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## **Korea Divided: The Best Way Forward**

Simon Gonsalves

### **I. Introduction**

In 1993, Bill Clinton visited the Republic of Korea as part of his tour of Northeast Asia. As President Clinton was looking across the Demilitarized Zone, he described the terrain he saw as one of the scariest places on Earth (William i). Since then, the Korean Peninsula has become even more perilous, and the reunification of North and South Korea seems as far away as ever. However opaque the future may be, it is still important to analyze the question of Korean reunification, as the international ramifications of a single Korea are not to be underestimated. This essay examines the circumstances under which the northern Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the southern Republic of Korea (ROK) could be reunified under a single government.

The most likely scenario for the unification of the Korean peninsula would be the internal collapse of the North Korean state and its subsequent occupation by the ROK. This argument is organized into three parts. The first section recounts the history of Korea's separation. This section discusses the attempts at political amalgamation within both countries from the 1950–1953 conflict onward. The next section outlines potential scenarios for unification and summarizes the most probable way reunification might be accomplished. The final section evaluates the potential fallout reunification would cause from both a Korean and an international perspective. Throughout the paper, historical examples will offer comparisons to recent history. These sub-topics provide real-world examples that relate to a potential Korean reunification. Historical appraisals are important because they apply the lessons of history to help make sense of the complicated questions regarding the unification of Korea.

It is important to note that the DPRK is one of the most closed societies in the world and does not publish reliable statistics. This scarcity of statistics makes analysis of North Korea's political and economic systems difficult ("South Korea vs. North Korea"). Specifics regarding the DPRK are far from infallible, and at times even the most precise statistics are closer to educated guesses than facts. The DPRK's isolationist and secretive nature creates an environment

where the country's internal affairs are kept secret and little information escapes to the outside world. Consequently, the ideas argued throughout this paper are advanced with a lack of a North Korean perspective and situation clarity, something that may prevent a complete picture of a plausible reunification from being conveyed. However, the evidence that is available through South Korea, international sources, and historical comparisons will be utilized to mitigate the hindrances of the DPRK's closed society.

## II. History of Korea's Separation

To understand the modern Korean peninsula and the seemingly permanent hostility between the North and the South, it is vital to understand how the ROK and the DPRK drifted so far apart. Koreans share millennia of common history and are one of the most homogenous peoples on the globe (William 3). Considering Koreans share the same ethnic, cultural, and linguistic background, what are the factors that divided the nation in half and caused the current state of mutual hostility?

Ever since the first united Korean kingdom was founded in AD 688, foreign powers have competed for influence and control over the country (Hoare and Pares 19). One authority on Korean history estimates that there have been more than 900 invasions of Korea over the past 2000 years (William 1). Since the mid-nineteenth century, China, Japan, Russia, and the West have all fought for control over Korea. Korea is located in the centre of this "strategic quadrangle," and each of the regional powers has historically considered Korea to be within its sphere of influence (Lee 4). Therefore, throughout its history Korea has borne the consequences of the hegemonic struggles between great powers. While never truly sovereign because of its geopolitical location, Korea was always territorially united. That changed decisively at the end of WWII.

During the final weeks of WWII, the Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States (US) pushed into Korea to remove the occupying Japanese. The border for the respective occupation zones was drawn along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by the two victorious powers. At the Cairo Conference on November 22, 1943, it was agreed that "in due course Korea shall become free and independent" (William 12). However, the rapid decline of Soviet-American relations ruined any chance of a timely unification of Korea by peaceful means. The intensification of the Cold War in 1946–1947 stalled attempts at creating a united, democratic Korea. Because no agreement could be reached between the two superpowers, the Americans installed Syngman Rhee to govern the southern Korean territory. A former Korean exile living in the United States, Rhee was a Princeton graduate known for his hard-line anti-communist views (48). To lead

the new Communist regime in the north, the Soviets eventually settled on Kim il Sung. A former communist resistance fighter, Kim il Sung served in the Red Army during WWII (11). Separate elections were held in the new Korean states in 1948 to legitimize each power's chosen representative.

