

Uniting Korea

Enduring Dream, Elusive Reality

Lowell Dittmer

The Cold War, having long divided the world based on two opposing translational ideologies, Marxism-Leninism and democratic capitalism, unleashed a pent-up wave of nationalism upon its quiet extinction in the early 1990s. In many cases the consequences were divisive: the quest for repressed ethno-national identities led to the breakup of not only the Soviet Union (into 15 independent republics) but Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia as well.¹ But the German case illustrated that nationalism could also lead to the reunification of nations that had been divided by the Cold War. Thus it revived interest in that possibility in one of the two Asian nations that remained divided, Korea. The Republic of Korea (ROK) undertook democratization in the era of bipolar detente amid a dawning recognition that anti-communism could no longer afford adequate political legitimacy in a post-Cold

¹ See Kenneth Jowitt, *New world disorder: the Leninist extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); also Samuel P. Huntington (1993) "The clash of civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72(3), pp. 22-49.

War world. And with the upsurge of nationalism in the ROK's vigorous new democracy, the issue of national reunification quickly rose to a starring position on the national agenda. The awakening need for national unity seemed to coincide fortuitously with the objective possibility, as the North simultaneously experienced unprecedented economic difficulties. Yet the route to unity, notwithstanding continued professions of resolve on both sides, has been all but smooth sailing.

The purpose of this paper is to review and analyze the division of Korea since the end of the Cold War provided a new opening to reconstitute its national identity. It consists of three parts. The first consists of a chronological review and preliminary assessment of the progress of reunification efforts in Korea since the end of the Cold War. The second part considers the impact of intervening outside factors impeding that progress, focusing particularly on the impact of political-economic divergence and the security dilemma (entailing the North's introduction of nuclear weapons to the peninsula) and the intrusion of outside forces in the reunification process. The third part offers some tentative suggestions for coping with these impediments.

I. Progress since the Cold War

Approaches to reunification have been variously categorized. Here we reduce them to three: (1) forced reunification by armed invasion (as in the Vietnamese case) or coercive bargaining backed by overwhelming force; (2) peaceful socio-economic engagement in the course of which one side collapses and the stronger side absorbs the weaker (as in the German case); and (3) gradual integration by mutual consent (e.g., Deng Xiaoping's "one country two systems," as successfully applied to Hong Kong and Macao). North Korea has relied primarily on the first approach, whereas South Korea has alternated between the second and third.

The DPRK's policy has been to seek reunification without what it sees as outside interference, aiming to establish a "Federal Republic of Koryo," and it has from the outset and consistently thereafter placed a higher priority on reunification than the South.² The unification goal was incorporated into the fundamental documents of both party and state. The preamble to the charter of the Korean Workers' Party

² For example, while the North has consistently advocated a relatively centralized "federation," the South has preferred a more loosely affiliated "confederation." Jong-Yun Bae, "South Korean Strategic Thinking toward North Korea: The Evolution of the Engagement Policy and Its Impact upon U.S.-ROK Relations," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (March/April 2010), pp. 335-355.

(KWP) states that “[t]he present task of the [KWP] is to ensure the complete victory of socialism in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the accomplishment of the revolutionary goals of national liberation and the people’s democracy in the entire area of the country.” Nominally South Korean delegates were ensconced in the national legislature. And although the DPRK’s seat of government has always been Pyongyang, the DPRK constitution from the outset stipulated that “the capital of the Democratic Republic of Korea shall be Seoul.” Although it has from time to time been willing to engage in negotiations and has also attempted to mobilize revolutionary support in the South, when neither of these availed the North has always been prepared to resort to violence. The Korean War was after all essentially an attempt to achieve reunification by force, and had it not been for the unanticipated intercession of the US this might well have succeeded. While in the initial post-war period the North, like the South, was preoccupied with domestic reconstruction, in the following two decades it launched a massive military buildup aimed at achieving decisive military superiority. In the early 1960s, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) manpower is thought to have been just over 300,000. By the late 1970s North Korea’s armed forces were apparently approaching the million mark, backed by a high and steadily rising share of economic output devoted to defense readiness. But as US troops remained in the South the North refrained from a second invasion, shifting frontal assault to the use of commando raids, political assassinations, abductions and other irregular tactics.

