

The Paradox of South Korea's Unification Diplomacy: Moving beyond a State-Centric Approach*

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Successive South Korean governments have made every effort to build the foundation for the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. The Park Geun-hye administration has also emphasized the importance of laying the foundation for peaceful unification and presented it as one of four administrative priorities. However, regardless of which administration assumes office, a state-centric approach has been taken towards the issue of unification. Whoever governs in South Korea, unification diplomacy targeting the four great powers has been their foremost priority. Such a state-centric approach may perhaps be an inevitable strategy to achieve Korean unification, particularly given the history of the division of the two Koreas and international relations around the Korean Peninsula. German unification in 1990 was made possible due to the interaction and cooperation among neighboring powers in the process of the Cold War's collapse. Therefore the roles and influences of the four great powers in the process of Korean unification cannot be understated. However, Korean unification has not yet been realized despite many efforts through the state-centric approach. On the contrary, it is debatable whether the state-centric approach focusing on the great powers has made unification rather difficult due to the serious conflicts of interest among those powers regarding Korean unification. This is the paradox of unification diplomacy in building the foundation for peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula. In this context, it becomes necessary to recognize the weaknesses of a state-centric approach in the case of Korean unification and to search for new possibilities that non-state actors can provide.

Keywords: Unification, Korea, Germany, State-Centric, Non-State Actor

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Introduction

Recently, there have been many changes on the Korean Peninsula in the process of laying the foundation for peaceful unification. The North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has so far been quite successful in his leadership succession by consolidating power following Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011. However, North Korea has reportedly suffered from domestic instability after the execution of Jang Song-taek in December 2013. To deal with its economic difficulties and regime stability, the Kim Jong-un regime has produced a new national strategy termed the 'Parallel Line' (*Byungjin*), which seeks to simultaneously develop its nuclear capability as well as the economy.¹ Looking outwards, the Korean Peninsula is surrounded by four great powers, the United States, China, Japan and Russia that have recently had leadership changes and pursued new foreign policy in Northeast Asia. In the case of South Korea, the Park Geun-hye administration has made efforts to build the foundation for peaceful unification of the two Koreas,² but the Korean Peninsula is the center of conflict among four neighboring powers. As inter-Korean relations weaken, North Korean-Chinese economic relations are showing signs of improvement. This has led to a decrease in South Korea's influence on North Korea and increase in China's influence on North Korea. This has made it very difficult to build the foundation for a Korean-led unification.³ In this sense, it is necessary and significant to rethink whether South Korea's unification policy truly serves its purpose and to search for a new strategy.

This paper raises the question of whether South Korea's state-

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1. For North Korea's 'Parallel Line' strategy, see Jihwan Hwang, "North Korea's Foreign Strategy under Kim Jong-un: the Parallel Strategy between Continuation and Change," *Korea and World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2014).
 2. For President Park's initial ideas for unification diplomacy, see Geun-hye Park, "A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust between Seoul and Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (2011).
 3. Jihwan Hwang, "The Two Koreas after U.S. Unipolarity: In Search of a New North Korea Policy," *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013).

centric approach to unification, which focuses on four great powers, has indeed strengthened the foundation for peaceful unification. It analyzes the four great powers' approaches towards the issue of Korean unification, given their foreign policies on the Korean Peninsula, and explains how there are many difficulties in South Korea's state-centric unification diplomacy. It shows how a state-centric approach was very successful in achieving German unification in 1990, and why the Korean case is quite different from the German case. This paper does not deny the importance of a state-centric approach, but argues that there should also be a non-state approach that makes use of non-state actors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) and International Organizations (IO).

South Korea's State-Centric Approach towards Unification

South Korean governments have so far made dedicated efforts to build the foundation for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. The Roh Moo-hyun government enacted a 'Law on the Development of Inter-Korean Relations,' stipulating that a basic plan for the development of inter-Korean relations should be produced every five years, emphasizing that peace and prosperity are the foundations for Korean unification. The Lee Myung-bak administration perceived that unification may come totally unexpected, so that it is necessary to prepare for the contingency that the North Korean regime may collapse in the near future. The Park Geun-hye administration emphasized the importance of laying the foundation for peaceful unification and presented it as one of four administrative priorities. The Park administration also presented three implementation strategies for peaceful unification: water-tight security, the Trust-building Process on the Korean Peninsula, and a trust-based diplomacy.⁴

4. For the Park Geun-hye administration's administrative priorities, implementation strategies, and administrative policy tasks, see the webpage of the presidential office, Cheong Wa Dae <http://english1.president.go.kr/government/basisImplementation.php>.