A fanatical nationalist, Kim il Sung could not bear what he saw as the permanent division of Korea, so he invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, in order to unite Korea under communist rule. After the United Nations (UN) "Police Action" pushed the invading North Koreans out of the South, the UN gave approval to "achieve the establishment of a unified, independent democratic government in the sovereign state of Korea" (14) However, as the UN forces pushed northwards towards the Chinese border, the Chinese intervened on behalf of the DPRK. UN forces were pushed back to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, where the border was permanently agreed upon by North Korea, China, and the United Nations in 1953. No formal peace treaty has since been negotiated between the ROK and DPRK (14). U.S. General Mark Clark observed at the signing of the armistice that the war had not resulted in military victory for either side but "instead resulted in an uneasy peace with no prospect of a definitive settlement of the Korean question" (Clark qtd. in Lewis 160).

### **III. Strategies for Reunification**

The problem of Korean reunification is incredibly complex. Re-joining one of the world's most dynamic and developed economies with one of its most dishevelled and repressive is no easy matter. The cultural, political, and, above all, economic gulf between North and South are now so great that many experts believe reunification is almost inconceivable. It has been nearly seven decades since the Korean peninsula was divided, and much of that history has been characterized by conflict and tension. However, reunification can come about in one of three ways: mutual reconciliation, war, or internal regime collapse. This paper will only examine the issue from the South Korean perspective because North Korea's perspectives on reunification are impossible to identify due to the totalitarian nature of the regime.

The scenario the ROK sees as the most optimal is a "soft landing" (Terry 154). In this scenario, the North Korean regime would adopt the Chinese economic model, abandon militarism, and work towards a gradual rapprochement with South Korea. This approach was the ROK's policy towards the DPRK from 1998 to 2007 because it is the most peaceful and economical of the three possibilities. This path is best exemplified by South Korea's 'Sunshine' foreign policy towards the DPRK that began in 1998 and lasted until 2008 (Jung and Rector 488). The main goal of the Sunshine policy was to soften North

Korea's behaviour towards the ROK by "encouraging interaction and economic assistance" (Jung and Rector 492) The goal was to incite reforms within North Korea, improve relations between Seoul and Pyongyang, and create goodwill between the people of the ROK and the DPRK (494). Unfortunately, the Sunshine policy was deemed a failure in 2010 by the South Korean Unification Ministry. The ministry statement declared that the "billions of dollars and cross-border exchanges failed to change the mindset of Pyongyang" (Yong). This failure epitomizes the consequences of all the other attempts made by the ROK to unilaterally provide aid to the DPRK in return for a calming of tensions (Lee 4). The Kim Dynasty has shown no interest in serious reform and uses South Korean aid and capital to stabilize its rule, providing nothing in return. During the Sunshine Period, North Korea fully established its nuclear program and tested its first device in 2006. The nuclear of the DPRK testifies to the naivete of the ROK government's belief in a peaceful merger of the two states (William 85). The failure of the Sunshine policy and the DPRK's progressive shift towards continued militaristic actions illustrates that a scenario involving a 'soft landing' reunification is not realistic.

Many South Koreans who favour the 'soft landing' approach look to German history for inspiration. In early 2015, South Korean President Park Geun-hye gave a major pro-unification speech in Germany, a highly symbolic destination choice (Yong). Since its unification, Germany has made great progress and is now among the most dominant and robust economics in Europe, an ideal end result for Korea's reunification. Both nations were divided artificially by Cold War politics and split along the capitalist/communist ideological line. Both the Federal Republic of Germany (FGR) and the ROK eventually became healthy, functioning democracies with successful economies, while the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the DPRK became authoritarian states whose planned economies failed. In addition, the FGR and the ROK maintained difficult relationships with their communist neighbours throughout their histories. While on the surface there seem to be many parallels between Germany and the current situation in Korea, there are also many profound differences.