There are many lengthy lists of such provocations: in January 1968, North Korean commandos penetrated the Blue House in an assassination plot against the president; in August 1974 DPRK agents attempted

once again to assassinate Park, instead killing his wife; in October 1983, 17 senior members of President Chun's entourage in Rangoon were killed by a North Korean bomb; in November 1987 a Korean Airlines commercial jet flying out of Baghdad exploded in mid-air killing 115 passengers; in 1996, 26 North Korean commandos infiltrated the south from an offshore submarine: and finally, in 2010, the North evidently torpedoed the South Korean frigate Cheonan and subsequently launched an artillery barrage on Yeongpyong Island, both incidents taking place just outside North Korean territorial waters, where the South had been holding military exercises.³ What is the purpose of such provocations? The most obvious answer is they are like commando operations in wartime—designed to incite revolution but failing that to sow confusion in the enemy ranks, to intimidate and demoralize the civilian population, to eliminate the South's outstanding leaders and otherwise pave the way for military victory. Yet any empirical evidence of progress toward achieving any of these goals is hard to find. Indeed the impact seems to have been generally counterproductive: as in the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the electoral backlash against such incidents seems to outweigh any conceivable tactical gains. One would think the North would over time become aware of this discrepancy between intention and effect and learn to modify its behavior accordingly (as has the PRC, in its

³ The most intense period of provocations seems to have been the latter half of the 1960s, when North Korea is reported to have infiltrated a total of 3,693 armed agents into South Korea. For a list of North Korean provocations, see Dick K. Nanto, *North Korea: Chronology of Provocations, 1950-2003*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., updated March 18, 2003; also "Record of North Korea's Major Conventional Provocations since 1960s," compiled by the Office of the Korea Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 25, 2010. I know of no systematic analysis of Pyongyang's provocations.

post-2005 Taiwan policy). Some observers have suggested that incidents are a form of coercive bargaining to win aid from the South, and the fact that the North indeed experienced a sizable increase in aid and trade with both South Korea and the United States in the wake of the first Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s lends some plausibility to this hypothesis. But is it not equally plausible that the increase in aid was not to reward blackmail but as a humanitarian response to the mass starvation that afflicted the North throughout much of the 1990s? (Of course it is also conceivable that while the South was motivated by humanitarian considerations the North perceived it as having been driven by successful blackmail.) In any event, such provocations have had diminishing marginal gains. There has been a substantial decline of aid from the West and the South since the North's nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, leaving China as virtually sole donor. A possible reason for the adverse impact of the North's provocative tactics may have to do with the vast economic asymmetry between North and South. Even in strictly military terms the North has fallen technologically behind: the military superiority boasted by the North in the 1970s and 1980s was lost when overall GDP in the South so completely outdistanced that of the North, boosting the military budget correlatively. This means in effect that the provocations have become empty: the warning of more damaging attacks yet to come implicit in such provocations (e.g., Seoul to be engulfed in a "sea of fire") loses credibility, as both sides realize that full-scale war would be suicidal for the North. Why then do such incidents recur? One conceivable reason is that tales of high-risk derring-do may strengthen the regime's domestic legitimacy, demonstrating the efficacy of its "military first" policy. The immediate impact of such incidents is of course to

exacerbate North-South polarization, but this may have the useful side-effect of reciprocally strengthening the North's ideological solidarity with the PRC (particularly if and when the "enemy" is perceived to overreact to such provocations). Thus China has since the nuclear tests and ensuing trade sanctions vastly increased both aid and trade with the DPRK (in technical violation of the UN sanctions to which China previously agreed). Finally, it is also possible the provocations are designed to prevent further movement toward reunification, or at least to prevent a form of reunification the North could not control. In classic balance-of-power terms, inasmuch as the North is now weaker than the South in economic and even in conventional military terms, if it hopes to "balance" against rather than "bandwagon" (or reunite) with the South, its only strategic option might be perceived to be nuclear.

Despite facing an increasingly ambivalent partner, South Korea's interest in reunification, largely quiescent during the Cold War, has resurged since its termination. It has also been both more varied and innovative than that of the North, not only because of its increasingly dominant economic position but because concurrent democratization has made its policies reflect the temporal vagaries of local electoral constituencies, the business cycle, and other such stimuli. The South's approach has alternated between the second two options (peaceful engagement and gradual integration by mutual consent), with little serious attention given to reunification by force, even after the South's military capabilities began to outstrip those of the North. The only serious consideration of the use of violence arose in response to the North's threat to withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty in pursuit of nuclear weaponry in 1993, and that was initiated by the US, not the

South, over Seoul's strenuous objections. There are several reasons for the South's abjuration of violence, possibly including some version of democratic peace theory.⁴ But the most decisive factor is no doubt the fact that a rather high proportion of the South Korean populace lives in Greater Seoul, well within range of North Korean artillery fire; should war occur, even if North Korea would eventually lose (as it probably would), the South would incur prohibitive losses.

During the 1988-1998 decade (i.e., under the presidencies of Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam), as the economic conjuncture in the North fell to new depths, the preferred approach in the South became one of peaceful absorption. This represented a departure from Cold War confrontation, including the first arrangements for aid, trade, and talks with the North. There are three likely reasons for this shift. First, the Kwangjoo incident gave rise to a *minjung* movement in South Korea that was far more critical of the American role in Korea and willing to take a more sympathetic look at the North's position.⁵ Second, the reunification of the two Germanys gave rise to an early diagnosis that the crisis was systemic and that the entire communist bloc could collapse, permitting a swift and easy reunification of Korea on roughly the same terms. Finally, the DPRK did in fact come very close to collapse, GDP growth plummeting to an average negative five percent

⁴ Certainly there is little appetite among South Korean taxpayers for an offensive war of against nonproliferation or even for unification. This would not be orthodox democratic peace theory, however, which proscribes only wars between democracies, not war between a democracy and a nondemocratic regime.

