

Four-Party Talks and South Korea's Unification Policy

Kwan-Hee Hong

The First Preliminary Meeting

Since the presidents of South Korea and the United States proposed four-party talks last April, almost a year and a half has passed with no fruitful outcome until a preliminary meeting was held early in August 1997. Delegates from each country designated originally for the talks, the two Koreas, the US and China, participated for the first time. It was indeed more than forty years after the Korean conflict that government officials from these four parties finally met to discuss peace on the divided Korean peninsula. In particular, that China took part in this preliminary meeting bears implications for the future of the talks.

The meeting was preliminary; a final settlement was not expected to be reached. It was expected, however, that a ground-work would be able to be laid for a plenary session of the four-way peace talks. Some procedural matters were agreed among the delegates about holding a second preparatory meeting and the formal peace talks in full scale, as well as on the level of representatives to participate and on the format, but the four countries failed to agree on an agenda.

In retrospect, there has been too much trial and error getting North Korea to participate, and considerable energy has been

spent. Before the first preliminary meeting in early August, for almost seventeen months there had been innumerable working- and higher-level talks and contacts, many collapses and subsequent revivals. Throughout, Pyongyang demanded that South Korea and the US provide food aid as a precondition for it to participate, but both countries strongly objected to linking peace talks with food donations. Seoul has continuously reaffirmed that, along with measures to ease tensions and build confidence on the Korean peninsula, large-scale government food assistance could be discussed only within the framework of the four-way talks.

The expressed purpose on the part of South Korea and the United States was "to initiate a process aimed at achieving a permanent peace agreement"¹ and as an interim goal to secure various measures to reduce the threat of war and thus stimulate mutual confidence. Pyongyang, in addition to its initial insistence upon food aid, has demanded that the agenda include its longstanding demand for the withdrawal of US military forces from the peninsula. Pyongyang claims that is the "key to peace" on the Korean peninsula and thus must be the main topic. "To withdraw all its troops unconditionally from South Korea and its vicinity is what the United States should do first of all for peace on the Korean peninsula."² In North Korea's perspective the American troops are an outside force and thus are standing in the way of Korean reunification.³

The basic stance of South Korea and the United States on this issue has been that any talk of withdrawing the 37,000 US troops must follow big steps by the North to reduce its military threat of surprise attack on the South. Washington refuses to cut

1 Ralph A. Cossa, "The Four-Party Talks: Anticipating Pyongyang's Demands," *Korea Times*, 6 August 1997.

2 Commentary of the official *Rodong Shinmun* after the first day of talks, titled "U.S. troops pullout the key to peace on the Korean Peninsula."

3 DPRK Vice Foreign Minister, Kim Kye-gwan's comment.

security ties to South Korea against the wishes of the Seoul government, especially without any visible measures for tension reduction by the North.

North Korea, however, wanted the issues of the US troops in the South and a separate US-DPRK peace treaty to be specified as a sub-agenda to the peace settlement. Pyongyang also insisted that, among the two topics proposed by South Korea and the United States—establish a permanent peace and establish measures to ease tension and build confidence on the peninsula—tension easing and CBMs were not appropriate for the four-way discussions because these issues should be discussed between the two Koreas. The North's contention was well prepared and made up quite logically. Pyongyang recalled that a formal peace treaty between the two Koreas was already signed in 1992 (the Basic Agreement) and argued that now is the time to establish a formal agreement between Washington and Pyongyang.

It seems clear at this point that Pyongyang continues its long-held strategy of dealing with the United States and ignoring South Korea, by branding its southern counterpart a puppet. The inference may be that the DPRK's real intention is to change the US role from a guarantor of ROK security as in the past to some type of impartial mediator. It should be recalled that Pyongyang has been calling for an "interim peace mechanism" to replace the armistice. Besides this strategic objective, another factor causing the North to take part in the four-party talks seems to be Pyongyang's desperate need for food aid.