A deeper analysis reveals the disparities between the two situations due to the profoundly different relationships the GDR and the DPRK have with their respective international benefactors. No state has the same degree of influence over the DPRK that the USSR had over the GDR (Lee 21). The GDR was a satellite state of the USSR. Thus, when Gorbachev decided to approve the reunification of Germany, the fate of the GDR was sealed. The DPRK, on the

other hand, is a state intent on defending its sovereignty, and China's influence over the DPRK has been not been substantial enough to direct policy. North Korea has openly flouted China in the past and has expressed a willingness to do what it sees as best for national interests regardless of what the Chinese government thinks. For example, China's foreign minister denounced North Korean nuclear tests in October 2006, and China's stance has remained largely unchanged since ("China resolutely opposes DPRK's nuclear tests"). The fact that the North Korean nuclear program persists to this day, despite Chinese opposition, shows that China's stance on the issue obviously has no effect on the DPRK, illustrating that the DPRK will not be pressured by outside forces on issues of national importance. Furthermore, Germany did not experience a civil war that resulted in millions of casualties, unlike Korea. The lack of a military conflict between Germans made the populations of the GDR and FGR less hostile to each other and more accepting of reunification. Both the GDR and the FGR maintained a working relationship that lacked the destructive border clashes that occur regularly between the ROK and the DPRK (Rhee 372). For example, there was no conflict between the GDR and the FGR comparable to the bombardment of Yeonpyeong, the infamous artillery engagement between the North Korean military and South Korean forces stationed on Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, 2010. North Korean forces fired artillery shells and rockets into South Korean territories, hitting both military and civilian targets, furthering the tensions between the ROK and DPRK ("North Korean artillery hits South Korean island"). The peaceful scenario that brought about German unification is not present in Korea, and thus the event is not an accurate historical comparison for Korean unification.

The second scenario, military conquest, is also improbable. The ROK no longer stands by the slogan it maintained until 1960, "March North and Unify." (Research Center for Peace and Unification 70). Current popular opinion in South Korea is, in fact, overwhelmingly against a first strike by the ROK military against the DPRK. Regardless, South Korea is bound by the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), which forbids an unprovoked South Korean strike on the North (69). Additionally, while the DPRK may be militaristic, it is not suicidal. The probability that a DPRK assault and total war on the ROK would end in success is minuscule, especially considering the protection the ROK receives from America (William 18). The combined forces of the ROK and American militaries would almost certainly triumph over the antiquated conscript armies of the DPRK, a fact that would be understood by DPRK military planners. Because of this imbalance, it is unlikely that military force

alone could result in unification.

Furthermore, one of the most powerful arguments against a Korean war over reunification is the existence of the DPRK's potent nuclear arsenal. North Korea has developed and detonated nuclear as well as chemical/biological weapons and has tested missiles that may be capable of delivering both at a distance. These weapons act as a force equalizer between the DPRK and ROK and its allies (72). The DPRK also maintains large amounts of conventional artillery within range of major South Korean urban centres. In particular, the DPRK is capable of bombarding the ROK capital, Seoul, which contains both a quarter of the country's population and the military's command and control headquarters (Lee 21). While the DPRK would never win a war against the ROK, The DPRK would likely use its substantial firepower to attack Seoul and other major cities with overwhelming force, seeking to do as much damage as possible. A Korean unification through the conquest of the DPRK would likely be a pyrrhic victory for the ROK. North Korea could inflict such a heavy toll on the South that it would negate any sense of achievement or profit. It is in the interests of both the ROK and the DPRK to avoid total war at all costs.

The most likely scenario for reunification is the breakdown of North Korea's government and society, known as a 'hard landing' (William 80). In this case, the DPRK would implode under economic and social forces and be absorbed by South Korea. This implosion could perhaps be triggered by a rebellion, natural disaster, or assassination. A "hard landing" represents the only real prospect for reunification. The ideological rigidity of the DPRK has set the regime on a path of unrelenting totalitarian control resulting in catastrophic consequences for the state. This is because the DPRK and the Kim Dynasty's claim to legitimacy relies on the ideology of Juche. This cornerstone of the North Korean state is a combination of Korean ultra-nationalism, a strong sense of national self-reliance, and traditional Marxist-Leninist principles (William 18). The regime's connection to the flawed command economy and protectionist policies upheld in Juche makes it difficult for the DPRK to initiate the necessary reforms the country needs to survive long term. Because it derives its legitimacy from Juche, as well as the cult of personality surrounding the ultra-nationalist Kim Dynasty, the regime would undermine the basis of its support if it were to follow the Chinese example and open the country to significant foreign trade and investment.

