

Chinese Attitudes toward Korean Unification*

Bonnie S. Glaser and Yun Sun

Although China officially supports unification of the Korean Peninsula, it essentially maintains a two Koreas policy. Beijing sustains this approach because even as the burdens and dangers of the status quo on the peninsula increase, it judges that the risks of unification are potentially greater. Nevertheless, China's growing economic and political clout along with the strengthening of its ties with South Korea are boosting Beijing's confidence that it can protect Chinese interests regardless of developments on the peninsula. The more permissible environment in recent years regarding discussion of Chinese policy toward the Koreas has engendered a robust debate among Chinese researchers about the potential costs and benefits for China of Korean unification. The ROK and the U.S. should consider ways to influence China's cost/benefit calculus regarding Korean unification. No single step is likely to alter China's approach, but an accumulation of measures aimed at easing Chinese fears and reducing the uncertainties associated with unification could have an impact on Chinese thinking and policies over time.

Keywords: China, Korean unification, Chinese interests in Korea, Chinese policy toward Korea, China's role in Korean unification

Introduction

A core component of South Korean President Park Geun-hye's policy is to establish the foundation for the peaceful unification of Korea. In a speech marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of Korea, President Park emphasized the benefits of "a Korea made whole" and called on all Koreans to "stand together and prepare for unification." Achieving this vision will undoubtedly

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require the acceptance and cooperation of North Korea.¹ Another key player in the process is China, which remains North Korea's largest benefactor, propping up the Kim regime with foodstuffs, energy supplies and consumer goods.² Understanding that Beijing can play an important role in either forestalling or realizing Seoul's dream of unification, Park has set out to enhance South Korea's ties with China.

Although China officially supports unification of the Korean Peninsula, it essentially maintains a two Koreas policy. Under Xi Jinping, Beijing's ties with the Republic of Korea (ROK) are playing an increasingly important role in China's regional political, diplomatic and economic strategies. Strains in Sino-North Korean relations are evident and may be deepening, but China is nonetheless unwilling to abandon its historic relationship with Pyongyang. North Korea's persistent efforts to develop nuclear weapons and long-range missiles pose direct challenges to Chinese interests and have led a growing number of Chinese experts to argue that their only treaty ally is a strategic liability rather than a strategic asset. However, influential voices remain convinced that Chinese interests are best served by the division of the Korean Peninsula, in part because of deep suspicions of American intentions and role on the peninsula in a unified Korea. So far, China's cost-benefit calculus favors perpetuation of the status quo. There is no sign that Xi Jinping is genuinely willing to accept, let alone promote, a unified Korea.

Drawing on official Chinese statements, articles by Chinese scholars and officials, and author interviews, this paper analyzes evolving Chinese attitudes toward the unification of the Korean Peninsula. The paper begins by explaining China's official position on Korean

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1. "Commemorative Address by President Park Geun-hye on the 70th Anniversary of Liberation," August 15, 2015, [http://english1.president.go.kr/activity/speeches.php?srh\[board_no\]=24&srh\[view_mode\]=detail&srh\[seq\]=11748&srh\[detail_no\]=43](http://english1.president.go.kr/activity/speeches.php?srh[board_no]=24&srh[view_mode]=detail&srh[seq]=11748&srh[detail_no]=43).
 2. James Reilly, "The Curious Case of China's Aid to North Korea," *Asian Survey* 54, no. 6 (2014), p. 1170. According to one report published in 2012, China provides 100,000 tons of food, 500,000 tons of fuel, and goods worth USD 20 million to North Korea every year. "Scale of Yearly Chinese Unconditional Aid to N.Korea Unveiled," *The Dong-A Ilbo*, June 24, 2012.

unification and Chinese interests on the Korean Peninsula. It then discusses Chinese debates about Korean unification, including the potential benefits and risks for China. Next, changes in Chinese relations with the U.S., South Korea and North Korea since 2013 are analyzed and the implications of Korean unification are assessed. The paper then examines China's views of various unification scenarios. Finally, suggestions are put forward on how to influence China's approach to unification going forward.

China's Official Position on Korean Unification

Beijing officially supports the unification of the Korean Peninsula under the condition that unification be "peaceful and independent."³ Generations of Chinese leaders beginning with Deng Xiaoping have endorsed Korean unification. In 1982, during a visit to North Korea, which was his last visit abroad, Deng expressed "resolute support to the efforts made by the Korean Workers' Party, the North Korean government and people for self-determined and peaceful unification."⁴ Chinese President Jiang Zemin made the same pledge in 2001 during a meeting with a senior North Korean delegation in Beijing.⁵ During his two terms as president, Hu Jintao also voiced Chinese support for the eventual unification of North and South Korea on various occasions, including in a speech to the South Korean General

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3. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson answers questions on the election of Park Geun-hye as the 18th President of ROK" (in Chinese), December 20, 2012, http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2012-12/20/content_2294873.htm Spokesperson Hua Chunying said: "China always supports the South and the North to improve their relations through dialogues, promote reconciliation and cooperation, and eventually achieve the independent and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula."
 4. Meng Hong, "The several 'last times' of Deng Xiaoping" (in Chinese), *Deng Xiaoping Commemoration*, February 22, 2013, <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2013/0222/c85037-20565770-3.html>.
 5. "Jiang Zemin: China adamantly supports the self-determined and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula" (in Chinese), *Sina News*, July 10, 2001.

