

## Unified Korea between U.S. and China: Its Strategic Choices for the Future\*

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Even if a unified Korea emerges as a potential major economic and military power with a combined population of 80-million, it will have to deal with U.S.-China strategic competition that goes beyond the Korean peninsula. The United States will make efforts to persuade a unified Korea to maintain its military alliance for broader strategic purposes, and China will try to bring Korea onto China's side by offering incentives such as investment and financial support for the reconstruction of the Northern part of a unified Korea. Considering that a unified Korea will need help from both the U.S. and China in order to stabilize former North Korean territory and build essential industrial infrastructure there, unified Korea's realistic policy would be to encourage both great powers to accept unified Korea's unique status in an effort to resolve or mitigate differences between neighboring powers while not strongly aligning itself with either major power. Rather than providing the line of defense for either of the great powers, a unified Korea will need to maintain a loose alliance relationship with the U.S. while actively pursuing cooperation with China in all aspects aside from conventional military security.

**Keywords:** Korean unification, Unified Korea-U.S. alliance, North Korea, Strategic buffer state, U.S.-China relations

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## **I. Korean Unification and Two Neighboring Giants**

The North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is unlikely to avoid the strategic trajectory of Korean unification according to South Korea's terms, while he appears to be ready to negotiate over denuclearization with the United States. The Soviet Union collapsed not as a result of military attacks from the West, but rather under the weight of its own internal systemic contradictions. North Korea under Kim Jong Un could take a similar path as the Soviet Union unless he shifts to stand on the right side of history and tries to overcome the structural forces that may lead to his demise. If the United States, China, and South Korea can talk about the future of the Korean peninsula in a candid manner, they might be able to discover the ways to resolve the North Korean problem while alleviating the strategic uncertainties about Korean unification.

In this vein, the vision for a "unified Korea" that South Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK), can legitimately present to the international community is that of a state which is committed to the principles of liberal democracy and market economy; maintains close cooperative relationships with neighboring actors as a non-nuclear state; and contributes to the peace and prosperity of the international community. Since it is highly probable that unification will be led by South Korea that is a liberal democratic state, it is only reasonable that her current politico-economic values and national objectives will be included in the vision of a unified Korea.

Korean unification will be a historic event that catalyzes the spread of liberal democracy and market economy—the twin principles upon which today's ROK is founded—across the entire Korean peninsula. It will further lay the groundwork for the birth of a new "North-east Asian era," driven by the continued expansion of cooperation between neighboring states that play various direct or indirect roles during the unification process. Until now, the ROK has had to resign itself to a lonely, island-like existence, detached from the larger Eurasian continent by the facts of peninsular division and North Korean isolation. Should the peninsula be united, the ROK will become recon-

nected with the rest of Eurasia. This, coupled with continued intimate cooperation between the ROK and her traditional maritime partners such as the United States and Japan, will place the unified Korea at the crossroads of Northeast Asia which will be a much more energetic and cooperative region than it is today. To be sure, a significant period of time immediately following unification will be devoted to the economic reconstruction of the Northern half of the Korean peninsula, which could constrain opportunities for a unified Korea to contribute to the international community. However, once unification enters its final phase and the foundations for inter-Korean integration and reconstruction have been established, a unified Korea will emerge as a state that can make a significant contribution to international peace and prosperity.

The U.S. stance toward Korean unification is one of support for ROK-led unification, as formally expressed in the June 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement.<sup>1</sup> It further wishes to see commitment to the principle of denuclearization reaffirmed in a unified Korea, since the ROK-U.S. alliance is unlikely to be sustained should a unified Korea acquire nuclear weapons. Washington's concern is the possibility that, as Korea continues to invest enormous resources toward reconstructing its Northern region in the period following unification, a unified Korea might attempt to free itself from the resulting defense burdens by breaking the traditional commitment to denuclearization and building a nuclear arsenal, thereby posing a serious challenge to the U.S.-led global nonproliferation regime. Thus, it is very probable that the United States will feel the need to continue the ROK-U.S. alliance, if only to encourage its steady commitment to denuclearization. At the same time, a unified Korea that initially will be focused inward on domestic issues of reconciliation, integration, and reconstruction will continue to need a security guarantee against external interference from larger neighboring powers. As a unified Korea devotes itself to reconstruct-

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1. "Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," (June 16, 2009), The White House Office of the Press Secretary, <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/joint-vision-alliance-united-states-america-and-republic-korea>>.

ing the North, the United States' strategic focus will be to foster the continued progress of organically cooperative relations between the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, an additional concern from the U.S. perspective is that changes in Korea's domestic politics and surrounding environment may lead to the deterioration or loosening of the alliance. An additional worry is the possibility that Korea will align itself with China after unification by virtue of geographic proximity or cultural affinity, or that the ROK-U.S. relationship will sour due to the duress generated by Sino-ROK relations.<sup>3</sup> In short, an important strategic issue for the United States, when it comes to Korean unification, is whether or not a unified Korea will remain a loyal American ally as it attempts to overcome the legacies of division. A prominent American expert argues that the maintenance of a strong U.S. security relationship with Korea has played a critical role in ensuring U.S. influence across the Pacific, which in turn is critical to U.S. strategic and security interests in East Asia.<sup>4</sup> How this question is resolved will bear directly on the fate of the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK), and on the distribution of costs that the United States will have to pay should large-scale structural adjustment of her defense posture in Northeast Asia become necessary.