Background and Implications

Faced with disastrous economic decline and international isolation in the late 1980s, North Korea pursued the development of nuclear weapons as a means of breakthrough from its crisis situation. Thereafter, it initiated, and came to have, direct dialogue channels with Washington, for the purpose of ensuring economic and other material aid, and of guaranteeing its

national security. Taking advantage of direct contact with the United States, Pyongyang then launched a new offensive to establish a peace agreement with Washington to replace the 1953 Armistice. Of course, this was not the first time North Korea proposed the issue of a new peace regime; for decades, probably since the late 1970s, it wished to achieve this strategic goal in particular, through various channels including direct military contacts with the US.

Four-party talks were Seoul's first effective response to Pyongyang's continuing violations of the armistice of 1953 and its demand to replace the cease-fire agreement with a peace treaty between Pyongyang and Washington. In one sense, the four-party talks could seem to be a product of long agony and effort on the part of South Korea, weary from such aggressive peace offensives from the North. The talks were jointly proposed by Seoul and Washington to deal fundamentally with the issue of peace and have since been regarded as an important and indispensable instrument to establish peace and confidence in inter-Korean relations. Although these talks are not likely to bring about short-term success, it is expected that they will serve as a long-term and basic framework for South Korean foreign policy toward unification.

A main feature of the four-party talks is that among the four powers surrounding the peninsula only the United States and China are designated to participate. In this two-plus-two framework, South and North Korea would be the main players, while the United States and China would be given the supplementary role of endorsing the South-North negotiations internationally. The United States is the global superpower as well as the hegemonic power in Northeast Asia exerting powerful influence on international matters in this region. The historical blood alliance between Seoul and Washington has become a crucial factor in protecting South Korea's national security and resolving major crises on the peninsula. The China variable is critical as well in resolving the problems surrounding the Korean

peninsula, due not only to its geopolitical link with the peninsula but also to its great influence upon Pyongyang and, recently, its greatly growing interdependent relationships with South Korea. US-China relations are also emerging as a new and most influential factor in international relations of Northeast Asia. It is interesting and understandable that only these two powers are incorporated in the framework of the four-party talks. The other two, Japan and Russia, also have their own legitimate interests in Korean developments, but at present their influence and roles are relatively minor.

Changing Security Environments of Northeast Asia

Regime Crisis of North Korea

In a word, the present situation of North Korea is simply not sustainable, politically, economically or in other aspects. The disastrous economic circumstances of the isolated regime have come to be well known. North Korea recorded a negative 3.7% rate of growth in real GNP in 1996, which marks the seventh consecutive year of minus growth since 1990. Exports in 1996 declined 6.1% from the \$790 million of the previous year. Total trade figures amounted to \$2.13 billion, which is the lowest since 1991 when the North's trade began to decrease with the disintegration of the Soviet Union.⁴ To make things worse, food production this year is expected to be one-eighth its normal output. Its food shortage is estimated at around two million tons annually, which cannot be met with emergency humanitarian assistance alone.

Politically, the people are in such blind allegiance to a political philosophy of *juche* or "self-reliance" that their isolation is extreme. However, the DPRK political ideology and revolutionary line may to have lost its foothold due primarily to the various

4 Provided by the Bank of Korea, 9 July 1997.

changes occurring inside as well as outside the regime. The official power succession of Kim Jong-il is near at hand and in appearance his leadership seems quite stable. Nevertheless, political instability seems to be deepening. There is evidence of differing opinions within the power elite as to foreign policy, *acceptance of common people's contacts with foreigners*, and the scope of reform measures. Also, quite a few North Korean elites have been defecting and seeking asylum, implying the symptoms of social crisis and collapse in the whole North Korean society.

In order for the regime to survive, it needs to reform the economy and political system. Basically, however, the North's problems are systemic and structural, and Pyongyang's efforts to improve the situation remain incipient and inconclusive. Recently, it has attempted to decrease its reliance on a central distribution system and has increased the use of farmers' markets or so-called free markets, just as did China at the beginning of its economic reforms. Also North Korea is experimenting with a special economic zone, Rajin-Sonbong, realizing that it needs to be more conciliatory to obtain international aid. Above all, these problems are expected to have positive influences on the prospects for four-party talks.