It is a common understanding that South Korea's policies towards North Korea and unification diplomacy have so far varied from one administration to the other, depending on which kind of ideological entity assumes office, conservative or progressive. However, it is indisputable that every Korean government has pursued a state-centric approach towards unification. Whoever governs in South Korea, unification diplomacy targeting the four great powers has been their foremost priority.

The Park Geun-hye administration is not an exception either. Its seventeen administrative policy tasks in 'laying a foundation for peaceful unification' are all based on a state-centric approach. It is particularly clear in policy tasks directly associated with North Korea and unification. For example, the policy task of 'strengthening the impetus to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue' suggests that it is necessary to "pursue denuclearization through cooperation with nations of the Six-Party talks and inter-Korean dialogues." The policy task of 'normalizing inter-Korean relations through a Trust-building Process,' which is the essence of the Park administration's North Korea policy, also suggests that it would "develop inter-Korean relations in a stable way through the trust-building between two Koreas." On the other hand, the policy task of 'promoting the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative and expanding cooperation with Eurasia,' which is the essence of the Park administration's Northeast Asia policy, also suggests that it would "ease the structure of bilateral troubles in Northeast Asia through the framework of multilateral cooperation and pursue the trust-building and economic cooperation simultaneously on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, linking Eurasian cooperation." Indeed, a state-centric approach is most distinct in the task of 'cooperating and advancing the alliance with the United States and the partnership with China as well as stabilizing relations with Japan,' which states that it would deepen and develop the ROK-U.S. alliance as a comprehensive strategic alliance, make the ROK-China strategic cooperative partnership substantial, and stabilize ROK-Japan relations."

However, there are few policy tasks which take a non-state

approach, and if any, that plans to make use of NGOs and IOs in building the foundations for unification. Only the policy task of 'taking practical measures to strengthen unification capabilities' suggests that it would use international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Food and Agriculture Organizations (FAO) to protect North Korean defectors and respond to the North Korean food crisis. However, it is a partial effort to expand the shared understanding and strengthen unification capabilities, not a comprehensive and full-scale strategy of using the NGOs and IOs.

Indeed, it may be inevitable to accept that a state-centric approach, which focuses on the four great powers, is one of the most important strategies to achieve Korean unification, given the history of the division of two Koreas and international relations around the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, German unification in 1990 was made possible due to the interaction and cooperation among neighboring powers in the process of the Cold War's collapse.⁵ Therefore, the roles and influences of four great powers in the process of Korean unification cannot be underestimated. South Korean governments have sought to follow the German case, and the state-centric approach to unification appeared to be valid also in the Korean case because of the regional instability in and out of the Korean Peninsula. However, Korean unification has not yet been realized despite many efforts through the state-centric approach. On the contrary, it is debatable whether the state-centric approach focusing on great powers makes unification rather difficult due to the serious conflicts of interest among those powers regarding Korean unification.⁶ This is the paradox of unification diplomacy in building the foundation for peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula.

5. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

6. Even many German experts on unification are also very skeptical about the state-centric approach in the Korean case. Author's interviews with German experts on unification in Berlin, Germany, May 2014.

State-Centric Research on Korean Unification

Unification Experts and their Research

The state-centric approach in South Korea can also be seen clearly in the research trends on unification. The trend of research on the issue of unification is important because there is a certain degree of scholarly and policy interaction between unification experts and government officials. Scholars and policy analysts on unification not only reflect their interests but also give some influence in the government's policy-making process. Therefore, the research trend on unification is somewhat telling of where the government policy is moving towards.

In this sense, unification studies in Korea have so far focused on the regional environment with regards to unification of the Korean Peninsula. Korean unification cannot be achieved only through inter-Korean relations under the spirit of 'by our nation itself.' However, it is also undesirable for neighboring powers to exercise excessive influence on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, it is difficult to realize unification unless the nature of the North Korean regime changes. Therefore, unification studies in South Korea have shown three main trends: the influence of international politics on the issue of Korean unification, particularly by the four great powers, the importance of inter-Korean relations, and South Korea's own efforts to build the foundation for unification and changes in the North Korean regime.