⁵ See Hyun-Wook Kim, "Domestic Events, Ideological Changes and the Post-Cold War US-South Korean Alliance," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 4 (December 2009).

per annum and incurring mass starvation from 1990 to the end of the decade, evoking a wave of humanitarian sympathy in the South.

Roh Tae-woo signaled his shift to peaceful reunification in his February 1988 inaugural address, asking the North to “accept that dialogue, not violence, is the most direct shortcut to ending division and bringing about unification.” And the years 1990-1992 witnessed a progression of state-to-state contacts that were extraordinary for the divided Korean peninsula. Those included eight official meetings at the prime ministerial level; the formalization of an agreement on “Reconciliation and Non-Aggression” and the initialing of a DPRK-ROK document on mutual nuclear inspections; and a five-day visit to the ROK by a DPRK vice premier who toured South Korean industries and discussed avenues of possible economic cooperation. In 1992 Roh introduced the important Korean National Commonwealth Unification (KNCU) Formula, which aimed at the gradual establishment of a national “community” as a precondition for formal reunification. The 6th round of the regularly scheduled prime ministerial meetings culminated in February 1992 in signing the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as a result of which all American tactical nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Korea by December 2001. Roh’s Nordpolitik (modeled after Brandt’s Ostpolitik) was aimed at eliminating the North’s isolation by opening relations with Pyongyang while simultaneously undertaking diplomatic normalization with both of its patrons. As he put it in his July 1988 ‘Declaration in the Interest of National Self-Esteem, Unification, and Prosperity,’ South Korea was “willing to cooperate with North Korea in its efforts to improve relations with countries friendly to us, including the United States and Japan; and in tandem with this, we will

continue to seek improved relations with the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries.”⁶ But because Roh’s diplomatic efforts proved more successful than Pyongyang’s, Nordpolitik improved Seoul’s options without alleviating Pyongyang’s isolation. Seoul gained recognition from the (then) Soviet Union in 1990, joint admission (with Pyongyang) into the UN in 1991, and diplomatic recognition by China in 1992. Kim Young-sam’s presidency (1993-1998), though also essentially premised on peaceful absorption of a collapsed DPRK, was to some extent thrown off stride by the 1993-1994 nuclear crisis, which tended to revive Cold War tensions. Kim was so upset by the American tendency to negotiate the nuclear issue bilaterally with Pyongyang without regard to the ROK’s unification policies (or indeed, its security interests), that he gave unification policy top priority, outranking nonproliferation or (hypothetically) even alliance commitments.

From 1998-2008 the ROK shifted from an approach that presumed eventual absorption of a failed state to one based on gradual socio-economic integration by mutual consent. This shift occurred for at least three reasons: First, despite mass starvation and comprehensive systemic failure the DPRK defied early expectations by failing to collapse. Second, by this time the exorbitant costs of the German model had become clear, exciting doubt in the South over whether they could afford immediate reunification. Third, South Korea had in the meantime become engulfed in the Asian Financial Crisis, forced to

⁶ Roh Tae-woo, ‘July 7, 1988 Declaration in the interest of national self-esteem, unification, and prosperity’ (1993), as cited in James Cotton (ed.) *Korea under Roh Tae Woo: democratization, Northern Policy, and inter-Korea relations* (UK: Allen and Unwin, 1993), p. 317.

accept a huge bailout from the IMF to salvage its own economy. Under these circumstances, absorption of a bankrupt DPRK no longer appeared realistic. The new approach, quickly dubbed the “sunshine policy” in reference to the Aesopian fable, was inaugurated by Kim Dae Jung in his inaugural address, in which he promised not to try to “undermine or absorb North Korea.” This represented a major step toward eliminating ideological and national identity differences as a prerequisite to unification. The new approach was premised on two assumptions: the separation of politics from economics and the principle of flexible reciprocity. Both were designed to insulate economic integration from political disputes.⁷ And indeed, over the next decade, lubricated by some 200 inter-Korean political talks and two summit meetings in Pyongyang, 42 inter-Korean agreements were signed between the two Koreas - 17 during the Kim Dae Jung administration and 25 during the Roh Moo-hyun administration. A joint venture was set up to facilitate tourist trade to Mt. Kungang and the Kaesong Industrial Complex was jointly established near the DMZ to draw upon South Korean capital and low-wage North Korean labor. Inter-Korean trade increased: by 2002 the ROK had become the DPRK’s second largest trading partner after China, and by 2008 it claimed over a quarter of the North’s external trade.⁸

⁷ See Samuel S. Kim, “The Rivalry between the Two Korea’s Inter-Korean Rivalry Conceived and Applied,” unpublished paper, 2010.