US-DPRK Rapprochement

As mentioned earlier, North Korea's difficulties have forced its leadership to turn to a diplomatic breakthrough aimed at direct relations with the United States. Its new foreign policy in crisis can be said to be a sort of survival strategy. It is clear that Pyongyang has perceived that an improvement of relations with Washington will be the only exit from adversity. It is a desperate struggle for the very existence of the nation and of socialism.

On the other hand, the Clinton administration's policy toward Pyongyang has been being carried out with the goal of a soft landing for the regime, while maintaining stability on the Korean

peninsula through the continuance of the hitherto containment or deterrence-by-force policy. The two backbones of the American engagement policy toward North Korea can be epitomized as: (1) freezing the North Korean nuclear development in exchange for LWR construction under the Geneva Agreement of October 1994, and (2) pursuing the realization of the four-party talks.

Specifically, the US is carrying through discussion with Pyongyang on bilateral issues such as continuation of the nuclear freeze, negotiations on MIAs, the North's missile programs and biochemical weapons, and opening of liaison offices, meanwhile embarking on the LWR project and making efforts towards the four-party talks. At the same time, the United States seems to be making preparations for an emergency in which North Korea might collapse internally without a fight against the South.

Recognizing that the current internal situation of North Korea can create both opportunities for progress as well as a danger of greater instability, the US has tried to engage the DPRK in hopes to reduce tensions on the peninsula and avoid dangerous scenarios. The "humanitarian-refugee crisis" that seems imminent is regarded as a critical challenge no less important than security matters. Thus Washington has provided over the past two years more than \$33 million in humanitarian assistance—medical supplies and food—to the DPRK to help alleviate the suffering of North Korean civilians⁵, and this year increased its donation of food aid to \$52 million. If its conditions satisfied the US intends to continue this effort through international organizations such as the UN World Food Program. One of the conditions is to assure the transparency of the distribution process of the donated food.

Despite the recent rapprochement and some accomplishments in US-DPRK relations, it is clear that the overall US perception

5 Acting Assistant Secretary of State, Charles Kartman's remarks made on 8 July 1997 to the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific.

of North Korea is not beyond mistrust. Of course, the American policy towards the North shows its tenacity to expand influence over the northern part of peninsula. On the part of the Pyongyang leaders, by contrast, there is a belief that Washington holds many of the cards they need in order to improve their situation. Thus there is a mutual willingness to explore an improvement in relations, which explains how the United States was able to reach the agreed framework that froze Pyongyang's nuclear program and how it could induce the North to four-party talks. Pyongyang clearly approached them reluctantly in the beginning but has been driven by necessity.⁶

Seeing in the process of coming to impasse towards the four-party talks that North Korea clung to its old, perverse political rationale, there seems to be rising in Washington a somewhat hard-line view on dealing with Pyongyang for future policy directions.⁷ North Korea's foreign policy is seen as too inflexible, absent any sense of reality; thus there is no hope for change.⁸ Overall, however, the Clinton administration's soft policy seems to have majority support since the engagement policies are shown to have been paying off. For example, through the Geneva agreement of 1994, the program for nuclear development was curbed, and by encouraging food deliveries the US also succeeded in persuading the North to open discussions on missile sales and on a formal peace treaty to end the Korean war.⁹

6 Ibid.

7 There has been some criticism from Congressional Republicans who point to the North's bellicose rhetoric and behaviors as reasons to abandon the deal with Pyongyang and confront the North with military means alone.

8 *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1997, Editorial: "Wake Up, North Korea."

9 *New York Times*, 5 September 1997, Editorial: "The North Korean Puzzle."