First, many scholars have studied the strengths and weaknesses of the four great powers, the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia. Some scholars have stressed the role of the great powers and multilateral dynamics around the Korean Peninsula. For instance, many studies proposed several scenarios on Korean unification and explained each great power's role and foreign policy in Northeast Asia.⁷ Others have

7. Jonathan Pollack and Jung Min Lee, *Preparing for Korean Unification; Scenarios & Implications* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999); Jung-Ho Bae (eds.), *Korean Unification and the Positions and Roles of the Four Neighboring Powers* (Seoul: KINU, 2011); Scott Snyder (eds.), *U.S. Policy Towards the Korean Peninsula* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2010); Kim, Jangho, *The Second Term Obama Administration' Policy towards the Korean Peninsula* (Seoul: KINU, 2012).

studied bilateral and multilateral approaches towards unification. In particular, most studies have emphasized the need for ROK-U.S. cooperation and the importance of U.S.-China relations on the Korean Peninsula.⁸

The second focus of unification studies was, of course, on inter-Korean cooperation. It basically depends on the functionalist approach towards regional integration, in which economic cooperation can eventually lead to political integration. In this sense, many studies are interested in the political outcome of North Korea's economic reform and opening.⁹ There are also many discussions on how and where inter-Korean cooperation should be moving towards.¹⁰ They include diverse approaches and concerns on inter-Korean economic cooperation such as how to activate the North Korean special economic zones and find areas of specialization in specific industries.

Third, there has been recently much research on South Korea's own efforts to build the foundation for unification as well as changes in the North Korean regime. One of the most debatable issues was how to finance Korean unification. Many studied the German experience from a comparative perspective and discussed whether it is necessary

8. Jae-Jeok Park, "The Rise of China and the US-led Asia-Pacific Alliance Network: Policy Suggestions for South Korea in the Context of the ROK-US Cooperation," in Center for Unification Policy Studies (eds.), *The Outlook for the North Korean Situation & Prospects for U.S.-ROK Cooperation After the Death of Kim Jong-il* (Seoul: KINU, 2012); John Park, "The Rise of China & Implications for U.S.-ROK Cooperation," in *ibid*; Scott Snyder, "Prospects for Sino-American Policy Coordination towards North Korea," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1. (2012).

9. Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Engaging North Korea: The Role of Economic Statecraft," *Policy Studies*, Vol. 59 (2011); Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Sanctioning North Korea: The Political Economy of Denuclearization and Proliferation," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2010).

10. Jin Park and Jiwon Lee, "The Direction of Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund Based on ODA Standard," KDI School of Public Policy and Management Paper, No. 11-05 (April 2011); Sung Min Moon and Byound Hark Yoo, "The Effects of Inter-Korean Integration Type on Economic Performance: The Role of Wage Policy," *International Economic Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2012).

for the South Korean government to introduce unification tax.¹¹ These studies have been widely carried out not only by the Korean government but also by independent think-tanks. On the other hand, there have been studies on how to normalize the North Korean regime, lead it to give up its nuclear weapons, and bring it into the international community.¹²

Unification Studies Institutes and their Research

On the other hand, trends in unification studies can also be seen by reviewing research topics conducted by institutes on unification studies. In this context, this paper examines research conducted by two major unification studies institutes in South Korea. One is the government-funded Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), and the other is Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS).¹³ These two institutes have recently performed rigorous studies in the area of unification studies and thus it is meaningful to examine what kind of topics they have been researching. Because they represent the main trends in unification studies, it is possible to observe what is being studied and what is not.

KINU states that its mission is “to contribute to the national unification policy through systematic research and analysis on issues regarding national unification and the rebuilding of a national community.” To this end, it has “three broad areas of research: international affairs in the region surrounding the Korean Peninsula, analysis

11. Bernhard Selinger, “Financing Unification in Germany and Korea: Is a Unification Tax Necessary?” *East Asia: Comparative Perspective*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2010).