China has long regarded North Korea as a "buffer state" that keeps U.S. influence a safe distance from China's borders.<sup>5</sup> With the

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2. Daniel Sneider, "Advancing U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: A U.S. Perspective," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, March 30, 2016, <<http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=662>> (date accessed April 15, 2018).
  3. About U.S. perspectives on China-South Korean relations, see Jae Ho Chung, "How America Views China-South Korea Bilateralism," *Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies*, The Brookings Institution, July 1, 2003, <<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/chung2003.pdf>> (date accessed March 15, 2018).
  4. See Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
  5. Joel Wuthnow, "Warning: Is China Pivoting Back to North Korea?," *The National Interest*, March 8, 2016, <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/warning-china-pivoting-back-north-korea-15427>> (date accessed January 15, 2018).

onset of unification, China will likely seek to preserve its buffer by extending the North Korean buffer to the whole of the peninsula. Buffer states are typically thought to be capable of preventing conflict between great powers by pursuing neutrality; allying with the stronger of two great powers while maintaining friendly relations with the other; or enlisting the intervention of a third-party great power and pooling capabilities with her. Provided that a unified Korea might result in a drastic weakening of its alliance relationship with the United States while simultaneously enabling an improved relationship with China, China will probably expect a unified Korea to play the role of a buffer state, preventing U.S. power from reaching her territory by persuading a unified Korea to maintain a status of de facto neutrality. From this perspective, China is likely to demand a unified Korea to abandon the ROK-U.S. alliance and its participation in the ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation network, pointing to the demise of the North Korean threat. China worries that, in accordance with Washington's wishes, the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance will evolve into a full-fledged tri-lateral alliance between the three powers and eventually come to target China.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, if Korean unification materializes into an inexorable historical event, China can be expected to contribute to unification in the hopes of winning support of the Korean public, distinguishing herself as having played an even more central role in the unification process than the United States. Only by doing so will Beijing be able to make headway toward the objective of converting a unified Korea into a buffer state.

## II. Regional Security Environment after Korean Unification

The main consequences that the arrival of a unified Korea can

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6. Jin Jingyi, Jin Qiangyi, Piao Euzhe, "*Hanbando tongilyi joonggukye michil peonikbiyong bunseok* (A Study to Analyze Cost-Benefits of the Reunification of Korean Peninsula for China)," Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, May 14, 2015, <[http://businessnews.chosun.com/nmb\\_data/files/economic/kiiep\\_27.pdf](http://businessnews.chosun.com/nmb_data/files/economic/kiiep_27.pdf)> (date accessed January 25, 2018). [In Korean].

potentially have for regional relations include contributions to the non-proliferation regime; the cultivation of a regional atmosphere conducive to the establishment of a Northeast Asian multilateral security structure; increased opportunities for democracy to spread both throughout the Korean peninsula and possibly to neighboring states; the consolidation of Northeast Asia's regional economic integration through the removal of the North Korean economic sinkhole that has sapped potential for full regional economic integration; and increased regional volatility with the intensified U.S.-China strategic competition over a unified Korea, or alternatively efforts to turn a unified Korea into a strategic buffer state. The most direct effect of Korean unification will be the demise of the North Korean nuclear problem, which will eliminate what has thus far represented a serious challenge to the global nonproliferation regime. By reaffirming its status as a non-nuclear state, a unified Korea will be able to mitigate the likelihood of neighboring Japan or Taiwan developing nuclear capabilities.<sup>7</sup> And as a non-nuclear state, a unified Korea will be able to play an appreciable role in maintaining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime.

Thus far, North Korea has been one of the single largest impediments to the institutionalization of Northeast Asian multilateral security cooperation. It follows that the emergence of a unified Korea should allow the cultivation of a diplomatic atmosphere conducive to the growth of regional multilateral security structures. In fact, the institutionalization of multilateral security cooperation will probably be an essential element of efforts to strengthen regional stability by mitigating the risk of increasing geostrategic competition over the strategic orientation of a unified Korea. In other words, we can reasonably hope to see the emergence of a multilateral security consultative body through which a unified Korea can discuss and resolve pressing secu-

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7. Unified Korea, even if it took the path of developing nuclear weapons to deter North Korea's nuclear weapons and then faced the collapse of North Korea before unification, will dismantle all of its nuclear weapons with a view to eliminating surrounding countries' concerns and attracting their contributions to the reconstruction of the Northern part of a unified Korea.