⁸ Inter-Korean trade began in 1988 and 2002 the ROK became the DPRK’s second largest trading partner after China. The Soviet Union had during the Cold War been the DPRK’s leading trade partner, but that sharply diminished after 1991 when the Russian Federation recognized the ROK and shifted trade from socialist planned to capitalist cash basis. Sixty percent of the DPRK’s export trade in 2002 consisted of trade with just three top trading partners: China (21%); the ROK (21%); and Japan (18%). But Japan’s share of DPRK trade declined from 20% to

Yet with the election of Grand National Party candidate Lee Myung-bak in 2008, the forward momentum toward inter-Korean functional integration leading toward political accord was quickly lost; after reaching its acme in 2008, trade plummeted, leaving China the DPRK's main trade partner. Based on evidence that aspects of the previous functional integrationist regime (including the 2000 summit) had been underpinned by covert South Korean political subsidies and that the ostensible separation of politics and economics had been largely illusory, the new president attached demands for political reciprocity (specifically, progress in nonproliferation talks).⁹ These demands were promptly met by indignant denials and ultimatums from the North. Underlying the shift in mood were at least two factors. First was the evident failure of the "sunshine" narrative to achieve its desired effect of persuading the DPRK to adopt a more amicable posture toward the South. It seemed that instead, the North took full advantage of the separation of politics from economics to continue its nuclear and missile buildup and to resume provocations against the South. These actions posed an enhanced security threat to the South, as well as to Japan and the US. Perhaps the North never accepted the premise that economic integration could be divorced from politics: any cooperative venture, even if based largely on South Korean subventions, might be seized by the North as a hostage to extort various demands. Upon the

less than 10% after 2004, when the abductees became a cause celebre. By 2008, China (40%) and South Korea (26%) as top two trading partners comprised 66% of Pyongyang's total trade, with Japan's share having virtually vanished (0.1%).

⁹ Alexander Vershbow pointed out the critical problems of South Korea's cash payment to the North such as the North Korean laborers' salary in Gaeseung and South Korean tourists' entrance fee at Mt. Kumgang. *Hankyoreh Shinmun* [Hankyoreh News], October 19, 2006; as cited in Bae, fn. 19.

election of Lee Myung-bak, the premise was hence dropped by the South as well, and all cooperative ventures became politically conditional, making them far more difficult to sustain. Thus when an errant South Korean tourist was shot dead by a North Korean guard at Mt. Kumgang, the South banned South Korean tourism and the North in retaliation began seizing South Korean assets at the site, resulting in suspension of the project. Although the Kaesong Industrial Complex remains open, both sides have cut back their stakes appreciably, placing the whole venture on tenterhooks. Second, implicit in the Kim-Roh functional integration paradigm was the hope that via mutual cooperation the North would relieve the economic crisis and stimulate further reform. This would, it was hoped, reduce the yawning socio-economic gap between North and South and bring their developmental trajectories into closer alignment, mitigating North Korean paranoia and *revanchisme* vis-à-vis the South. Yet although this hope was shared by China and even the US, North Korean attempts at reform beginning in 2002 were politically anemic, economically ill-conceived, and generally unsuccessful, leading to inflation, corruption, and (most pertinent, from the regime's perspective) loss of political control. The central government has thus since 2005 reasserted centralized control. Yet it has still been unable to run its economy successfully, by 2011 again facing a steadily worsening food crisis.¹⁰ Only the North's military modernization program (and indeed only in specific areas, e.g., nuclear and missile technology) has continued to make noteworthy progress.

¹⁰ See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Engaging North Korea: The Role of Economic Statecraft* (Honolulu: East West Center, Policy Study no. 59, 2011).

II. Impediments

Why has the Korean division proved so intractable? Two impediments seem particularly troublesome. Domestically, in contrast to the China-Taiwan case, the developmental trajectories of the two political-economic systems seem to have driven them along divergent rather than convergent paths. The North, which began with the help of China and the Soviet Union as an exceptionally successful centrally planned economy, is an example of the diminishing returns of "extensive growth" and has been left far behind by the wave of socialist reform and international economic globalization that enabled China and Vietnam to survive the demise of the rest of the communist bloc. Beginning with an early informal factional pluralism, the leadership of the KWP has since the purge of inner-Party opposition in 1956 monocratized power under the Kim Il Sung family. This contrasts with the normalization of succession under collective leadership and the emergence of meritocratic norms in the leaderships of China and Vietnam. Meanwhile South Korea has become one of East Asia's most vibrantly successful free-market democracies. This corresponds to an increasingly wide gap in political values that has been difficult to bridge. Even more difficult has been the yawning gap in economic performance and living standards: while the South has become the world's 12th largest economy the North has become one

of the earth's poorest, with an aggregate GDP some 3-5 percent that of the South. This has enervated the will of South Korean politicians to consider unification in view of the enormous financial sacrifices its economic reconstruction would predictably entail, placing a crushing burden on South Korean tax-payers. But it reduces North Korean incentives for unification still more, as the North's political power would predictably shrink to fit its decidedly modest ability to contribute economically to the reunified nation-state.