12. Young-Sun Ha and Dongho Jo, *North Korea 2032: The Evolution Strategy towards the Advancement* (Seoul: East Asia Institute, 2010).

13. There may be a selection bias because these two institutes do not represent all the unification-related studies in Korea. However, it is possible to show the main trend of unification because they are two major institutes, either government-funded or university-related, that have focused on the unification studies.

on North Korea, and unification policy.”¹⁴ In this context, KINU's research has focused on “North Korea's politics, military, economy, and society, the neighboring countries' [the U.S., Japan, China and Russia] policy on the Korean Peninsula, strategy for unification, and South Korea's policy towards North Korea. Recently, more focus has been put on the North Korean nuclear issue, North Korean human rights and inter-Korean integration.”

Table 1. Areas of Focus in KINU's Research, 2012¹⁵

| North Korea | Inter-Korean Relations | Great Powers | Other |
|-------------|------------------------|--------------|-------|
| 12(2) | 4 | 13(2) | 2 |

Table 1 shows areas of focus in KINU's research trend with twenty nine research topics in 2012. It can be easily seen that most of KINU's research deal with issues concerning great powers or North Korea. This means that KINU has highlighted the influences made by great powers or the importance of North Korea itself in building the foundation for Korean unification. However, research projects on inter-Korean relations are few, given the weakening cooperation between two Koreas during the last five years. In addition to these three issues, there were also other studies on how to finance unification and the issue of responsibility to protect (R2P). In short, the table shows that KINU's research has depended greatly on the state-centric approach, while the issue of R2P may somewhat discuss the role of IOs in dealing with the North Korean human rights situation.

On the other hand, Seoul National University's IPUS “concentrates on three dimensions: peace through inter-Korean reconciliation, peace through the promotion of cultural and human rights, and peace through ecological civilization.” It recognizes Korean unification and

14. For KINU's research projects, see its website, <http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/index.jsp>.

15. Table 1 is based on KINU's 29 research projects in 2012 uploaded on its website. It includes research both in Korean and English. The number in the parenthesis indicates research projects which can be categorized in two groups.

peace “as the most important challenge facing Korea and East Asia,” and “aims to accumulate knowledge and build capacity to deal with issues that may arise during the process of reunification,” striving to achieve the goal by conducting multidisciplinary research in both the social sciences and humanities. Therefore, IPUS “conducts research projects focusing not only on inter-Korean relations and reunification issues but also on peace studies in general and their relevance to the complex peace-less situation on the Korean Peninsula.”¹⁶

Table 2. Areas of Focus in IPUS's Research, 2007-2013¹⁷

| North Korea | Inter-Korean Relations | Great Powers | Other |
|-------------|------------------------|--------------|-------|
| 5(1) | 8 | 2(1) | 5 |

Table 2 shows IPUS's main research trend with nineteen research topics from 2007 to 2013. Compared to KINU research topics, most research conducted by IPUS deals with issues related to inter-Korean relations, North Korean regime, and unification including both German and Korean cases. Interestingly, they have not published many research outcomes concerning the influences of the great powers. It is mostly because IPUS is a university institute that aims to conduct multidisciplinary research. However, IPUS's research approaches are not much different from those of KINU, in that they have also been based on the state-centric approach though research agendas were somewhat more diverse.

The Need for New Research Areas and Policy

In short, the current literature on the Korean unification has concentrated on the role of great powers, inter-Korean relations, and changes

16. For IPUS's research projects, see <http://tongil.snu.ac.kr/ipus/>.

17. Table 2 is based on IPUS's 19 researches from 2007 to 2013 uploaded on its website. It includes research both in Korean and English. The number in the parenthesis indicates research projects which can be categorized in two groups.

in the North Korean regime. Of course, diverse research conducted by many scholars and research institutes like KINU and IPUS cannot be easily grouped into the simple categorizations mentioned above. However, it is evident that there is a need to develop new agendas on unification, although issues above are the most important ones.

In particular, there is little research, if any, at both KINU and IPUS which cover the roles of NGOs and IOs in a comprehensive manner. Given the democratization and globalization in and out of the Korean Peninsula, it is necessary to recognize that non-state actors are gaining more importance even in the Korean unification process. However, while KINU and IPUS have different approaches and research agendas, their research is similarly based on a state-centric approach.