riety issues and conflicts among neighboring states. Importantly, if U.S.-led alliance systems (i.e., ROK-U.S. alliance, U.S.-Japan alliance) are maintained in the aftermath of unification, the United States has little reason to oppose the birth of such a multilateral body in Northeast Asia. It is worth noting that, despite the end of the Cold War, European nations allowed the United States to play a leading role in European security by refusing to dismantle the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As a result, the United States did not oppose but rather cooperated with the creation of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), allowing post-Cold War European security to be firmly undergirded by the two—NATO and OSCE—coexisting security institutions.<sup>8</sup>

The United States and Japan are likely to hope that the emergence of a unified Korea as a democratic state could spur the democratization of China and Russia, paving the path for a “democratic peace” in Northeast Asia. Additionally, there is a high possibility that the birth of a unified Korea will fuel further economic cooperation in Northeast Asia, possibly accompanied by the establishment of a ROK-China-Japan free trade agreement (FTA). Should the movement toward economic integration in Northeast Asia gain momentum, such a trend will support the expansion of economic cooperation throughout Southeast Asia and the entire Asia-Pacific region. Of course, if China ends up dominating Northeast Asian economic integration efforts, concerns may be raised in the United States over the potential strategic ramifications this will have for the region.<sup>9</sup>

If a unified Korea emerges as a potential major economic and military power with a combined population of 80-million strong, then it may aspire to play the role of a “strategic buffer state” that helps resolve or mitigate differences between neighboring powers while not

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8. See Dennis Sandole, “The OSCE: Surviving NATO and the End of the Cold War” in Dennis Sandole, *NATO after Sixty Years: A Stable Crisis* (Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2012).

9. Shannon Tiezzi, “How China Could Benefit From a Unified Korea,” *The Diplomat*, January 14, 2014, <<https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/how-china-could-benefit-from-a-united-korea/>> (date accessed, January 15, 2018).

strongly aligning itself with any one of them. To be sure, a unified Korea will first have to complete its economic reconstruction and integration efforts on the Korean peninsula, and thus a unified Korea may find it difficult to play such a role for at least two decades following unification. If, on the other hand, regional powers—particularly the United States and China—intensify their competition to strategically win over Korea promptly after unification, volatility in the regional political environment could increase. The United States will make efforts to persuade a unified Korea to maintain its military alliance, while China will try to bring a unified Korea into her strategic fold by offering economic incentives such as investment and financial support for the reconstruction of the Northern part of a unified Korea.

### **III. ROK-U.S. Relationship after Unification**

#### ***1. Continued Alliance Relationship***

There remains a significant possibility that, with the demise of the North Korean threat following unification, various segments of the Korean population will begin to question the need to maintain the ROK-U.S. alliance and advocate the establishment of a new security arrangement. Likewise, many Americans will also question the need for U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula following Korean unification. As the original rationale behind the ROK-U.S. alliance becomes more vulnerable after the North Korean threat disappears, a unified Korea may prefer improvements in their relationship with China or at least a transition to neutral status as the most reasonable way to minimize post-unification security burdens.

While there are many compelling rationales for a continued alliance relationship, including a residual USFK (U.S. Forces in Korea) presence on the peninsula after unification, foremost among them is the fact that a unified Korea will still find itself surrounded by great powers and that it will therefore continue to require powerful alliance support, at least until Northeast Asian stability becomes immutably

consolidated. More specifically, a unified Korea may find such support necessary in order to check or defend against the expansion of Chinese or Japanese military power. And if the security needs of a unified Korea indeed require an alliance, it is only rational that a unified Korea maintains such a relationship with its traditional alliance partner—the United States. It is widely recognized that the United States is a remarkably suitable candidate for such an alliance, as a maritime power that is located far away from Northeast Asia and accordingly harbors few territorial ambitions in the region.<sup>10</sup> Most Koreans can be expected to support the maintenance of the alliance and a USFK presence provided that they perceive the U.S. as having made significant contributions during the unification process. Otherwise, unified Korean people would oppose continued alliance with the United States.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. interest in a continued alliance with a unified Korea will be tied to the need to maintain regional stability and the risk of strategic and economic encroachment on a weak unified Korea by neighboring powers during its reconstruction phase.

It is obvious that a unified Korea will not need the current size of the armed forces once the hostilities between the two Koreas are resolved once and for all. In order to ensure stability and order in the Northeast Asian region, the United States will likely attempt to check the expansion of Chinese influence throughout the Asia-Pacific region by not only revamping its alliance relationship with both a unified

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10. Patrick Cronin and others, "Solving Long Division: The Geopolitical Implications of Korean Unification," Center for New American Security (2015); David F. Helvey, "Korean Unification and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, *Strategic Forum* (February 2016); Derek J. Mitchell, "A Blueprint for U.S. Policy Toward a Unified Korea," in *Korea-U.S. Relations in Transition: Korea-U.S. Alliance in Retrospect and Prospects for a New Strategic Partnership*, eds. Jong-Chun Baek and Sang Hyun Lee (Sungnam: The Sejong Institute, 2002). For an opposite view, see Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

11. If the United States approached China to maintain the status quo rather than promote unification after the North Korean contingency had broken out, it would not be able to expect a unified Korea to continue the alliance relationship with the United States.

