

Southwest Asia and Korean Unification

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Abstract

Due to its invasion of Iraq, the overemphasis on the threat posed by Al Qaeda, the ongoing war Afghanistan, and the possibility of other confrontations in Southwest Asia, the United States has cut down on its commitments in Northeast Asia. It is possible that in the future the US will further scale back its military and diplomatic assets the region. Therefore, if and when Korean unification takes place, the United States may be unwilling, or incapable, of playing the leading role. This could make the political and economic management of the unification process even more difficult.

Keywords: Korean unification, Southwest Asia, US security policy, Al Qaeda, unification process

The policy debate in the United States since the Al Qaeda strikes of 2001 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has two characteristics. First, there is an obsession, equally shared by Republicans and Democrats, about Southwest Asia (Southwest Asia, a recently new term in the American strategic vocabulary, is a somewhat ill-defined region).

Broadly speaking it includes the area of responsibility of the US Central Command that ranges from Kenya to Kazakhstan and from Egypt to as far as Pakistan (US Central Command (Centcom)).¹ This area also includes Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian polities in Gaza and the West Bank which are included in the European Command area). Second, there is a lack of focus on the possibility of Korean unification.

On the surface, the American preoccupation with Iraq and “Islamic terrorism” is unrelated to a decline in US interest regarding the timing and nature of the absorption of the northern half of the peninsula into the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Nevertheless, there is to some extent, a causal relationship between the latter (the concentration of both military and intellectual resources on Southwest Asia) and the former (a lack of interest in Korea’s future). More ominously, the nature of the American commitment to the region between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea will make it harder for the United States to play a constructive role in the unification of Korea. Fundamentally, US policies in Southwest Asia have several nefarious consequences in regards to America’s commitment to Korea. First, American military and diplomatic resources are stretched to the limit, constraining the ability of the United States to deploy assets (military as well as diplomatic) in other regions. Second, the catastrophic consequences of the Iraqi war may deter the American electorate from supporting ambitious foreign policy goals in the future, thereby making it harder to secure the support of the American people for US economic and political assistance in handling Korean unification.

¹ http://www.centcom.mil/sites/uscentcom2/Misc/centcom_aor.aspx.

The Obsession with “Terrorism” and Southwest Asia

Although this article is principally about Korea, we first need to understand the nature of America’s fixation with Southwest Asia. In 2001, Osama Bin Laden, leader of Al Qaeda, launched a successful operation to simultaneously hijack four US airliners. His men managed to hit the World Trade Center twin towers in New York and the Pentagon with three aircraft, while the fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania. The strikes killed about three thousand Americans. Compared to American fatalities in Vietnam War and Korea, not to mention the World Wars and the Civil War, the number of victims was comparatively low. Seen in the context of deaths due to domestic circumstances, Al Qaeda’s victims were far less numerous than the 43,000 fatalities due to road accidents during the same year, the 15,000 Americans who killed themselves in falls,² not to mention the 16,000 homicides of 2001.³

Moreover, it was obvious from the day of the attacks, that Al Qaeda had very limited resources. Thus, those who compared “9/11” with Pearl Harbor totally missed the point. The Japanese strike was backed by the considerably military and naval power of Asia’s strongest nation. In addition, the United States had to confront the even more dangerous German military machine. Bin Laden, on the other hand, had a small number of followers, no advanced weaponry, and only counted Afghanistan as an ally. There is no doubt that he was a menace to American interests, but his was a very feeble challenge to American security compared to the threats posed in previous decades by Soviet and Nazi power. As for those who see the “post-9/11 world” as another type of Cold War, they forget that the Soviet Union had the capacity to wipe out entire American, European, and Asian cities, and

²http://www.nsc.org/library/report_table_2.htm, August 18, 2007.

³<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/tables/totalstab.htm>, August 18, 2007.

had the ability to kill tens of millions of American and allied citizens in a few hours.

Nevertheless, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper, the American reaction to the Al Qaeda skyjackings quickly turned into hysteria about “Islamic terrorism.” “Hysteria” is not a term of contempt for the feelings of the “man on the street.” It applies to the mental transformation of most American policymakers, politicians, and intellectuals in the period that followed September 11. This disequilibrium in the American psyche then allowed President Bush, for reasons that are still ill-understood, to obtain broad bipartisan support for his invasion of Iraq.