In this sense, such research trends on Korean unification have two weaknesses. First, there have been some limitations in the research agenda and scope. Most research projects are actor-driven ones, but they do not pay much attention to non-state actors such as NGOs and IOs which have been gaining importance in international relations after the end of the Cold War. Although there have been diverse studies on NGOs and IOs in world politics, there has been relatively fewer efforts to examine their roles in studies concerning Korean unification. Research on non-state actors in unification studies were not comprehensive or long-term research projects, but were mostly involved in specific issues such as human rights, humanitarian aid, special economic zones, environment, etc.¹⁸ Therefore, there has been little effort to develop and put together research agendas in building a long-term foundation for unification that focuses on how to make use of NGOs and IOs that are different from state-actors in their goals and approaches.¹⁹

18. Hanna, Kim, Heejung Cho and Bokgyo Jeong, "Social Networks and Ideological Orientation of South Korean NGOs Involved in the Unification Issues of the Korean Peninsula," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (2011); Mi Ae Taylor and Mark E. Manyin, "Non-Governmental Organizations' Activities in North Korea," Congressional Research Service, R4174 (2011); Kab-Woo Koo, "Civil Society and the Unification Movement in South Korea: Issues and Challenges," *Journal of Peace and Unification*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2011).

In this sense, it is meaningful to raise the need to conduct comprehensive and long-term research on the uses of NGOs and IOs, which should include both theoretical analysis and policy studies. Although a state-centric approach to the issue of Korean unification would still be valid and important in the future, it is important to develop new research trends because changes are occurring both on the Korean Peninsula and in world politics.

German Unification and Korean Unification

This paper has shown that both the Korean government's unification diplomacy and research trends in unification studies have basically adopted a state-centric approach. In particular, unification diplomacy has much to do with the process of the division of two Koreas after the Second World War and the current regional situation around the Korean Peninsula. Because the Korean division was greatly influenced by great power politics between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the 1940s, there is still a widespread perception that the process of Korean unification will inevitably fall into the hands of great power politics among the four neighboring powers. On the other hand, because not only unification diplomacy but also inter-Korean relations have been continuously under the influence of regional powers, the process of Korean unification is also likely to be affected by conflicts of regional interest among them.²⁰ Such state-centric approach by historical legacy and regional dynamics has been clearly shown in the German unification process in the late 1980s.

19. Many IO and NGO officials who have worked in North Korea say that they are better positioned to work in North Korea compared to the state actors because they have different goals and approaches. Author's interviews with IO and NGO officials in Brussels, Belgium, and Berlin, Germany, May 2014.

20. Hwang, "The Two Koreas after U.S. Unipolarity."

The German Unification Process and the State-Centric Approach

As it is widely recognized, the process of German unification was led by 'two plus four talks' that included the two Germanys, the U.S., the Soviet Union, Britain, and France.²¹ Although German unification in October 1990 might be said to have resulted directly from the collapse of the Berlin Wall one year before, unification itself would have had much difficulty in meeting international approval of the four victorious nations of the Second World War. Of course, the process of German unification started with East German people's escape to the Western side when the Hungarian government opened its border to Austria in early May 1989.

From an international perspective, however, what mattered was the West German government's timely effort to receive U.S. support by expressing its strong will for reunification and declaring that it would remain in NATO after unification. Right after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the West German government announced the 'Ten Point Program for Overcoming the Division of Germany and Europe and made every effort to ease the other nations' concerns that might be caused by German unification. West Germany's decision to remain in NATO made it possible for the U.S. to prevent Europe from destabilizing after German unification, and put Germany in the U.S.-led multilateral alliance framework. It meant that the U.S. could respond to the potential destabilizing factor in a stable and peaceful way, which was more favorable to preserve the U.S.-led status quo in Europe.

Helmut Kohl made efforts to address neighboring powers' concerns by suggesting a gradual unification plan in which German unification will be achieved in five or ten years after the confederation stage as a part of European integration. West Germany was able to persuade all neighboring countries including Britain, France and Poland which suffered from Germany's invasion during the First World War and Second World War, mostly thanks to strong U.S. support.²² West

21. This part depends greatly on Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 149-198.

German leaders clearly understood the complex international relations in Europe at the time, and succeeded in receiving international approval for unification.