Korea and Japan, but also constructing a trilateral security cooperation network linking a unified Korea, Japan, and the United States.<sup>12</sup> China, on the other hand, is expected to demand that a unified Korea develop as a pro-Chinese state rather than play a contributing role in the United States' containment strategy towards China, and will probably oppose the continued stationing of the USFK by questioning the rationale for continuing the alliance in the absence of a North Korean threat. In short, a unified Korea will have to consider the role and size of the USFK in order to ensure self-reliant defense capabilities in the face of U.S. and Japanese efforts to bring it into their maritime strategic network and Sino-Russian efforts to integrate it into their continental sphere of influence.

While there has been no specific agreement on a suitable arrangement for the USFK's post-unification presence on the peninsula, there would be little disagreement that the ROK-U.S. military command structure will have to be one in which each country commands its own forces. In other words, at some point before unification, wartime operational control (OPCON) over the ROK armed forces will be transferred back to Korean authorities, and the ROK will come to possess both peacetime and wartime OPCON within the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO).<sup>13</sup> As such, it is highly likely that the size of the USFK will be reduced to a symbolic level, possibly comprising a single brigade of ground forces together with current levels of naval and air units. Rather than being a force for America's pursuit of hegemony in Northeast Asia, the USFK will hopefully play a constructive role by helping to reduce defense expenditures, manage interstate conflict, and maintain regional stability. The appropriate location for the USFK

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12. Regarding a U.S. wish toward a trilateral alliance among U.S., Japan, and Korea, see McDaniel Wicker, "America's Next Move in Asia: A Japan-South Korea Alliance," *The National Interest*, February 24, 2016, <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-next-move-asia-japan-south-korea-alliance-15301>> (date accessed January 18, 2018).

13. Even if it didn't happen before unification, the United States will transfer wartime operational control to a unified Korea due to the disappearance of the rationale for the ROK-U.S. combined forces command.

will have to be a place that avoids militarily provoking China—in other words, somewhere south of the 38th parallel. Once the United Nations Command (UNC)’s mission is accomplished following unification, leading to the dissolution of its organization, it is desirable that the USFK continue to play a stabilizing role in the Northeast Asian region. Discussions for the full-scale withdrawal of the USFK should be considered anew only after a definitive Northeast Asian collective security system is built and a military arrangement for the maintenance of regional stability within this system is established to replace U.S. contributions to unified Korea’s defense and deterrence against outside aggression.

## **2. USFK: Stabilizing Force for Asia**

The role and size of the USFK should be determined within a range that is consistent with the following military policies and strategy of a unified Korea. First, during peacetime, the goal should be to deter the outbreak of war and to contribute to the maintenance of Northeast Asian stability and peace in the international community. Second, in the event of a localized or limited conflict, the force should be capable of denying the adversary the objectives of its provocation and imposing arrangements to prevent its recurrence. Third, in the event of an all-out invasion, the force should be able to defeat the adversary and to deny the adversary the objectives of its aggression. In such ways, the USFK will be able to help maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia as a stabilizing force while simultaneously being a provider of military cooperation and support against the threat of attack by potential aggressors in the region.

The most important factor to take into account when contemplating changes in the role of the USFK is the question of how to alleviate China’s concerns. Assuming the maintenance of the ROK-U.S. alliance in the aftermath of unification, it will first be necessary to firmly define the role of the USFK as a “regional stabilizing force in Asia” as opposed to a force targeting any specific state (i.e., China). Second, a key way to help mollify Chinese concerns would be to station the

USFK below the current demilitarized zone (DMZ), and in a Southern region of the peninsula if at all possible. Third, a unified Korea will have to definitively reaffirm its promise of denuclearization to the international community. Fourth, active efforts should be made to expand military trust-building measures among states neighboring the peninsula. Some specific initiatives to consider would be to invite Chinese observers to ROK-U.S. combined (not regular but intermittent) military exercises, or to restructure the form of such exercises altogether (e.g., a transition from the current ROK-U.S. bilateral exercise to a regional/multilateral exercise).

Thus far, many studies in South Korea on the post-unification structure and size of the USFK have advocated a reduction of U.S. ground forces after unification and restructuring the force as one primarily composed of naval and air forces. In terms of ground units, the first phase of reduction would be to a level of approximately 10 thousand personnel in order to cope with the “chaos” that could be expected to occur in the transition period that immediately follows unification. In the next phase, a reduction to the level of brigade (approximately 3 to 5 thousand personnel) would be desirable if the peninsula’s surrounding environment remains stable. In the final phase, reducing the footprint of ground forces to the furthest possible extent is the best way to reduce suspicions about the United States’ strategic intentions toward the Northeast Asian region while simultaneously checking efforts by neighboring states to restrain a unified Korea’s activities.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, consistent with the discussion on wartime OPCON transition, it is expected that the current ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) will be replaced by the US Korea Command (KORCOM) after unification, with the U.S. forces playing a supporting role for the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>15</sup> We may also expect a unified Korea’s armed forces to change in accordance with three new strategic

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14. See, for example, Nam-hoon Cho, “Evaluating the Uncertainties of Korean Unification and Korea’s Future Policy Directions,” *Strategic Studies*, vol. 22, No. 1 (2015), pp. 51-52. [In Korean].