In spite of this pessimistic economic forecast, the DPRK, with the exception of mostly cosmetic minor reforms, clings to the status quo (Delury and Moon). This position, however, is growing increasingly untenable. The

North Korean economy collapsed in the late 1990's and suffers from severe shortages of most necessary items (William 68). This collapse has led to numerous famines, droughts, and an economy that cannot meet its citizens' basic needs. In addition, China, North Korea's single economic backer, has shown signs that its patience with the DPRK is diminishing. Recently, criticism of the DPRK has become common in Chinese state-controlled media (Perlez). China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly criticized North Korea's 2016 nuclear test, saying Beijing "firmly opposes" the DPRK's actions (Jiha). This public statement underscores Beijing's deepening dissatisfaction with Pyongyang as well as the deteriorating ties between the two allies. Since China provides North Korea with most of its food and energy supplies, a waning of Chinese support would be devastating to the DPRK. Additionally, the regime's control over information is much weaker than it was twenty years ago. Through black market trade across the Chinese border, North Koreans are increasingly aware of North Korea's poverty and the relative prosperity of China and South Korea (Fuqua 137). These factors all contribute to the idea that the DPRK is prime for internal collapse, furthering the plausibility of a "hard landing" reunification

On the other hand, academics and experts who have predicted the DPRK's imminent downfall have been consistently proven wrong. The idea that the regime in North Korea "stands on the brink of extinction dates back decades" (Delury and Moon). Regime collapse is difficult to predict accurately, especially since the DPRK's coercive and repressive tactics have proven very effective at maintaining the regime's control over the population (Hoare and Pares 43). However, as a comparison, most 'experts' on the GDR and the Warsaw Pact had no inkling that the end of the Cold War was imminent. In *Korea: Enduring Division*, D. S. Lewis predicted in 1988 that German unification was unlikely. He wrote that "the presence of the Soviet Union and its watchful eye on developments that might lead to unification renders it improbable that the extension of mutual tolerance between the two Germanys will extend beyond a certain point" (157) Within a year, the Berlin Wall had come crashing down and the U.S.S.R. had given its approval for steps to be taken towards unification through the 2 + 4 agreements (Rhee 365). By the end of 1990, Germany was a united nation for the first time in forty-five years. Thus, academics and experts on North Korea, just as with the GDR, might be wrong in their predictions and should not be discredited due to past incorrect deductions.

#### IV. International Implications

In recent years, tensions across East Asia have increased. The rise of nationalism across the region, China's increasing assertiveness and power, Japan's movement away from its adopted pacifist identity, and ambivalence towards America's long-term commitment in the region have all contributed to this unease (Lewis 146). In this era of heightened tensions and strained relationships, the amalgamation of both halves of Korea would send shock waves throughout the region. A unified Korea could have great implications for the balance of power, with South Korea already considered by many a regional power. While unification might pose some short-term challenges for Korea on the international stage, in the long term, the end of the Kim Regime in North Korea would be in the best interests of all concerned parties.

China is one country which has traditionally been viewed as an opponent of Korean unification. The Chinese government believes its geopolitical situation would be significantly weakened by the collapse of the DPRK. Because China has few allies in East Asia, the potential absorption of the DPRK by the ROK could be considered a blow to China's national security, as The DPRK's presence as an ally helps to solidify China's position as a regional power. Furthermore, the collapse of the DPRK would bring about a military intervention that would bring South Korean and American forces to China's border. Having an American-aligned power on its doorstep in an era of perceived American encirclement and containment might be seen as a the problem for the Chinese (Terry 155). Yet, the replacement of the DPRK might also bring China strong advantages. China would no longer have to prop up the DPRK through transfers of fuel, food, and other goods (Terry 158). Instead, it could provide real investments to the former DPRK that would come with profitable returns instead of a capital drain. This investment would also give China a public relations victory in the eyes of the world, something the country sorely needs as many East Asian nations grow increasingly suspicious of Chinese motives and ambitions. By contributing towards the rebuilding of North Korea through aid, investment, and expertise, China's prestige would greatly improve in a region that views the country with suspicion.