West Germany also persuaded the Soviet Union, emphasizing that unification would not threaten the Soviet Union again in the future. West German leaders promised that it would accept the Oder-Neisse Line which gave up the territory that Poland took after the Second World War and halve the number of its troops after unification from 665,000 to 370,000. It also made efforts to win the Soviet Union's favor by promising that it would share the expenses for the Soviet troops in East Germany. It must have been clearly a useful promise that Germany unification would not adopt an expansionist strategy in Europe, in contrast to the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand, West Germany also encouraged the United States to push the Soviet Union to approve German unification in the 'two plus four talks.'

In fact, German unification could be regarded as a great revision to the European status quo from the Soviet perspective. There was no guarantee that a unified and strong Germany in Central Europe would not threaten the Soviet's security just as it had done during the First and Second World Wars. However, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, at that time, was also pursuing some revisionist policies in regards to the East European regional situation in order to overcome its internal difficulties. Gorbachev wanted to make a breakthrough by stopping the painful arms race and start an arms reduction with the United States. Because the Soviet Union itself sought to produce new changes in Europe, German unification might have appeared to be less threatening than before, if the unified Germany would remain as a status quo power under the control of NATO and not threaten the western border of the Soviet Union.²³ As a result, the Soviet Union's

22. West German leaders were especially careful about how to get approval from neighboring countries given the history of invasion during World War I and World War II. Author's interview with German unification expert in Berlin, Germany, May 2014.

23. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 251-285.

policy towards German unification had shifted from 'disagreement in principle' to 'conditional acceptance' with unified Germany's withdrawal from NATO membership. However, it finally changed again to 'conditional approval' with Germany remaining in the NATO. Gorbachev finally agreed to German unification in his efforts to save *perestroika* by obtaining the West's economic support.

In short, German unification might not have been internationally approved if the United States and the Soviet Union had perceived a unified Germany to behave as a revisionist, not a status quo power in Europe, and were concerned about the sudden changes in European international relations. On the other hand, the European regional situation at the time was quite favorable to German unification because it was going through a great change itself after Gorbachev started his reform both in and out of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev sought rapprochement with Western Europe and the United States in his efforts to resolve the Soviet Union's structural problems. He can be said to have initiated changes in Europe by abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine towards East European countries and pursuing arms reduction. If the Cold War rivalry was growing at the time as it had done until the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union would have never dreamed of approving German unification. Because the Soviet Union was changing, Germany was also given the opportunity to change. In short, German unification was made possible thanks to the favorable international relations in Europe at the time.

Can the Process of German Unification be Repeated on the Korean Peninsula?

The German case appears to reconfirm the importance of great powers in the process of Korean unification. West German leaders' perception of power and diplomacy made it possible to win the U.S. support for German unification from the beginning and overcome disagreements with neighboring powers. Also, for Korean unification, the importance of those great powers cannot be overestimated. If Korean unification can follow Germany's experience, a simplified version of Germany's

scenario can be applied to the Korean Peninsula and its relevance can be examined as suggested in Table 3.

Table 3. German Unification Process and Korean Unification

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- 1) A large influx of North Korean defectors and the collapse of the North Korean regime
 - 2) Free elections in North Korea and the victory of early unification supporters
 - 3) South Korea's declaration to maintain the ROK-U.S. alliance and U.S. strong support for unification
 - 4) Winning China's support for unification
 - 5) Winning Japan and Russia's support under the U.S. support
 - 6) Finalizing Korean unification
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Table 3 may appear to confirm the relevance of the German experience in the Korean unification process, but it is not very difficult to recognize the differences between the two cases. First of all, even if the North Koreans start to defect from North Korea on a large scale which may lead to the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime similar to the Honecker regime,²⁴ it is doubtful whether free elections will be held in North Korea, considering its unstable domestic political structure. Rather, it is possible that a new power group may rise and replace the Kim Jong-un regime. If North Korea's domestic situation is stabilized, China and Russia would be more likely to approve the new regime in North Korea. Because China and Russia would regard the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime as a *regime* collapse, not as a *state* collapse, they are less likely to see the collapse lead to the unification on the Korean Peninsula but would support the rebuilding of the state.