15. Burwell B. Bell and Sonya L. Finley, “South Korea Leads the Warfight,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 47 (4th Quarter 2007), pp.80-86.

objectives: focusing on imposing unacceptable costs to adversaries that seek to threaten Korea's regime; developing mobility capabilities that enhance the armed forces' reach towards the Indian Ocean in order to enable the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOC); and maintaining internal safety and order in the immediate aftermath of unification, particularly in areas previously controlled by North Korea. Furthermore, it would be desirable for the Korean peninsula to establish itself within Washington's global military posture as a suitable location for the rotational deployment of U.S. forces and the hosting of combined exercises.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, changes in the status of the UNC are expected to become inevitable with the demise of the North Korean threat after unification and the conclusion of the current armistice maintenance mission on the peninsula. This is because the very existence of the UNC finds its legitimacy in the division of the Korean peninsula and the armistice regime. Currently, in anticipation of wartime OPCON transition and the dissolution of the CFC, it appears that the United States seeks the maintenance of the UNC and the reinforcement of its functions on the peninsula. In offering specific reasons for its position that the UNC should continue its activities even after the establishment of a peace mechanism on the peninsula, the United States would argue in the first instance that the UNC was established on the basis of a United Nations Security Council resolution, and that its dissolution is therefore not a matter that should be determined via deliberation by the ROK government. Second, the United States sees the UNC as a body that is legitimate according to international law, and thus capable of deterring North Korean provocations and preventing escalation in the event of a provocation through crisis management. Third, should situations on the peninsula make it necessary, the UNC can be an insti-

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16. David Eunpyoung Lee, Elbridge Colby, Hannah Suh, Patrick Cronin, Richard Fontaine and Van Jackson, "Solving Long Division: The Geopolitical Implications of Korean Unification," Center for New American Security, December 16, 2015, p. 21, <<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/solving-long-division-the-geopolitical-implications-of-korean-unification>> (date accessed Januray 15, 2018).

tutional mechanism through which member states could send forces to Korea without an explicit resolution by the United Nations Security Council. Fourth, although changes in the status of the UNC after unification (i.e., dissolution) would require a new resolution on the part of the United Nations, it should be taken into consideration that some wish to see the UNC become an alternative mechanism for ROK-U.S. bilateral military cooperation after the dissolution of the CFC.<sup>17</sup>

Following major changes in the status of the UNC, realistic forecasts expect its Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC) and Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) to be dissolved or transformed accordingly. The basis for the existence of the UNCMAC will disappear with the conclusion of the armistice maintenance mission after unification, along with the supervisory duties of the neutral nations. It is thus anticipated that both bodies will be dissolved in a fairly natural process. Rather than simply discarding institutions such as the UNC, the UNCMAC, and the NNSC in the aftermath of unification, however, options to transform them into new peace maintenance institutions should be considered.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, while keeping the ROK-U.S. alliance at the center of its foreign policy, a unified Korea could also create a network of multi-tiered, complex relations meant to promote the perception that the ROK-U.S. alliance and the ROK-China relationship are not mutually exclusive. Towards this end, it would be desirable for a unified Korea to support high levels of Korea-U.S.-China trilateral security cooperation, while at the same time pursuing the balanced growth of mini-multilateral relations whose multiple layers comprise cooperation between Korea, U.S., and Japan or Korea, China, and Japan. The

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17. For this view, see Cheol-ho Chung, "The Status and Role of the UNC after the Transfer of the Wartime Operational Control," *Sejong Policy Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2010), pp.197-239. [In Korean].

18. The future status of the UNC and its expected change is a controversial issue among many Korean experts. The majority view supports the continuation of the UNC in a substantially modified organization, rather than completely rescinding it. See Il-young Kim and Sung-yol Cho, *US Forces in Korea: Its History, Controversies, and Prospects* (Seoul: Hanwool Academy, 2003). [In Korean].

aim, in short, is to deliberately create a complex network of relations.

#### **IV. Unified Korea-China Relationship after Unification**

One of the biggest obstacles a unified Korea will face as it determines the orientation of its foreign policy following unification is how to maintain a security alliance with the United States while providing assurances to China that perpetuation of an alliance between a unified Korea and the United States will not pose new security challenges for Beijing. Since China's primary objective in the event of Korean unification will be to replace North Korea as its security buffer, China will actively oppose unified Korea's efforts to perpetuate the security alliance with the United States.<sup>19</sup> China is likely to use a variety of economic and political instruments in an effort to neutralize and win over a unified Korea geopolitically to China's side and to loosen its ties with the United States and Japan. But it will be desirable that in its initial phase and possibly longer, a unified Korea facing the challenges of reconstruction and integration of the North will desire to continue the alliance with the United States, especially in the initial phases of unified Korea's economic and political integration.