The second factor frustrating inter-Korean integration has been the North Korean relentless preoccupation with security. This has been clearly implicit in Pyongyang's "military first" [son'gun] policy, but the priority placed military self-strengthening long antedates Kim Jong Il's 1995 coinage of the term.¹¹ To be sure, the focus on military defense has been reciprocal, resulting in a long North-South arms race; indeed from the end of the Korean War in 1953 until the early 1980s the ROK military was probably larger than the KPA.¹² The North launched a major modernization drive in the late 1970s, after South Korea received new technologies and equipment from the United

¹¹ In 1997, an editorial published in Rodong Sinmun, the North Korean Workers' Party official newspaper, stated: "Never before have the status and role of the People's Army been so extraordinarily elevated as today when it is being led energetically by the Respected and Beloved Comrade Supreme Commander." By this point, the Korean People's Army had also become "synonymous with the people, the state, and the party." Cf. Byung Chul Koh, "Military-First Politics and Building a 'Powerful and Prosperous Nation' In North Korea" *Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online*, 14 April 2005, <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0532AKoh.html>, accessed September 19, 2011.

¹² See Chung-in Moon, *Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula: International Penetrations, Regional Dynamics, and Domestic Structure* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1996), p. 56; as cited in Samuel Kim, "Rivalry," p.6.

States, and gained what has been an enduring quantitative superiority in troops and in certain weapons systems (e.g., tanks, field artillery, landing vessels, and commando units), but it has fallen technologically behind, as the South's globalizing economy took off in the late 1980s and 1990s while the North's collapsed. Rather than focus on economic recovery (as it did in the 1950s), Pyongyang became obsessed with military armament, even as its neighbors claimed a "peace dividend" in the wake of the Cold War. The DPRK has come to approximate the "ideal type" of a garrison state, the most militarized country in the world today. Based on a population of only 23 million the Korean People's Army (KPA) is the fourth largest army in the world, at about 1,190,000 armed personnel (December 2008), about 20% of men ages 17-54 serving in the regular armed forces. Military service of up to 10 years is mandatory for most males. The North also has a reserve force of 8,200,000 soldiers and the world's largest Special Forces contingent (numbering some 180,000 men). As of 1993, over 60 percent of the army was located within 100 kilometers of the DMZ.

Compensating for the North's increasing technological obsolescence in conventional weaponry has been its development of nuclear weaponry and missile technology. The nuclear weapons program was not consciously developed in response to its technological obsolescence or by the perceived threat from the South as symbolized by the first Gulf War, though these may account for the tenacity with which the North clung to the program even after the withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons and declaration of a nuclear-free peninsula in 1991. The North's nuclear program started back in the late 1950s, when Pyongyang sent several hundred students and researchers to the Soviet Union to study at Soviet universities and nuclear research

centers under the "Atoms for Peace" initiative, modeled after Eisenhower's initiative of the same name. The Soviets also built a research reactor and associated nuclear facilities at Yongbyon in the 1960s. North Korean specialists trained at these facilities and by the 1970s were prepared to launch their own nuclear program. Pyongyang decided to build a gas-cooled, graphite-moderated reactor, probably because it can operate with natural uranium fuel (with which the North is well endowed) and does not require enriched uranium. After mastering all aspects of the gas-graphite reactor fuel cycle the North proceeded to build fuel fabrication facilities and a reprocessing facility to enable extraction of weapons-grade plutonium from spent fuel. Unlike the Soviet-built research facilities, these new facilities were built and operated without being declared or inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Pyongyang had no legal obligation to do so, as it was not yet a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). American reconnaissance satellites picked up signs of the reactor construction in the early 1980s and the reprocessing facility in the late 1980s, but it was not until 1989, when South Korea leaked American satellite data of the reprocessing facility, that the international community first became aware of North Korea's nuclear program and its far-reaching strategic implications. Yet Pyongyang's claim that the reactor was needed for non-military purposes was not entirely bogus. To meet its growing energy requirements Pyongyang asked the Soviets to build light water reactors (LWRs). The Soviets asked Pyongyang to join the NPT as a precondition, which it did in 1985, but LWR construction was overtaken by the disintegration of the USSR and the Gorbachev-era Soviet-DPRK political fallout. Pyongyang kept inspectors out of its new facilities until 1992, by