Therefore, by 2003, the United States found itself in a catastrophic situation entirely of its own making. The war in Iraq absorbed large military and financial resources in a conflict that can only end with the defeat of the United States. It diminished assets available for the struggle in Afghanistan while empowering Iran and other foes of the United States.

As of now (November 2007), there is little chance that the United States will quickly find a way improve its situation in Southwest Asia. There is no sign of an American consensus to withdraw from Iraq. Many politicians, including Democrats, seem to accept the idea of war with Iran. The conflict against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan is far from over. Finally, depending on how it develops, the possible implosion of Pakistan could open an additional front in the region.

Korean Unification

If America is both badly and over-invested in Southwest Asia, it suffers from under-investment in Korea. One reason for this state of affair is the focus on Southwest Asia. As a consequence, military units that are normally based in Korea or Japan, or in the United States but

earmarked for East Asian contingencies, are deployed in the Centcom area of responsibility.

As Zbigniew Brzezinski has noted, America may be dominant but it is not omnipotent. The Bush administration decided to eschew putting the United States on a war footing. It took no action to increase the size of US ground forces, did not even consider introducing conscription, and went so far as to implement tax cuts. Therefore, America reached a point where its military and political commitments to Southwest Asia forced it to curtail resources available to other regions of the globe. Diplomatic resources also began to flow away from East Asia. The State Department gives priority to staffing the elephantine American mission in Bagdad. Learning Arabic has priority over Korean, Japanese, or Chinese. The six-party talks are a symbol of the lack of focus on Korea and East Asia. These negotiations, involving Japan (the world's second largest economy and America's biggest ally), China (both a major partner and rival of the United States), South Korea (America's ally and home to US forces), North Korea (the most advanced WMD "proliferator" in the world), and Russia (a weak but not totally insignificant player), are led by Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill. Though no one questions his qualities, it is noteworthy that whereas the Secretary of State and her senior deputies devote all their waking hours to Southwest Asia, they delegate Northeast Asian affairs to a fairly junior official. In this particular case, it is probably good that Hill is in charge. He is generally believed to have had a good record as a diplomat and negotiator in Europe. Unlike senior administration officials, he bears no responsibility for the Iraqi catastrophe.

However, there are other factors which explain the lack of critical thought applied to Korea in general and the issue of its possible future unification in particular. President Roh Moo-hyun has not exhibited the degree of anti-Americanism as some had feared. His administration negotiated a trade pact with the United States, despite the opposition

of his more left-wing supporters. Yet, on balance, Roh's positions on North Korea, Japan, and the role of Korea in international affairs, have not made him popular in the United States. His views, and even more those of some of the more radical elements among his backers, indicate that he does not see the security relationship with the United States as the lodestar of Korean strategy.

Unfortunately, President Roh, like many of his compatriots, misread the nature of America's interest in Korea. Besides his dislike of American support for Presidents Park and Chun, he seems to think that it is obvious to all Americans that Korea is vital to American interests. It may be true, but the fact is that the United States is a vast country with global responsibilities. Many Americans, including their politicians, know little about foreign affairs. Others think that other countries or regions matter more than Korea. Therefore, unless South Korea is seen as a reliable US ally, some American policymakers will favor minimizing the importance of the relationship with Seoul. Unfortunately for Korea, the Roh presidency convinced quite a few Americans that Korea was not a reliable ally and should be written off as an important American partner.

Finally, American thinking about North Korea has evolved. The collapse of Soviet communism, the unification of Germany, and the death of Kim Il Sung all put Korean unification on the agenda. The assumption, perhaps simplistic, was that the dominos would keep falling, bringing about the end of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

However, despite low expectations about his chances of survival, Kim Jong Il has kept his inheritance (relatively) intact. His ability to obtain humanitarian and economic aid from South Korea, China, and even from the United States, as well as from international organizations and NGOs is sufficient to convince many that North Korea is here to stay. His success in extracting the February 2007 Agreement from Washington reinforces the assumption that North Korea is here to stay.