##### **1. China's Expanded Economic Influence on Unified Korea**

Perhaps the major instrument China is likely to use in its efforts to gain leverage with a unified Korea and to blunt the influence of the United States will be its growing economic influence on the Korean peninsula.<sup>20</sup> China will seek to protect existing economic interests in

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19. Richard C. Bush, "China's Response to Collapse in North Korea," *On the Record*, Brookings Institution, January 23, 2014, <<https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/chinas-response-to-collapse-in-north-korea/>> (date accessed January 18, 2018).

20. See Sui-lee Wee and Jeyup S. Kwaak, "China's Harsh Words Mask a Trade Boom With South Korea," *New York Times*, September 29, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/business/china-south-korea-trade.html>>

the North Korean territory while taking steps to strengthen Sino-Korean economic ties as a means by which to enhance China's economic influence on a unified Korea and bring it into China's economic orbit. Toward this end, China may become an active aid donor and financier for reconstruction within the former North Korea, may offer humanitarian assistance in an effort to stabilize and extend its influence into areas inside a unified Korea near the Chinese border, and will search for economic instruments by which to strengthen China's economic influence within a unified Korea.

The three Chinese Northeastern provinces that share a border with North Korea will be most active in trying to extend economic influence into the Northern part of a unified Korea, both as a means by which to extend China's economic and political influence across the border and in order to secure maritime access for China's Northeast through ports of entry in the former North Korea.<sup>21</sup> Chinese firms that have experience and prior trading relationships with North Korea may opportunistically seek to expand access to North Korean infrastructure and mining sectors during a moment of transition when protections of these resources in a unified Korea and needs for capital to spur development are particularly acute.<sup>22</sup> For China's Northeastern provinces,

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(date accessed December 23, 2017).; Steven Denney, "South Korea's Economic Dependence on China," *The Diplomat*, September 4, 2015, <<https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/south-koreas-economic-dependence-on-china>> (date accessed March 2, 2018).; Asia Experts Forum, "Stephen Haggard on China-North Korea Trade," McKenna College, October 5, 2017, <<http://asiaexpertsforum.org/stephen-haggard-china-north-korea-trade/>> (date accessed March 2, 2018).

21. Chong Woo Kim, "Open North Korea: Economic Benefits to China from the Distance Effect in Trade," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 14, 2014, <<http://en.asaninst.org/contents/open-north-korea-economic-benefits-to-china-from-the-distance-effect-in-trade-2/>> (date accessed January 25, 2018).; "China Investing Heavily in N. Korean Resources," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 12, 2007, <[http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2007/04/12/2007041261016.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2007/04/12/2007041261016.html)> (date accessed January 25, 2018).
22. Sang-hun Choe, "North Korea Rents Out Its Resources to Stave Off Reform," *New York Times*, October 25, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/26/world/asia/north-korea-rents-out-its-resources-to-stave-off-reform.html>> (date accessed February 5, 2018).

such efforts will represent a natural extension of local interests in promotion of economic integration of the former North Korea.

China's provincial interests in economic integration across the Sino-Korean border will align with interests in Beijing that desire to utilize economic instruments to preserve China's geopolitical and security interests during a time of political transition in Korea. Beijing will support expansion of Chinese economic influence into a unified Korea as a source of potential leverage to influence Korean politics, to establish a rationale for a unified Korea to maintain a friendly relationship with China, and to persuade a unified Korea to take Chinese political and security interests into account in an effort to make a unified Korea into a buffer state that would protect China from having to directly face potential adversaries such as Japan and the United States.<sup>23</sup>

The complex security situation on the Korean peninsula has heretofore been an obstacle to serious Chinese efforts to apply its One Belt One Road (OBOR) plans to the Korean peninsula, but a changed security environment in which Korea becomes unified would remove those constraints on Chinese financial and project investment in a unified Korea and would make the Northern part of a unified Korea a particularly attractive target for Chinese investment in large-scale infrastructure projects alongside efforts to strengthen preferential terms of access on the Korean peninsula.<sup>24</sup> China would likely be a ready source of reconstruction funding, grants, and humanitarian aid to the Northern part of a unified Korea, but Chinese economic largesse would likely come with political strings and conditions that will require a unified Korea to navigate carefully as it defines its reconstruction goals while also trying to preserve its independence.

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23. See Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, "China-Korea Relations: Two Koreas Defy, Chinese Sanctions," *Comparative Connections*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2017), pp. 83-94. <<http://cc.csis.org/2017/05/two-koreas-defy-chinese-sanctions/>>, for an illustration of how China has been seeking to use economic leverage against both Koreas.

24. Anthony Miller, "The Chinese Dream in Peril: Xi Jinping and the Korean Crisis," *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2017, <<https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-chinese-dream-in-peril-xi-jinping-and-the-korean-crisis/>> (date accessed March 5, 2018).