which time it had all of the pieces in place for the plutonium fuel cycle. By this time, the five MWe experimental reactor was producing ca. six kilograms (roughly one bomb's worth) of weapons-grade plutonium per year (plus electricity and heat for the surrounding town). In 1992, Pyongyang opened the window on its nuclear program under Western diplomatic pressure, but closed it quickly when IAEA inspectors uncovered discrepancies between their nuclear measurements at Yongbyon and Pyongyang's declarations, much to Pyongyang's surprise and chagrin. Pyongyang responded by announcing its intention to withdraw from the NPT, the first signatory to do so. Negotiations started in June 1993 but stalemated in 1994, when North Korea unloaded the reactor's fuel containing an estimated 20 to 30 kilograms of plutonium, Washington and Pyongyang came close to war before Jimmy Carter intervened and brokered a freeze. Intense negotiations in Geneva then led to the Agreed Framework, fifth wherein Pyongyang agreed to give up its indigenous gas-graphite reactor program in exchange for the promise of two LWRs to be supplied by the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Operation of the five MWe reactor, the fuel fabrication plant, and the reprocessing facility was halted and monitored by IAEA. Construction of the two larger gas graphite reactors was also suspended. Meanwhile the heavy oil was delivered but construction of the LWRs fell years behind schedule.¹³

Is it possible to foster socio-economic integration and reunification by mutual elite consent while one's "partner" obsessively focused on developing a formidable military capability (including advanced

¹³ Siegfried S. Hecker, "Lessons Learned from the North Korean Nuclear Crises," *Daedalus*, Winter 2010, pp. 44-56.

missile technology and the world's third largest chemical weapons stockpile), even at the "opportunity cost" of letting hundreds of thousands of its own citizens starve to death? There are only two conceivable aims of the North Korean military buildup: one is to attack the South and the other is to defend against an attack from the South. While these two aims are of course not mutually exclusive, KPA deployment suggests preparation for offense. In either case, it alters the power balance in at least three ways. First, it improves the chances that the North would prevail in any bilateral conflict. Second, it makes it possible for the North to engage in "provocations" with greater impunity. Third, when the DPRK's development of long-range delivery vehicles finally bears fruit, it will make possible North Korean nuclear threats against Japan and US forces as well. One would think this situation might be psychologically challenging to any pursuit of national reunification. Yet that is exactly what the "sunshine policy" attempted to do. Indeed, this policy was sustained for a full decade (1998-2008) and with considerable success. Two summits (and many other meetings) were held, manifold formal agreements were signed, trade and cooperative ventures increased, as indicated above. And yet in the end, the movement to integrate by gradual socioeconomic integration failed: it was flouted by the North and repudiated by the electorate that had originally endorsed it.

How can we account for this perhaps unrealistic project being implemented in the first place, and how can we then account for its failure? It was launched at a time when both Koreas perceived themselves to be relatively weak: North Korea had not yet emerged from negative growth, and South Korea (under new leadership) was facing the prospect of sovereign bankruptcy in the Asian Financial

Crisis. The DPRK precipitated an international crisis by flouting an international accord (the nonproliferation treaty), shifting the configuration from bilateral to multilateral and bringing other interested powers into the game: the US was implicated by the threat to the ROK, its formal ally; and US engagement in turn invoked the DPRK's ally, China. These patron states had no immediate interest in reunification, which they supported in general while leaving operational details to their clients; their concern was with containing the security threat, since any conflict now had nuclear escalatory potential in which each was treaty-bound to come to the aid of its client. Although this certainly complicated the reunification scenario it was not necessarily fatal, since both patron states also supported reunification in general and it was hence potentially useful to have them engaged; moreover, the crisis seemed at this point to have been settled by the 1994 Agreed Framework. This agreement not only permitted the reunification program to proceed under the auspices of a superpower-backed international accord, but extended cooperation by adding such projects as the construction of two light-water reactors (awarding the US\$4 billion contract to the ROK).

But the two patron-states were implicated by slightly different concerns, these having primarily to do with the possibility of conflict escalating to nuclear levels and involving a wider array of states (particularly themselves). When the Agreed Framework was abruptly terminated in 2002 upon the discovery of an ongoing covert uranium enrichment project proceeding in tandem, termination of the LWR project subtracted a significant piece of the economic integration effort. The South's effort to sustain North-South socio-economic integration was deemed incompatible with the US attempt to coerce the North to