China Variable

China fought the 1950–53 Korean War on the North Korean side against the combined forces of South Korea and the United States, and it is one of the signatories to the armistice agreement that ended the war. Historically Beijing has maintained closer ties with the Korean peninsula than has any other nation. Since it launched a reform movement in the late 1970s, China has been successful in turning its socialist economy capitalist, and has opened itself to the international community more effectively than has any other socialist country. Today it continues its relentless economic march averaging almost twelve percent of growth per year over the last five years. The military is also growing such that China's defense budget is probably around \$30 billion and increasing by ten percent each year. These trends are likely to continue. With this growing power it will certainly be one of the most important players in any future circumstances of the Korean peninsula.

China kept a low profile until participating in preparatory talks in New York early in August, despite its own defensive rhetoric, "From the outset, we were positive though we did not say so in public. We made our own efforts to ensure that the talks be held."¹⁰ Beijing did show in this meeting a somewhat ambivalent attitude regarding relations with both Koreas. The Chinese delegation sided with Seoul and Washington in opposing Pyongyang's demand for a sub-agenda on the peace settlement. In this regard, it seemed to support the improvement of relations not only between the two Koreas but also between Washington and Pyongyang. But, by proposing that the four parties discuss among themselves the improvement of bilateral relations rather than confidence-building and tension-easing steps, it gave the feeling that it supported the North's demand for bilateral US-DPRK relations.

10 Chinese Ambassador Zhang Tingyan's remarks, *Korea Herald*, 25 August 1997.

On the issue of the withdrawal of American troops in the South, China has consistently over the past half century opposed the stationing of foreign forces in Asia, and has reportedly tried to persuade South Korea of this position.

Now, China is assuming a new role by participating in the four-party talks and expanding its influences on the Korean peninsula. On the attitude of China toward the peninsula, there exist two opposing views and prospects. One expects that China will not confront the United States and South Korea politically or militarily at the expense of its economic growth. Furthermore, if North Korea appears ready to collapse in the years to come, Beijing might try further to improve ties with Seoul, including security matters. The following description of China's flexibility is suggestive in this regard: "China does not draw distinction lines in accordance with the ideology, but makes judgements about things according to their own merits case by case."¹¹ It is indeed to be noted whether it will continue current equidistance diplomacy, or turn to a pro-Seoul policy in order to establish friendly relations in political and military sectors as well. It is thought that China's fear is not unification itself by the South: what it is more concerned about is that the whole Korean peninsula might be placed under the influence and control of the United States.

Another, more ominous view is that China does and will maintain the traditional friendly relationship with North Korea, frequently referred to as a lips-teeth relationship.¹² In this view, Beijing would not want South Korea's democratic rule to extend to the northern border of the peninsula. Neither would it simply look on while the northern part of the peninsula fell into the

11 A Chinese scholar, Zhou Xing-Bao, describes China's flexibility in a recent publication. Cited from Mary B. Kim, "Toward a Workable Peace," *Korea Herald*, 7 August 1997.

12 Chinese epigram seeing North Korea as a buffer in the relationship with the US or Japan: "Without lips, the teeth are cold."

domain of US influence as a result of a quick collapse of North Korea. There is evidence that China is helping North Korea with plenty of food and other materials in an attempt to prevent the collapse of the Northern regime and to have it survive in the end. In any case Beijing is highly expected to support the status quo on the peninsula for the time being, but ultimately can be depended upon to maximize its own national interests.

Recent Inter-Korean Relations

Recently there have been remarkable advances in inter-Korean relations even with strong uncertainty about the future. There has been a significant increase in economic cooperation and in the flow of businessmen, products, visitors, journalists, and religious representatives. Among other things, KEDO's double-1,000-megawatt nuclear reactor project has already begun, in August 1997. Despite the Pyongyang authorities' claim that the KEDO project is a matter between the DPRK and the United States, South Korea's dominant role in the project is gradually being recognized among the North Korean people and will certainly affect their attitudes toward the South and the rest of world. Pyongyang is also trying to make a success of the Rajin-Sonbong special economic zone. Also there is evidence that it plans to open some port cities such as Nampo and Wonsan to foreign businesses by setting up tax-free bonded areas there.¹³ Moreover, recently the South Korean Red Cross completed delivery of about 50,000 tons of grain to its northern counterpart, and Pyongyang announced a willingness to allow civilian aircraft to fly through its airspace.