South Korea's strongest allies would also likely see problems with the unification of Korea. Both the United States and Japan would "fear the regional chaos and instability that regime change would bring" (Terry 156). In particular, both countries are concerned about North Korea's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Experts believe that the DPRK may have between five and twelve nuclear weapons (William 85). With the dismantling of the North Korean

regime, there would be an increased risk that this nuclear arsenal could fall into the wrong hands, causing a security nightmare in an age of global terrorism. However, if these weapons were dealt with quickly and efficiently and North Korea's military of 1.2 million active personnel demobilized properly, then the risk could be minimized to acceptable levels (Fuqua 87).

Furthermore, Japan might feel threatened by the potential strength of a united Korea. According to a 2009 report by Goldman Sachs, within thirty to forty years, a reunited Korea could overtake Japan in terms of GDP (Terry 160). However, assisting with the fallout of reunification would give Tokyo a great opening to dispel the anti-Japanese sentiment among Koreans that has lingered since the days of Japanese occupation (William 7). In addition, America might fear that a stronger Korea would be more independent and, consequently, lessen America influence in the region (Lee 21). However, ending the long-term threat the DPRK poses as Northeast Asia's primary source of instability would be worth the potential drawbacks.

The country most affected by reunification would undoubtedly be South Korea. Many South Koreans fear the economic cost that would accompany reunification. An advisory body appointed by South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in 2011 put the price tag of reunification at over two trillion dollars. Most current economic predictions state that reunification would cost the ROK up to seven percent of the country's annual gross national product (GDP) for a decade (Phillips). The costs of integrating an isolated, impoverished, and brainwashed population of twenty-five million into the modern world would be extremely challenging ("North Korea vs. South Korea"). Updating an economy that is one of the world's worst is not an easy feat, as many South Korean elites have learned from the German experience. North Korea's GDP is estimated to be around \$40 billion and its per capita GDP ranks as one of the lowest worldwide at only \$1,800 (Jung and Rector 488). In contrast, South Korea currently has the world's thirteenth largest economy, worth \$1.849 trillion and a per capita GDP of \$35,485 (488). The gap between the two countries is astronomical. As a result, a large portion of South Koreans grew up in affluence and fear that their standard of living would fall if the DPRK joins with the South. Concerns over tax increases, budget deficits, international loans, and refugees have caused many South Koreans to give up on reunification.

While the immediate issues facing South Korea would be serious, if handled correctly, reunification would be desirable in the long term. From a security perspective, South Korea would no longer have to be concerned about North Korea's artillery targeting South Korean cities, its navy torpedoing South

Korean ships, its commandos targeting South Korean leaders, or its nuclear arsenal threatening South Korean existence itself. With this increase in security, the ROK could reduce its defence budget from its current \$31 billion a year while also ending mandatory conscription (Terry 158). From an economic standpoint, conscription limits a nation's economic growth. The practice delays young men's entrance into the workforce and constrains their economic potential. Furthermore, acquiring North Korea has serious economic advantages. South Korea's economy is extremely advanced, but the country must import ninety-seven percent of its energy, as well as the materials it needs to sustain its export sector (Terry 157). North Korea has large deposits of coal, uranium, magnesite, and rare-earth metals, but it has neither the capital nor the technology to mine them (Terry 157). The technology from the South combined with the raw materials from the North would give a united Korea a major competitive advantage. Also, access to the northern half of the peninsula would allow the ROK to transport goods more efficiently. Currently, South Korea functions as an island economy, as the hostile DPRK blocks South Korea's only access to land. In a united Korea, goods would flow freely from Korea to China and Russia, reducing both importing and exporting costs, since companies use more efficient methods to ship by land. The benefits of a larger labour base, more natural resources, and additional territory would lead to a huge overall economic boost for Korea in the long term.