keep its nonproliferation commitments, and when China sought to protect the North from sanctions this too was deemed unhelpful. Although five members of the Six-Party Talks initially agreed on the necessity to halt proliferation by the 6th, the ensuing disagreement over tactics created a split between Japan and the US on the one hand, who considered the “complete verifiable irreversible dismantlement” of nuclear weapons an overweening imperative justifying disabling sanctions against the North, China, Russia, and South Korea, who were also displeased by the North’s relentless pursuit of nuclear weaponry but unwilling to impose severe sanctions for fear they might precipitate the North’s collapse. When nonproliferation failed with the nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009, the North pulled out causing the talks to collapse, and the incentive for further cooperation among the anti-proliferation coalition was lost. The South, as a pivotal part of this coalition, was most disappointed of all, and the “sunshine policy” was a collateral casualty. Upon the GNP sweep of the Democrats in the 2008 national election, South Korea made further movement toward reunification conditional, North Korea preemptively curtailed a number of cooperative ventures, and North-South relations polarized. The anti-proliferation coalition remained split, the hard-liners (the US, Japan and now South Korea) maintaining a post-nuclear freeze, while Beijing plunged into a range of economic ventures with the North, tacitly accepting nuclearization as a fait accompli.

III. What Is to Be Done?

Korea's reunification project, coinciding with North Korea's no-holds-barred quest for nuclear weaponry and the international complications this brought in its train, has clearly suffered a severe setback. Our diagnosis attributes this to two impediments: the diverging trajectories of the two "halves," making any integration culturally, politically, and economically very difficult; and the North's quest for absolute security. The South's plan for peaceful reunification, by stressing that it be preceded by an incremental process of economic exchange and sociocultural integration, was well designed to cope with the first impediment. But in addition to the indigenous pitfalls in the North Korean reform process, the nonproliferation issue collided with and ultimately frustrated the process of inter-Korean integration. If Korea's enduring dream of national unity is to be revived, an adequate solution for both impediments must be found. What follows are some modest (and perhaps quite ill-advised) proposals for what might be attempted.

The problem of diverging developmental trajectories is of course that while the South has successfully pursued a variant of the East Asian "capitalist developmental state" approach to modernization, the North has stubbornly adhered to an indigenous variant of Stalinism in the

teeth of massive evidence of systemic failure. The DPRK case has been even more unfortunate than China's experience with radical Maoism (which also in its heyday precipitated notorious disasters), partly because "socialism with Chinese characteristics" was less consistently and thoroughly implanted than Kim Il-Songism, partly because North Korea never had a Cultural Revolution, and partly because the neo-traditional institution of dynastic succession leaves little opening for any significant change in policy "line," as the successor has genetic as well as political vested interest in continuity. Although the South Korean approach to reunification by a process a peaceful reintegration under coordinated mutual elite consent is a correct response and should (in my view) certainly be resuscitated if possible, I have two caveats. First, the road will be a long and rocky one, and will require great steadfastness and forbearance. Deng Xiaoping's comparable proposal for "three links" across the Taiwan Strait was originally made in early 1979, but met with prompt and firm rejection by the Chiang Ching-kuo regime and was not reciprocated by Taiwan until more than decade later-and Taiwan is a market economy! Despite being spurned, Beijing patiently maintained its offer until it was finally accepted. Second, the policy should be completely depoliticized, normalized and indeed privatized, lest the North again seize joint projects as hostages to blackmail the South. This may require arrangements for some form of political insurance for traders and investors, to be arranged either in talks with the North or if necessary unilaterally.

The nuclear issue is an even more challenging than that of diverging developmental trajectories, for in addition to the uncertainties of dealing with leadership dynamics in Pyongyang, it introduces outside powers whose interests go beyond reunification to unrelated questions of

regional inter-state security (e.g., to the US, Japan and China). Yet the challenge must be faced, for the North's *de facto* acquisition of nuclear weapons capability will otherwise again derail any prospect of Korean reunification (not to mention profoundly upending the regional power balance). In a sense, the horse is already out of the barn - it is far more difficult to reverse nuclear weaponization than to stop it in its tracks. Nuclear preemption, an option given serious consideration by the Clinton administration in the early 1990s before nuclear proliferation had succeeded, is no longer feasible now that the North has a credible nuclear deterrent. But successful nuclear weapon programs have been peacefully terminated under duress in Ukraine and South Africa since the Cold War, and Libya's program was terminated before it succeeded.¹⁴ These successes were achieved with a combination of diplomatic pressure and trade sanctions. But sanctions have thus far failed in the North, largely because the PRC, though it originally voted for UN sanctions, has become increasingly lax in their implementation. Without an operational consensus on sanctions, attempts to enforce them will simply propel the North further into China's economic orbit.¹⁵ In any event the "hermit kingdom" has such a low trade dependency ratio that sanctions, even

¹⁴ William J. Long and Suzette R. Guillot, "Ideas, Beliefs and Nuclear Policies: The Cases of South Africa and Ukraine," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring 2000, pp. 24-40.