However, to paraphrase a warning often issued to investors, “past performance does not predict future performance.” The DPRK might last another 50 years, but we should not forget that it is fundamentally a very fragile construction. At any time, the regime could break down. In most countries regime collapse does not equal state collapse. Communism fell in countries such as Poland and Hungary, but the nations themselves still exist, with the same borders though under different regimes. In the case of North Korea’s, however, the regime is the only justification for the state. If the Kim dynasty and the ruling party were to lose control, it is hard to imagine a North Korean state without them. Like East Germany, if it were not for the imposition of communist rule by Soviet occupation, North Korea would never have existed. We can imagine scenarios where a post-Kim DPRK continues to exist. Since South Koreans are aware of the enormous costs of unification, they might seek to allow North Korea to survive, perhaps under the control of elements of the KWP receiving ROK - and Chinese - aid to avoid state collapse. However, it would be unwise to bet on such an outcome. Korea, unlike Germany, is not a relatively recent creation with ill-defined boundaries. Moreover, both post-war German states downplayed nationalism. Yet, within days of the demise of communist rule in East Berlin, it was clear that Germany would be soon unified. In both Koreas, however, all political actors, conservatives, progressives, and communists, have emphasized a virulent form of nationalism and ethnic pride. Therefore, it is even more likely than in Germany that when the current DPRK regime falls the forces of nationalism will not overcome all obstacles and force unification upon reluctant leaders.

Planning for Unification

Korean unification could result from various scenarios. The most peaceful one would be the product of a breakdown in Pyongyang’s

authority, followed by the downfall of the regime. Such a development would be quite similar to that of East Germany in 1989-90. On the other end of the spectrum, the DPRK could initiate a war, be defeated, and then collapse. The end of the North Korean state could also come about as a result of factional fighting within the elite, or be caused by events we have not yet foreseen.

There is obviously a great difference between a bloodless overthrow of the dictatorship, as happened in Berlin in 1989, and uniting Korea in the aftermath of a war. Yet, regardless of the process of unification, the Republic of Korea will face enormous challenges in absorbing the former DPRK. Incorporating over 20 million citizens raised in a grotesque, impoverished tyranny into a modern first-world liberal polity could well destroy the ROK as we know it. The strains will be stronger or weaker depending on the process of unification, however, regardless of how the South absorbs the North, the difficulties will be enormous.

The consequences of unification on Korea's international posture will depend even more on the circumstances surrounding the end of North Korea. One could imagine Seoul, Washington, and Beijing, possibly with some input from other capitals, negotiating a peaceful end to the DPRK state, say in the aftermath of the death of Kim Jong Il. However, the last days of North Korea could as well be brought about by Pyongyang launching an attack on its foes, leading to a US-led invasion to solve once and for all the North Korean problem. This looks highly unlikely but history teaches us that sometimes fact is stranger than fiction.

Despite all these imponderables, one thing is certain. The ROK will need foreign support if its victory (unification) is not to be followed by a failure to manage the takeover of the northern half of the country. On the domestic front, Korea will require economic assistance. The record of foreign aid programs is debatable, in some cases they have done more harm than good when they serve as narcotics that harm the

development of effective state institutions.⁴ In Korea's case, however, there are good grounds for massive external economic and financial support. First, South Korea has strong and effective institutions. Therefore, like the western European states during the Marshall Plan, it has the political and administrative capacity to manage a development program for the North. Second, the collapse of North Korea will be a sort of natural disaster which, like a tsunami wave, will strike the ROK. Like all such events, it will call for immediate government assistance. Since the amounts involved will be far beyond the capacity of the ROK alone, Seoul will have to rely on help from other nations.

As noted above, the implications of unification for Korea's international position are much harder to predict until we actually see what process has brought unification about. Nevertheless, we already do know that unification will bring about several changes. The division of Korea transformed (South) Korea into an island. Since for all practical purposes the DMZ was an impenetrable barrier, the ROK became, like Japan and Taiwan, an insular capitalist nation on the mainland of communist Asia.

The past two decades have altered this situation. South Korea now has extensive economic, political, and cultural links with China. There is now an interaction between the North and the South, though still very minimal and well below the intensity of inter-German relations during the Cold War. However, the fact remains that the ROK is separated from China by the DPRK, which to this day remains closed to overland communications, thereby forcing Chinese and South Koreans who wish to visit each other's country to fly or take a ferry.

Unification will radically alter the relationship with China. There will be a long, and presumably open, border between the newly enlarged

⁴ See William E. Odom, *On Internal War: American and Soviet Approaches to Third World Clients and Insurgents* (Duke University Press, 1922) for a detailed argument on the impact of foreign assistance on states that need to build their institutional capacity.

Republic of Korea and China. This will facilitate contact between the two societies but could also bring about tensions. As of now, the ethnic Korean citizens of China in Jilin province border North Korea. Following unification, they will suddenly be next to a successful Korean state. There is currently no unrest in Jilin province, and unlike Uigurs and some other minorities, the Korean-Chinese do not appear to be victims of any discrimination. Yet, this new situation could worry China's leadership, which has always be hypersensitive to foreign influences, stemming from ethnic or religious ties, on its population. Moreover, some Korean irredentists could renew claims to Chinese territory beyond the Yalu which they consider to be historically Korean.

