteed. The North's core objective would be to secure peace through concessions. Though an implausible outcome, the intent would be ensure that South Korea joins China as the North's primary long-term enabler.

Such a strategy would seek to weaken or delegitimize the US-ROK alliance, and in so doing give the North a much freer hand. An overeager or unduly solicitous ROK engagement strategy could feed misperceptions in the North and place the ROK in a highly disadvantageous position. Moreover, North Korea would not require the ROK's explicit acceptance of Pyongyang's maximal objectives for it to achieve a singular political breakthrough. Strategic confusion and division in the ROK would be the largest factor contributing to this outcome, though North Korea would be eager to exploit it.

Brief Conclusions

Neither reconciliation nor unification seems an imminent prospect on the Korean peninsula. The possibility of a unified, democratic Korea remains an aspiration of many South Koreans (though far less to younger generations), even as many remain deeply conflicted by what the unification process could entail. A

unified Korea is likely to prove a more assertive Korea determined to arrive at indigenous conceptions of core national goals. At present, however, the open-ended abnormalities between the North and South and the deepening fissures and fears generated by the prospect of an operational nuclear deterrent in the North stand very much in the way of peaceful, orderly transition and transformation on the peninsula. The responses of the major powers to would also greatly inhibit the possibilities of a more autonomous strategic identity (or identities) on the peninsula.