¹⁵ See Honkwon Kim, "A New Step of Sino-DPRK Economic Cooperation and South Korea: Interpreting 'Chang-Ji-Tu' and 'Ra-Son' through China's Foreign Strategy," unpublished paper presented at the World Congress for Korean Politics and Society, University of Incheon, Yonsei Songo Global Academy Campus, August 24-25, 2011; also Robert Marquand, "China's New North Korea Agenda: Economic reform trumps anti-nuclear message," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 1, 2006.

if comprehensively enforced, might have little efficacy. One option might be to accept the DPRK's claim to be recognized as a nuclear-weapons state, analogous to India and Pakistan, as Pyongyang insists, and enter into mutual disarmament talks. Though this option seems to have been tacitly accepted by the PRC, there are two problems: first, the PRC is not a likely target of those weapons; second, North Korea is not India. North Korea's foreign policy has been erratic and violently high-risk, with a long record of terrorist provocations and other outlaw activity, and given even a minimal nuclear deterrent these may be expected to increase.

What, then, is to be done? Two modest suggestions, mixing carrots with sticks: By way of the former, the US should finally exchange diplomatic recognition with Pyongyang and commence negotiations for a formal treaty ending the Korean War, as was promised in the Agreed Framework but never delivered. The idea that mere talk is giving something away and refusing to communicate is an effective punishment is a strange one; talk should never be conditional though what is said of course depends on the conversation. Normalization should proceed, and trade sanctions should also in principle be removed; anything to facilitate successful economic activity in the North and normal economic intercourse with the international market is in the interests of the anti-proliferation community as well as North-South reconciliation and is long overdue.¹⁶ This would also preempt one of the most persistent (and somewhat plausible) North Korean

¹⁶ Unfortunately some sort of trade inspection program will still be needed to prevent nuclear proliferation by the North (not to mention traffic in counterfeit currency, drugs, and other contraband).

demands. And to achieve maximum diplomatic effect this should all be done “unconditionally,” though the implicit *quid pro quo* will be clear enough.

Second, while the repercussions of North Korean *de facto* nuclear weaponization will be international, South Korea is most directly and seriously threatened: armed with a nuclear deterrent the North gains the capability to strike out at will (as in 2010) with an array of new provocations. The ROK has the inherent right of self-defense against such a contingency. Thus if diplomacy fails (or elicits only ridiculous counter-proposals), Seoul might consider (1) renouncing the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as no longer factually accurate; and (2) setting up a blue-ribbon study committee to consider either a) the restoration of American tactical nuclear weapons in the south, or b) the development of an indigenous nuclear deterrent. The committee should be authorized to “study” these two options and report back to the president within (say) a year. Option “A” would involve a less radical departure from precedent, be more legal (in terms of the NPT) and in this sense preferable, though it would obviously require consultation with Washington. Countering proliferation with more proliferation is obviously problematic in the sense that if proliferation is deemed unhelpful more cannot be better, and if the South decides to take this route Japan will not be far behind. But at the same time it is likely to be a highly effective bargaining chip, because the outcome would result in a more equitable distribution of negative outcomes (and corresponding incentives to push Pyongyang to denuclearize) than the provisory current outcome, which redistributes the balance of potential threats in a dangerously asymmetric way. The assumption would be that

putting these retaliatory options back on the table would be sufficient to lead to a more equitable negotiating outcome, though of course if the bluff is called the South must be prepared to act accordingly. In the worst case, the change would help restore the balance of threat even if it also escalated the level of multilateral risk.

Conclusion

North and South Korea have more than a millennium's history of political, linguistic, and cultural cohesion and both "halves" have since their division at the end of World War II cherished an enduring yearning for reunification. Yet the distribution of the incentive has always been asymmetrical, depending on the relative strength of the two halves. In the early decades the North took the (often violent) initiative, striving for a relatively centralized state structurally analogous to the DPRK, while the South paid lip service to a more loosely affiliated unity. In the post-Cold War era, as the South's economic takeoff far outdistanced the North's, Seoul became actively engaged in the reunification project, while the North took steps to defend its security. These steps included the development of nuclear weapons in defiance of an international treaty, invoking the participation of the world powers and ultimately making the reunification project impossible to pursue.

One of the central paradoxes inhibiting reunification efforts by either the North or the South has to do with relative power. The side that is more powerful has greater resources and capability to pursue reunification, while the side that has less power becomes fearful of being swallowed up by that power and acquires an enhanced

incentive to resist. Resistance may take the form of both internal balancing (e.g., rearmament) and external balancing (e.g., mobilizing the support of allies, such as the US or the PRC). The incentive to resist is not just a reflection of the ideal interests of an endangered elite but the nightmare of a loss of national identity. To the extent it is the latter it is conceivably more broadly shared. We have very little reliable information about the morale of the DPRK citizenry to verify this supposition (which seems belied by the refugee flow out of the DPRK at the height of the famine), but the fact that the North nevertheless survived such a catastrophe indicates that it has been able to retain a certain minimal legitimacy. This means that the road ahead is apt to be protracted and tortuous, demanding a high level of diplomatic finesse.