## **2. *China's Pursuit of Political Cooperation with a Unified Korea***

China's main political objectives in establishing a relationship with a unified Korea will be primarily geopolitical; to block foreign influence on the orientation of a unified Korea toward the United States and Japan and to neutralize a unified Korea geopolitically as a potential threat on China's periphery. The political instruments China may use in pursuit of those objectives may include political coercion strategies alongside the economic-oriented influence expansion strategies detailed above. But political coercion efforts will be tempered by the need to establish a mutually positive and cooperative strategic relationship between the two countries.

Thus, China and a unified Korea will likely start off by recognizing each other's geographic and geopolitical importance and by renewing pledges to maintain positive momentum toward having good relations with each other. A unified Korea will value a good relationship with China even more deeply as it seeks both regional political peace and stability and resources for reconstruction of the Northern part of the peninsula.

While China will share unified Korea's interest in maintaining stability on China's periphery, Beijing may also mount a strong political challenge to efforts by a unified Korea to maintain a security alliance with the United States in case of post-Korean unification on grounds that the rationale for the alliance has dissolved in the absence of an inter-Korean conflict. China has already telegraphed its objections to alternative rationales for Korea to maintain an alliance with the United States as part of its opposition to the installation of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) system in South Korea. China's main objections were based on the idea that the missile defense system had regional application beyond the military balance on the Korean peninsula, an assertion that the United States and South Korea roundly denied.<sup>25</sup>

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25. Sungtae (Jacky) Park, "How China Sees THAAD," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 30, 2016, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/pacnet-32-how-china-sees-thaad>> (date accessed March 8, 2018).

However, Chinese objections to the deployment of THAAD were an important marker defining Chinese opposition to the idea that the scope of the U.S.-ROK security alliance should extend beyond deterrence of the threat from North Korea.<sup>26</sup> China's subsequent efforts to impose boundaries on South Korean security commitments through the informal establishment with the Moon Jae-in government of the "three noes" (no more THAAD batteries in Korea, no regional integration of missile defenses with Japan and the United States, and no establishment of a trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea defense alliance) provide further evidence of China's opposition to an expansion of the scope of the U.S.-ROK alliance beyond the North Korean threat; thus China would assert that there is no longer a compelling rationale for a U.S. security alliance with a unified Korea.<sup>27</sup> Although most of China's geopolitical strategies for enhancing influence in a unified Korea while strengthening coercive instruments designed to discipline a unified Korea from taking measures perceived as countering Chinese interests will be focused on limiting the scope of a unified Korea security ties with the United States, the primary point of geopolitical conflict between security interests on the Korean peninsula is really between China and Japan, both of which see a friendly unified Korea as critical to their respective security interests.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, it is likely that China will step up efforts in relations with a unified Korea to foment distrust of Japan and to limit unified Korea's strengthening of security arrangements with the United States that involve Japan or serve Japan's interests. Likewise, adjustments in Japan's policies toward a unified Korea,

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26. Jung-yeop Woo and Eileen Block, "Misinformation Hinders Debate on THAAD Deployment in Korea," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 319, East-West Center, August 11, 2015, <[https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb319\\_0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35254](https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb319_0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35254)> (date accessed January 25, 2018).

27. Jeongseok Lee, "Back to Normal? The End of the THAAD Dispute between China and South Korea," *China Brief*, vol. 17, Issue 15, Jamestown Foundation, November 22, 2017, <<https://jamestown.org/program/back-normal-end-thaad-dispute-china-south-korea/>> (date accessed March 8, 2018).

28. Sungtae (Jacky) Park, "If Korea Were to Unite..." *The Diplomat*, January 31, 2013, <<https://thediplomat.com/2013/01/if-korea-were-to-unite/>> (date accessed April 3, 2018).

possibly including economic, political, and security strategies, may be motivated primarily by the need to counter the risk that strengthening political ties between China and a unified Korea would put Japanese interests at risk.

Another sensitive area that has potential to influence the tone in management of political relations between China and a unified Korea will involve management of cross-border issues between the two countries. A unified Korea would inherit the legacies and historical precedents established by North Korea in managing cross-border issues, but the nature and specific problems involved in managing cross-border relations may change as a result of a shift in tone and style of management of the overall China-unified Korea relationship. Among the historical legacies around that relationship that could become a focal point for political conflict will be the question of whether a unified Korea challenges existing borders on historical grounds, (including the controversial cession of the Kando peninsula to China in 1907 when Korea was under Japanese control), review of any special access arrangements for Chinese companies to unified Korea ports and mines, and ongoing disputes over historical relics and their provenance dating from the Koguryeo and Parhae kingdoms over one thousand years ago.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, there would be powerful motivations for China and a unified Korea to manage border issues cooperatively as a manifestation of positive relations consistent with the rising mutual interests in establishing as good (an optimal or ideal) a political relationship as possible.