Second, even if free elections are held after the collapse of the regime, there is no guarantee that the supporters of early unification

24. Many IO and NGO officials associated with the projects in North Korea are even very skeptical of whether the North Korean regime may collapse in the near future. Author's interviews with IO and NGO officials in Brussels in Belgium and Berlin in Germany, May 2014.

will win the election. North Korean people's support will determine the outcome of the election, but it is not sure who they will vote for. East Germans unexpectedly supported the early unification group,²⁵ but there is still no guarantee that the North Korean people will follow East Germans' decision. It is doubtful whether there will be a rising power group in North Korea who wants to see early unification and whether they would be strong enough to win the election. Furthermore, it is not sure whether North Korean people are quite favorable to South Korea and that they will vote for the group. There is a shocking story that the North Korean people would choose to either cooperate with the Chinese or seek to rebuild their own regime rather than to work with South Korea.²⁶

Third, even if the early unification group takes power through elections, it is not certain that the United States will strongly support the early unification of the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. may willingly agree to a slow and gradual unification process because it will be helpful in solidifying the ROK-U.S. alliance and balancing against China's rise. However, it may be concerned about the sudden changes to the Northeast Asian status quo that may destabilize the regional situation and weaken the U.S. strategic interest. In this sense, the U.S. is expected to seek a status quo strategy in Northeast Asia, at least in the foreseeable future. Such a strategy can be seen from the Obama administration's military restraint which refrains from military involvement in external conflicts. The recent debate on the U.S. retrenchment explains the U.S. difficulties very well.²⁷ Because the U.S. is showing

25. According to many experts on German unification, the Western German parties went to East Germany and gave a strong impact on the outcome of the 1990 election. Author's interviews with German Unification experts in Berlin, Germany, May 2014.

26. According to an unofficial survey in 2009 of the North Korean people in the North Korean-Chinese borders, only 27.1 percent wanted to choose to integrate with the South in case of the regime collapse while 40 percent chose to integrate with China and 31.5 percent chose to rebuild the nation by their own efforts. See *Chosun Ilbo*, December 20, 2013.

signs of relative decline compared to China's rapid rise and does not have enough resources to cope with the sudden changes in international relations due to financial difficulties, it would prefer to maintain the status quo in Northeast Asia. Although the U.S. has recently stressed the importance of this region by stating the 'Pivot to Asia' and 'Rebalancing' strategies, it is less likely to be involved in unexpected military conflicts with China.²⁸ In this vein, the U.S. does not appear willing to take the risk by accepting the regional instability and unpredictability, which will be caused by the sudden collapse of the North Korean regime as well as unification.

Fourth, even if the U.S. chooses to support the early unification of the Korean Peninsula, China would not support it as long as the ROK-U.S. alliance is strongly maintained. China may exercise its veto power in this case, just as the Soviet Union did in the German case.²⁹ Although the Soviet Union changed its course of action due to its domestic troubles, China is in a completely different situation. China is now growing much stronger and would behave according to its strategic interests in the region rather than be persuaded by other powers. In this sense, China also appears to prefer the status quo in Northeast Asia rather than to expect sudden changes in the regional environment.³⁰ Moreover, China is now rising very fast in both economic and military areas, and thus there is no reason for China to welcome the sudden changes in this region. Therefore, China is more likely to

27. Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2012/13); Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline?: The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011).

28. Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

29. According to one survey on the Korean unification, most American (84%) and Japanese (94%) experts believe that China will be strongly against the Korean unification. See *ChosunIlbo*, May 22, 2014.

30. Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2013).

choose the status quo on the Korean Peninsula with the current North Korean regime rather than the unpredictable situation Korean unification may bring about.³¹ Chinese leaders would perceive that Korean unification is not very helpful for its strategic and national interest.

China is now rising and building its own sphere of influence. China does not want a major military conflict with the U.S., but it is strengthening its military power in East Asia and pushing the U.S. out of the region.³² Because such a situation will grow more serious as China's power grows, there is a growing concern that the U.S.-China relations may lead to instability in the future.³³ Under such a situation, there is no possibility that China will accept the scenario of early Korean unification with the ROK-U.S. alliance still in effect. China may seek slight revisions to the status quo in Northeast Asia in the long term, whatever the reason may be, just as the Soviet Union did in the late 1980s, but it will accept Korean unification only when it does not threaten China's security and national interests in the region.