The ROK government has provided \$19 million worth of food to North Korea through international organizations such as the WFP and is likely to continue this sort of humanitarian assistance. Inter-Korean trade in the second quarter of this year

13 *Korea Herald*, 9 July 1997.

totaled \$86.7 million, a 52.9% increase over the same period last year and a 47.7% increase over the first quarter.¹⁴

These movements will certainly help alleviate the hostile atmosphere that has surrounded the two Koreas for several decades. Of course it is true that at the same time, there have occurred some events that could well unravel the fragile North-South relationship. One was the defection of Hwang Jang-yop, a former secretary of the Korean Workers' Party; there was also a fairly recent exchange of heavy gunfire at the Demilitarized Zone. Fortunately, neither disturbance led to the cancellation or abandonment of the preliminary meeting for the four-party talks. The defection to the United States of the DPRK ambassador to Egypt also cast doubt over the future of the talks, but after a bilateral US-DPRK meeting, the second preliminary meeting among the four parties was held as scheduled. Even so, Pyongyang continues to demand that removal of US troops in Korea and a DPRK-US peace treaty excluding the ROK be included on the agenda. There is speculation that it is going to use the talks to bargain for international food aid, particularly from Washington and Seoul.

South Korea has been ambivalent about assistance to the North in the last few years. South Korean people feel a strong emotional tie with their compatriots in the North, while at the same time they are also alarmed about the risk that the food will simply bolster the DPRK army. However, considering the increasingly widening gap of the state power between the two Koreas and Seoul's need to exploit policy leverage on the North, it seems the proper time to proceed with aid in full scale.

Prospects for the Four-Party Talks

Nowadays a consensus at home and abroad seems to be developing over the way and mode of reunification of Korea. A

14 The data are from the Ministry of National Unification, 29 July 1997.

unified Korea will be structured more like South Korea than North in terms of political-economic system. Liberal democracy and market economy has testified its universal validity through the collapse of the socialist systems. It is generally said that there are three ways for the reunification of Korea: (1) provocation of war by the North and eventual victory by the South; (2) internal collapse of North Korea; (3) the soft landing. Sudden unification, either through war or internal collapse then absorption by the South is the most probable, but not desirable in that it will be extremely cost and dangerously disruptive. Herein exists the rationale of the soft-landing policy: to avoid such costs and instability and instead to pursue a reduction of the military tensions on the peninsula, confidence building, and increase of economic and social interaction, and then to establish a peace regime.

The four-party talks will prove to be a well-designed instrument to reach the goal. Yet, it is not much more than an idealistic and somehow imaginative framework at present. It needs a realistic foothold in order to be realized. In order for a peace regime to work effectively, probably some conditions need to be satisfied.¹⁵

Among other things, tension reduction on the peninsula should precede any other measures so that the parties involved perceive a reduced military threat from each other. Only then will they be able to engage in substantial communication and interactions. For this, the parties should recognize each other's legitimacy. The two Koreas have never enjoyed the kind of relationship implied by such notion as a peace regime. At present a change of attitude on Pyongyang's part must be a precondition. Major disagreement in this preparatory meeting of New York was over the agenda for the formal talks, especially regarding

15 With respect to this point, see Thomas L. Wilborn's "Dimensions of ROK-U.S. Security Cooperations and Building Peace on the Korean Peninsula," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring-Summer 1997.

the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. The DPRK knows clearly that the ROK and the United States will in no way accept their demand for withdrawal of US troops. Thus it seems clear that it is not seriously interested in the establishment of peace regime on the peninsula through these four-party talks: instead, obviously its participation stems from a desire for more food and economic assistance from the United States to stave off collapse as well as its wish to improve US-DPRK relations.