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29. "What China's Northeast Project Is All About," *Chosun Ilbo*, May 30, 2008, <[http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2008/05/30/2008053061001.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2008/05/30/2008053061001.html)> (date accessed March 8, 2018); Taylor Washburn, "How an Ancient Kingdom Explains Today's China-Korea Relations," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2013, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/how-an-ancient-kingdom-explains-todays-china-korea-relations/274986/>> (date accessed April 8, 2018).

## **V. ROK's Strategic Considerations**

Through this research focused on envisioning Korea's post-unification foreign and security policy, particularly in regards to the ROK-U.S. alliance and the ROK-PRC relationship, we have arrived at a number of key strategic factors that must be taken into consideration. First, in order for Korea bent on unification to maximize the pursuit of its national interests under this situation, it must carefully manage the "speed" of and motivations behind cooperation with China by managing the nature and purposes of economic collaboration while taking gradual steps to strengthen cooperation in the political and security arenas; assure the United States that the ROK-U.S. alliance remains the cornerstone of Korean security; build enough confidence to avoid excessive fear of China; and pursue ROK-U.S. technological collaboration in order to enhance their "brain power" as seen in the case of the U.S.-India relationship.

Second, ROK policymakers should prepare to cope with the ROK-U.S. "global alliance dilemma." While both Washington and Seoul agree that the ROK-U.S. must continuously evolve with changes in its surrounding situation, there remain elements of friction between the U.S. effort to expand the purview of its military alliances to encompass regional and global missions and the Korean preference for limiting the military aspect of the alliance to the peninsula (backed by Chinese pressures to delimit and potentially even to eviscerate the U.S.-ROK security alliance) while welcoming non-military cooperation in the global arena. This is what might be properly termed a ROK-U.S. global alliance dilemma that does not allow Korea to expand the scope of the "military" alliance to a global level. In this situation, the ROK must make preparations to realize wartime OPCON transition at the earliest possible period rather than to postpone it indefinitely, and must pursue more intensive "non-military" cooperation with the United States in pan-global concerns such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, economic development, and human rights.

Third, since a sustainable balance between security and economic cooperation has yet to be reached when it comes to the ROK-China

relationship, ROK policymakers must be able to respond appropriately to this issue as well. Priority must be placed on advancing an acceptable vision for a unified Korea in order to persuade China to abandon its reservations regarding unification, and the establishment of a systematic strategic dialogue between the two countries is critical in this regard. A specific, realistic way to make this happen would be to hold a so-called "1.5-track" strategic dialogue involving experts from both countries (government officials would not participate in the initial phases of the discussion, and only become involved gradually). And to assuage perceptions that ROK-China strategic discussions are overtly focused on political issues, comprehensive exchanges should be pursued by expanding the framework to resemble a "Strategic and Economic Dialogue," such as which currently exists between the United States and China.

Fourth, strategic discussions between the ROK, U.S., and China should be energized in tandem with efforts discussed above in order to handle questions related to the construction of a peninsular peace mechanism and to enhance prospects and potentially, to define institutional arrangements capable of undergirding post-Korean unification regional stability. If China adheres to its traditional position, we may expect that it will criticize the USFK problem, mutual distrust between North Korea and the U.S., and differences in roadmaps proposed by the Koreans and those proposed by neighboring countries. In the past, China suggested that the North Korean nuclear problem will only be resolved when the United States succeeds in alleviating the "rational security fear" harbored by the North Korean regime. If the Chinese view has not changed, the establishment of a peace mechanism on the Korean peninsula will become extremely difficult due to outstanding differences in perception between the U.S. and China regarding the peace mechanism, and cooperative relations between the ROK, U.S., and China will be called into question. It is thus critical that a solution to this problem be devised.

Fifth, a "consultative body for the management of a North Korean crisis" should be activated between the ROK and China, or among the governments of the ROK, the United States, and China. There is no

need to presume that China will reject discussion on these matters with the ROK, and in fact, there is ample reason to believe that the ROK is one of the countries with whom China is most anxious to hold discussions regarding a potential contingency in North Korea.<sup>30</sup> Because Chinese public opinion is gaining more and more influence on Beijing's decisions on this issue, it is imperative that an atmosphere that is friendly toward the ROK be cultivated within China in order to secure its cooperation. Towards this end, the ROK must reinforce its ability to monitor Chinese public opinion and its efforts to cultivate a favorable social atmosphere.

Finally, ROK policymakers must respond in a proactive manner to China's diplomacy toward its neighbors. Some of influential Chinese scholars have recently argued that "the tributary system of pre-modern eras was not necessarily all bad," signaling a desire to manage relations with neighboring countries, including the ROK, in a more assertive manner.<sup>31</sup> In order to check Chinese efforts to consolidate "hierarchical" relations with her neighbors, the ROK will have to strengthen its bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other states in China's vicinity.

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30. See Jia Qingguo, "Time to prepare for the worst in North Korea," *East Asia Forum*, September 11, 2017.

31. Fangyin Zhou, "Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2011), pp. 147-78; Gungwu Wang, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 8 (Part 2): *The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644*, eds. Denis Twitchett and Frederick Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 304.

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