The impact of the end of Korean division on Japan is very hard to predict. It could make Koreans, realizing that they need Japanese aid, very accommodating to Japan. It could, however, also fuel a nationalist reaction, which would have elements of anti-Japanism. In Japan, one of the most obvious preoccupations following the demise of the DPRK, will be the fate of the North's remaining WMD arsenal. It may be that by the time of unification Pyongyang will have accepted total and verifiable nuclear and missile disarmament (though that is unlikely) or that its weapons will have been either destroyed or confiscated by the United States after a war. However, it may also well be that a unified Korea will inherit the North's atomic bombs and rockets. If this is the case, Japan's priority will be the dismantlement of these military assets.

The US Role

This analysis brings us back to our starting point, the role of the United States. The United States has a special role in East Asia. It is, by far, both the largest economy in the world and boasts the stronger military. In Asia alone, it operates land, air, and naval forces stationed

in Japan and Korea, as well as bases in Guam. Moreover, it has the ability to project reinforcements rapidly from the other theaters to augment its power in the region. It also has alliances with (South) Korea and Japan. Its relationship with China is complex, but despite - and in some ways because of - their rivalry, Washington is by far Beijing's most important partner in both the political and economic arenas.

Therefore, it is logical to assume that the United States would take the leading role in coordinating and leading the international effort to stabilize both Koreas and the region following unification. This would entail working with Seoul to create a Korean Rehabilitation Organization which, under Korean chairmanship, would arrange for large amounts of economic assistance from the United States, Japan, China, other countries, and international organizations. As befits a country with the planet's biggest GDP and essential political-military interests in Asia, America would be expected to be the biggest contributor. Such a role would require a major investment of capital. It would also take a lot of diplomatic skill on the part of Washington to extract pledges from other countries, to manage the petty and more substantive conflicts between the participants, and to steer a well-balanced equilibrium between American leadership, Korean pride, Chinese ambitions and fears, Japanese ambivalence about Korea, and bureaucratic inertia in all participating countries and international organizations. On the domestic side, the US administration would also have to convince Congress to vote large appropriations for the program. Harry Truman and George Marshall achieved similar goals as they steered the Marshall Plan, but not every American president is a Truman nor are all secretaries of State Marshall's.

Beyond the management of the Korean Rehabilitation Organization, the United States would have to create a new security mechanism in Northeast Asia. Though small and wretchedly poor, North Korea exerts an influence on the Asian system out of proportion to its size. Its

disappearance will, of course, be welcome news to its people. It will also lessen the risk of war. As noted earlier, however, the dynamic of ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations will be altered, but almost all bilateral and multilateral relations involving the US, Japan, China, and Korea in East Asia, including Taiwan's position, will be affected by the end of Korean division.

Therefore, to ensure that, as in the case of German unification, the unification of the peninsula improves rather than damages the Asian security environment, the United States will have to take the initiative in setting up a system that simultaneously ensures that Korea can remain a productive member of the US-led system of alliances while keeping all the regional actors sufficiently happy to give them a stake in the new system or render them unable to challenge it. This is not an impossible task. As of now, we can conceive of a post-DPRK order that would be beneficial not only for Korea but also for the United States, Japan, China, Taiwan, and other regional players. Achieving such a goal, however, will not be easy, and it will take a large investment of US political, diplomatic, and economic resources to achieve.

Southwest Asia and the US Role

The nature of America's involvement in Southwest Asia has truly put the ability of the United States to the test in being able to fulfill these tasks in the aftermath of Korean unification. On paper, the United States has the resources to simultaneously continue its hopeless war in Iraq, attack Iran, and fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan (and maybe tomorrow Pakistan). Although the Pentagon spends well over \$1 million a minute, defense spending in 2007 was a little above 5%. In 1960, when the United States was involved in no major armed conflict, it was at 9.3%. In 1970, during the Vietnam War, it was at

8.1%.⁵ These numbers are not necessarily perfect, and budgetary appropriations, especially for defense, are a complex and opaque process, but it is quite clear that the United States could devote more resources to East Asia without reducing its activities in Southwest Asia. For example, if only 0.5% of GDP were allocated to programs for East Asia (economic aid to unified Korea, additional military expenditures if needed, etc.), it would represent an amount equal to around \$65 billion.