Furthermore, it is clear that considering how much the current leadership of Pyongyang hates the ROK's Kim Y. S. administration, it will not proceed with any meaningful rapprochement and will not make any effective decision in inter-Korean relations until South Korean presidential elections this December. It may be better, then, not to expect too much from these talks. Recalling the original rationale of the four-party talks, we need a patient attitude until Pyongyang shows a change and should keep trying to induce the crumbling North Korean regime into dialogue, give them hope for a soft landing, and finally build a peace regime on the peninsula so that the most dangerous and disruptive scenarios including total war can be avoided.

The Four-Party Talks and South Korea's Unification Policy

Leading Role of South Korea in the Situation on the Peninsula and Improvement of Inter-Korean Relations

The Republic of Korea, as a party concerned with any emergency situation in North Korea, especially in a time of its collapse and thereafter national unification, is certain to be placed in a central position of the crisis management. Seoul should take moral responsibility for the settlement of situation since both North and South have preserved a historical and cultural integrity as one nation. It is thus certain that South Korea will play the leading role in any Korean settlement. This will, of course, be basically understood by the international community.

However, the ROK will need to coordinate with the other international players because the powers surrounding Korea are also certain to have their own roles in the process of unification. Inter-Korean talks are indispensable for this. When South Korea is able to improve relations with the North despite the current impasse in inter-Korean dialogue, it is certain to gain the momentum to lead unification and exercise a greater influence on the peace and security issue.

It is seriously urgent for Seoul to exploit some policy leverage towards the North in preparation for emergency, by maintaining dialogue channels such as one over the Rajin-Sonbong special area, one for KEDO, for South-North Red Cross Meetings, and so forth. It will then be able to check, to some degree, the interference of the big powers in the internal affairs of the future Korean nation. As the state power of North Korea declines, the moment will arrive for South Korea to assert its sovereign right over the peninsula and the ROK should prepare for that time. At the critical moment when the issue of reunification is discussed in full scale among the major powers, South Korea should persuade the other countries the legitimacy of unification centered upon Seoul and make it understood that unilateral action for the stability in the northern part of the peninsula may have to be taken if necessary. South Korea needs to appeal to the international community that there is no alternative but to achieve unification in the South's way in order to establish democracy, human rights, and a free market system in the northern part of the peninsula. In this sense, Seoul needs to develop its own engagement policy towards Pyongyang in order eventually to implement a one-Korea policy.

Pyongyang should be reminded as well as international community that South Korea is the only country with the will, capability and sense of responsibility to provide the necessary assistance. Of course, Seoul will have to bear a double burden, the cost of assistance and the cost of defense to counter the military threat.

Korea-US Alliance

The United States occupies a very special status in South Korea's security and international relations, providing a security umbrella to help maintain the South-North military balance. Since the ROK-US mutual security treaty of 1954, deterrence by force against provocation from the North has been the primary strategic objective of both countries. As long as a military threat exists, the US military presence is likely to play a vital role in peace building on the peninsula.

The US strategy for national security can be epitomized by three objectives: enhancing security, bolstering economic prosperity, and promoting democracy abroad.¹⁶ As is well known, American foreign policy has been strongly influenced by moral objectives such as human rights. Intervention in conflicts of Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti was clearly motivated by this moral impulse, and the issue of human rights in China and North Korea has clearly been an important factor determining the US foreign policy toward these regions. Towards North Korea as well, for the sake of domestic public support this humanitarian factor might well be a central consideration.

American policy toward the Korean peninsula, however, starts from the basic premise that stability and tension reduction here is the pivotal condition for the US national security goal. Washington regards the current internal crisis in the DPRK and the tremendous armed forces being maintained by the Northern regime as the most dangerous factor threatening the stability of Northeast Asia. For this reason, a peaceful resolution of the Korean problem and denuclearization of the peninsula as well as the eventual elimination from the peninsula of all weapons of mass destruction are raised as the primary policy objectives for the United States. The ROK-US military alliance and the stationing of the US forces in South Korea are sustained as core policy

16 White House NSC, *A National Security Strategy for A New Century*, May 1997.

means to execute those objectives; America's so-called Win-Win Strategy provides the rationale.¹⁷