As a democracy, public opinion is important in the ROK and pro-unification sentiment is becoming rarer in South Korea. There is growing indifference, doubt, and even opposition to reunification among South Koreans. Seven decades have passed since the dividing of Korea. Most South Koreans have never experienced a united Korea, and many do not have any personal connections with anyone in the DPRK. Among teens, the number of those who support reunification has dropped to twenty percent (Phillips). Many South Koreans feel that they now have nothing in common with those who live in the DPRK because the two Koreas have so dramatically diverged. The ROK needs to make a stronger case for reunification to its citizens, especially its youth, if the process is to succeed. North Korean popular opinion towards unification is more difficult to determine. Citizens of the DPRK have no way of relaying their true opinions to the outside world. DPRK defectors are not necessarily representative of what the rest of the population truly feels regarding reunification because they are all men and women who hated the DPRK enough to risk their lives trying escape.

## V. Lessons for the Future

It is unlikely that the Kim regime will come to a clean end. The process of reconstructing North Korea, politically and economically, will be tremendously difficult. However, the ROK and its allies have the benefit of history. By applying lessons learned from the aftermath of the German and Vietnamese reunifications, as well as the collapse of the USSR and the eastern Bloc, a united Korea could continue the ROK's legacy of success.

After the collapse of the USSR, economic reforms during the 1990's in the former Soviet empire were not handled efficiently. Mass privatization by new regimes, known as "shock therapy," resulted in heavy unemployment, as well as discontent with the new system (Kirschbaum). The breakdown of the trade networks within the communist world forced countries to integrate quickly into the capitalist world economy. As a result, the GDR (once the Eastern Bloc's leading industrial nation) is now largely devoid of industry. Often state enterprises were promptly shut down and sold rather than being retooled and run for the long-term benefit of the state (Kirschbaum). Additionally, many former GDR residents feel that beneficial organizations and programs, such as the twelve-year school system and pre-school care, were ended for purely ideological reasons (Kirschbaum). The transition from a centrally planned economy to a competitive market economy is not easy. ROK would be wise to learn from the consequences of rushing economic reforms and take the necessary time to integrate the former DPRK into the modern, globalized world.

After the French withdrew from their colonies in Southeast Asia, Vietnam was divided in two by the 1954 Geneva Accords. America backed the new country of Southern Vietnam and poured economic aid and investment into the nation. As a result, South Vietnam became financially better off than its northern counterpart. In the aftermath of North Vietnam's victory over South Vietnam, massive amounts of North Vietnamese moved to the wealthier south. This migration caused the South Vietnamese economy to collapse, creating a period of economic decline for the entire country ("Vietnam – Migration"). South Korea would do well to learn from the repercussions of Vietnam's unification by maintaining strict border controls along the Demilitarized Zone in order to prevent an influx of people moving from North to South in Korea. Forbidding North Koreans from moving to South Korea, while unpopular amongst the former citizens of the DRPK, would be necessary for a substantial period of time to allow both halves of Korea to adjust to the new reality. It would be in the best interests of the Korean people as a whole to rebuild Northern Korea first because South Korea's supply of available housing and employment

opportunities would never be able to keep up with North Korean demand.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the unification of Korea will not come about with ease. Though the DPRK is susceptible to collapse, the militarized and desperate Kim dynasty will not dissolve without firing a shot. The DPRK leadership have committed horrendous crimes and would certainly be put on trial in front of the International Criminal Court if they ever lost power. While the collapse of the DPRK would cause short-term regional instability, a 'hard landing' is the most optimal scenario for Korean reunification. With preparation and planning, combined with the broad support of the international community and East Asia's regional powers, the DPRK can be successfully integrated into the ROK. Reunification is in the best interest of South Korea, Japan, China, and the US. In the end, those who stand to gain the most from this outcome are the North Koreans themselves, finally able to escape from Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism. Free from a world of labour camps, hardship, and repression where conditions are among the worst in the world, those who live in the DPRK could, for the first time in their lives, look towards the future with true hope.

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