In politics, however, the ability to merely write checks is not always what matters. Here the situation is different. Having already approved ever-increasing budgets for defense, Congress may well reach the conclusion that voters do not want their elected representatives to support a massive “foreign aid” initiative.

Moreover, there is no indication that either the current US executive branch leadership, nor for that matter any of the candidates who might succeed George W. Bush and their potential advisers, realize the strategic importance of getting Korean unification right. Unless there is an effective effort, led by the President, it is hard to see how the sort of American involvement which is needed will actually take place.

Of course, the collapse of North Korea might occur after US commitments to Southwest Asia have already been diminished by a withdrawal from Iraq, and a lessening of the concern over Iran. However, even after the last American soldiers have left Iraq, the American electorate may remain wary of extensive foreign involvement. Appeals to bring the benefits of democracy and freedom to the people of northern Korea may well ring on deaf ears following the Iraqi fiasco.

⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/pdf/08msr.pdf>, tables S-2 (October 21, 2007); <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us/html> (October 21, 2007); William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (Yale University Press, 2007), p. 92.

An Alternative to US Leadership?

It may be that some of the premises of this paper will turn out to be wrong. By the time Korean unification comes around, the United States might be able and willing to play its role in the creation of a post-DPRK order. We should nevertheless think about alternatives to a US-led process.

Even if the United States refuses to lead the process, it will still be around as an Asian power. Rather than be the conductor of the orchestra, it may well be only one of the players, albeit an important one. Consequently, governments in the region will have to think about organizing a sort of “concert of Northeast Asia” to manage the issues surrounding Korean unification. The six-party talks process may be the best framework from which to start building the institutions which are necessary for this task. As noted earlier in this article, there are two distinct aspects of the unification challenge. The first one is economic. This would require an expanded membership compared to the six-party talks. Obviously, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank should be involved. Leading NGOs with experience that could be useful in post-Kim northern Korea also have a role to play. The European Union, Australia, Singapore, and possibly some oil-rich Middle Eastern states should all be encouraged to contribute financially and thus to participate, along with the members of the six-party talks (or rather five of them, since obviously the DPRK would not be at the table).

The second issue, that of security, concerns principally the five parties. Russia is somewhat peripheral, but as long as it does not create obstacles to a solution, there is no reason to humiliate it by excluding it. Taiwan has a strong stake in the situation, but its interests will have to be represented by the United States since Beijing would obviously not accept Taipei as a member.

Ideally, these structures should be in place before a North Korean

collapse. Unfortunately, doing so would be difficult unless the South Korean government changes its attitude towards Pyongyang. Seoul is understandably keen to develop ties with the North and to avoid regime collapse. This is a legitimate and logical goal. Even hard-core South Korean conservatives are not opposed to negotiating with the DPRK (in fact Park Chung-hee initiated the first so-called “Red Cross talks” between both states). Nor do they wish to see the DPRK break down, since they realize the costs and dangers of such a situation. However, the Roh administration has shown an enormous degree of reluctance to even publicly discuss the issue for fear of displeasing the Dear Leader.

Regardless of its wishes, the ROK might not be able to avert regime disintegration in the North. Refusing to focus on this issue is akin to not wearing a seat belt because one doesn’t want to be in an accident or not wishing to insult the driver. Kim Jong Il will indeed not be happy to see that the ROK and its partners are planning for his funeral. What, however, could he do? He needs aid from the South and other countries. Some of the planning for a post-Kim Korea can be done covertly. It is not possible, however, to assemble the resources of numerous countries and organizations in total secrecy. Moreover, the more analysts and experts, inside and outside the government, are involved in developing ideas about a Korean Rehabilitation Organization, the better prepared the parties will be when “D-Day” actually arrives. Therefore, Seoul will have to accept that Kim will be aware of what is going on. He will not be happy. Overall, however, the ROK’s position will be strengthened. Part of Pyongyang’s negotiating strength derives from the implicit threat that it might collapse and bring the entire peninsula down with it. The better Korea and the world are prepared for a world without the DPRK, the weaker Pyongyang’s negotiating leverage will be. The day the South Korean president can tell Kim Jong Il “we’re ready if your regime dies,” he will greatly enhance his power relative to his northern counterpart. Therefore, it is clearly in Seoul’s

interest to openly lead the way, with its major partners, in creating this “concert of Asia” to handle the economic and security risks inherent in any future demise of the DPRK.