Fifth, even if China supports the scenario of early unification, it is uncertain whether Japan and Russia will be persuaded by the U.S. and South Korea. Russia now appears to be less against Korean unification, because it is very interested in the ongoing project of developing the infrastructure and energy resources in East Siberia.³⁴ The North Korea-Russian relations are not as close, and thus Russia may change

31. Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea," United States Institute of Peace Working Paper (Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2008).

32. Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013, Annual Report to Congress (2013); Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael S. Chase, Derek Eaton, and Kevin L. Pollpeter, *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007).

33. Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2013).

34. Stephen Blank, "The Significance of Russia's Frustration with North Korea," *The Diplomat* (December 23, 2013).

its course of action and agree to unification if it does not threaten Russia's strategic interests and security in the region.³⁵ However, it is still doubtful how big a role Russia can play in the process of unification, even if it does not exercise its veto. Japan appears to disagree with the scenario of early unification because of the destabilizing factors that unification may cause. If a unified Korea moves closer to China, even with its alliance with the U.S., it would give Japan serious strategic challenges.³⁶ Moreover, a unified Korea may emerge as a rival against Japan, given the past history between two countries.

In short, when seeking to apply the German unification process to the Korean case, there exist many serious challenges at each stage. German unification provided both the United States and the Soviet Union with a stabilizing variable in the changing international relations in Europe. The Korean case should also produce such a stabilizing variable in Northeast Asia. Only when both the United States and China see Korean unification in a positive light, can it be accepted internationally. If Korean unification is perceived to deteriorate U.S.-China relations and cause revisions to the status quo, both countries will be seriously concerned about the outcome. In this sense, unless Northeast Asia itself undergoes a great change, major powers around the Korean Peninsula have little motivation to support Korean unification.

Conclusion: In Search of a New Role by Non-State Actors

This paper has raised the question of whether a state-centric approach has been conducive in building a solid foundation for the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. It does not deny the importance of the great powers, but there is a serious limitation to this approach. If a state-centric point of view is adopted, no major power will be

35. Alexander Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking Regarding North Korea," *The Asan Forum* (October 7, 2013).

36. Many Japanese leaders are concerned with the possibility that a unified Korea may get closer to China. Author's interview with Japanese experts on Korea in Tokyo, Japan, March 2014.

willing to provide strong support for Korean unification due to the serious conflict of interest among those powers. It means that these major powers will support the status quo in the region. On the contrary, German unification had benefited from the changing international relations in Europe at that time. However, there is no sudden structural change in Northeast Asia and thus the major powers appear to be keeping their status quo strategy.

Of course, a state-centric approach is still very important in building the foundation for Korean unification. However, it is necessary to recognize the weaknesses that the state-centric approach carries in the case of Korea, and to search for new possibilities that non-state actors can provide. Non-state actors do not have serious conflicts of interest on the Korean Peninsula and they cherish international norms and the value of a peaceful community. Therefore, they are less likely to disagree to unification once it looms closer. In this sense, it is important to make good use of the roles played by non-state actors in addition to the influences of the great powers. In fact, it is not realistic to seek to include too many NGOs and IOs in the process of Korean unification. Therefore it is necessary to identify non-state actors that are deeply involved in Korea-related issues and also have enough capacity to change the present circumstances. In particular, some non-state actors may play great roles in deterring great powers from wielding negative influences and gathering international opinion to move towards unification. Such a role would be very important not only in the unification process but also in the stabilizing stage after unification occurs.

Then, what can be expected from non-state actors? If the process of unification is divided into two separate stages, one for building its foundation and the other for integrating the two Koreas after unification, there are many areas that NGOs and IOs can contribute to, such as the issues of human rights, refugees, environmental agenda, and economic development. Non-state actors have more opportunities to help Korean unification than those great powers, which have big strategic calculations regarding unification. Because great powers have different goals and approaches, it is important to minimize their

influences and differences by using non-state actors. In fact, non-state actors have accumulated much experience and knowledge for a long time in diverse issue areas. Moreover, many NGOs and IOs have so far had valuable experiences in North Korea related projects, so they should be expected to play a further role in building the foundation for peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula.

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