Washington strongly supports the improvement of inter-Korean relations since it sees the rapprochement between the two Koreas as being fundamentally in accord with its policy goal toward the peninsula. Hearing some complaints posed by the South Korean public about the way Washington and DPRK have negotiated, especially during the nuclear talks which were clearly agreed without South Korea, Washington has tried to coordinate and consult with South Korea in negotiations following, and has fended off efforts by the North to drive a wedge between the ROK and the United States. It seems clear that the United States has now recognized the danger of a two-Korea policy, which was in fact engineered during the past few years, and is returning to its original policy orientation based on a firm ROK-US alliance. Proposing the four-party peace talks jointly with the ROK is a good example. In this regard, Washington officials counter that the possibility that the US will conduct important negotiations with DPRK without Seoul's participation is sharply diminishing.¹⁸

On the other hand, it should be noted that the principal US policy objective is to maintain peace and stability on the peninsula rather than to achieve Korean reunification by any means. American people are certain to support the stated goal of unification on terms that the Korean people seek, as long as it is peaceful and acceptable to the Korean people. In other words, the US will support the type of reunification that contributes to regional stability but would not look favorably on the disruption caused by the unilateral unification efforts by South Korea. "It is

17 "Win-Win" refers to the ability of the US to win two simultaneous regional wars, one, for example, in the Middle East such as the Gulf War, and the other on the Korean peninsula. QDR: *The May 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review*, US Department of Defense, 19 May 1997.

18 Charles Kartman's remarks, *ibid.*

not the goal of the United States to see a unified Korean peninsula. It is the US policy goal to support the Korean people's efforts to first defend their country and join the United States in a prosperous future, and also if they choose to unify themselves."¹⁹

The United States, in cooperation with the ROK, seeks to keep the process of change on the Korean peninsula manageable and peaceful. At the same time, however, the US seems to believe that the peaceful and negotiated reunification of the peninsula is highly unlikely anytime soon; rather, the most likely alternative is the absorption of the failed North by the South—but Washington considers it highly undesirable and potentially dangerous.

Despite some differences in view, Seoul needs to maintain the steady traditional friendship with the United States and especially the security alliance. The two share the same perspective regarding the future of North Korea. They both watch in common the changes and development of events in Pyongyang regime. Both are concerned about radical changes in North Korea such as internal disruption or explosion. At this time it seems urgent for policy-makers of both countries to make it a rule to consult in advance and take coordinated counter-policy alternatives.

Korea-China Relationship

From South Korea's perspective, the improvement of relations with China is certain to contribute to unification efforts. Among other things, China's participation in the four-party talks can exert nothing less than a great impact, of whatever kind, on the progress of a peace framework on the peninsula.

China remained a staunch ally of North Korea until it normalized formal relations with South Korea in 1992, and has since been building upon these new ties especially in economic fields.

19 Ibid.

Today trade is growing, investments are surging and exchanges are expanding. Bilateral trade more than tripled in the 1992–1996 period to \$19.85 billion. Even so, China has deliberately been keeping South and North Korea at equal distance especially on sensitive diplomatic issues—but now it is time to expand relations with Seoul into other arenas including political and security matters. Herein lies a task for South Korea's unification diplomacy.

In the future, four-party talks are certain to be most influenced by the US-China relationship. Friendly relations will make it easier for ROK foreign policy goals based on the 2+2 four-way talks to come about. Conflict between the two big countries, on the other hand, is likely to darken prospects for success of the framework. If Sino-US relations continue in confrontation, hopes for four-party dialogue will diminish.

Between the United States and China there seems to be occurring a new type of power struggle or contest for influence over the stumbling North Korea. It is evident that Beijing is currently delivering a huge amount of food aid, even knowing that it benefits the DPRK military, to prevent a regime collapse. The American engagement policy is also concerned about a scenario in which the Pyongyang regime might be placed under the Chinese domain of influence. The main task of Seoul's unification diplomacy, then, could well turn out to be precipitating a rapprochement between the United States and China.