Assembly in 2005 and to American media in 2011 before his state visit to Washington.⁶ Chinese President Xi Jinping has also openly backed unification of the Korean Peninsula in two summits with President Park Geun-hye. During his landmark visit to Seoul in July 2014, Xi publicly praised the “Trust-building Process advocated by President Park” and stated that China “supports the improvement of relations between the South and the North in order to achieve reconciliation and cooperation, which will eventually lead to self-determined and peaceful unification.”⁷

Whether China genuinely backs unification or only pays lip service to this position is uncertain. After all, China remains a divided country itself and views the eventual reunification of Mainland China and Taiwan as an “irreversible trend of history,”⁸ so Beijing has little choice but to support Korea’s unification.⁹ Moreover, since Seoul and Pyongyang both seek unification, opposing their national aspirations would be contrary to Chinese interests in preserving amicable ties with both sides.

There is broad recognition among Chinese experts and officials that unification of the Korean Peninsula is inevitable someday. However, there is no expectation that unification will take place in the near term. Chinese analysts believe that Xi Jinping is personally committed to the eventual unification of the Peninsula in principle, but the timeframe and conditions have yet to be worked out and there is no sense of urgency in Beijing to expedite the process.¹⁰ Chinese

6. “Hu Jintao delivered speech at the South Korean General Assembly: China supports the self-determined and peaceful reunification of North Korea and South Korea” (in Chinese), *China News*, November 17, 2005; “President Hu Jintao’s Written Interview with the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*” (in Chinese), *Renmin Ribao*, January 18, 2011.

7. “Xi’s Lecture at Seoul National University” (in Chinese), Xinhua, July 5, 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2014-07/05/c_126713142_2.htm.

8. “Full text of Hu Jintao’s report at the 18th Party Congress,” Xinhua, November 17, 2012. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm.

9. Interview with a Chinese scholar, Beijing, December 2012.

10. Interview with a Chinese scholar, Beijing, May 2015.

researchers deny that Beijing is a key player in the unification of the Peninsula, arguing instead that only the two Koreas can determine their joint future.¹¹ At the same time, however, they insist that it is China's responsibility to prevent any premature attempt to achieve unification before arrangements are agreed upon that ensure that the national interests of both Koreas and China are adequately protected.¹²

Chinese Interests on the Korean Peninsula

Beijing has three priority interests on the Korean Peninsula: maintaining peace, preserving stability, and promoting denuclearization. These key interests are enshrined in Beijing's "no war, no instability, no nukes" (*buzhan, buluan, wuhe*) policy.¹³ Preventing conflict ranks above all other interests and is the result of the painful memories of the Korean War, which cost hundreds of thousands of Chinese lives and led to a stronger U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security. The Chinese leadership fears that another military conflict would severely impede China's economic development and damage its relatively advantageous international strategic environment.¹⁴

The second key priority is the preservation of stability on the Peninsula. Beijing fears that instability in North Korea, generated by an economic or political emergency, could lead to massive North Korean refugee flows into China, resulting in a humanitarian crisis and social instability. Furthermore, instability in North Korea could precipitate U.S. military intervention, especially if the U.S. judges North Korean weapons of mass destruction (WMD) facilities to be insecure.

11. Interview with a Chinese scholar, Beijing, January 2013.

12. Interview with a Chinese scholar, Beijing, December 2012.

13. Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, *Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2012, p. 1.

14. Bonnie S. Glaser, "China's Policy in the Wake of the Second DPRK Nuclear Test," *China Security* 5, no. 2 (2009), p. 37.

Although denuclearization is a key Chinese objective and has been elevated in importance by Xi Jinping, Chinese analysts maintain that avoiding war and maintaining stability on the Peninsula remain higher priorities.¹⁵ Beijing strongly opposes Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions and supports a nuclear-free Korea, but it only supports strategies of denuclearization that do not threaten peace and stability on the Peninsula.¹⁶

China worries that continued expansion of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal may eventually compel South Korea, Japan and Taiwan to acquire nuclear weapons themselves in response.¹⁷ Nuclear proliferation around China's periphery as well as the ensuing risk of the breakdown of the Non-Proliferation Treaty would create severe security challenges for China. Such fears have increased with the growth of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Top Chinese nuclear experts now estimate that North Korea may already have 20 nuclear warheads, and may be able to double its arsenal in 2016.¹⁸ Denuclearization of North Korea would eliminate the possibility that a unified Korea could have nuclear weapons, which is one of Beijing's many fears about unification.

Another Chinese interest that is not articulated by Chinese officials is that the Korean Peninsula is currently on amicable terms with China. An alignment by a government in either North or South Korea, or potentially a united Korea, with another nation for the purpose of bringing harm to China would pose a grave threat to Chinese interests. Whether China's interests could be protected under a unified Korea is a question that will be discussed below.

15. Interview with a Chinese scholar, Beijing, May 2014.

16. Glaser and Billingsley, *Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula*, p. 2.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Jeremy Page and Jay Solomon, "China Warns North Korean Nuclear Threat is Rising," *Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2015.

Benefits and Risks of Korean Unification

Chinese Korea experts have long debated various aspects of the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, including whether unification would advance or harm Chinese interests. Since the North conducted its first nuclear test in 2006, the Chinese leadership has permitted more open debate about North Korea and Chinese strategic priorities on the Korean Peninsula, including allowing the publication of a range of Chinese opinions on the matter.¹⁹ The lifting of some of the restrictions on openly discussing a previously taboo subject has provided a new window into Chinese thinking about the potential benefits and challenges that Korean unification would pose.

Potential Benefits

Although Chinese experts don't rule out the possibility of unification led by North Korea, they recognize that unification under Seoul's leadership is more likely. The most immediate benefit to China of Korean unification led by the South would almost certainly be the alleviation of the political and security pressures caused by Pyongyang's belligerence and development of nuclear weapons.²⁰ Indeed, the growing threat from North Korea in recent years has provided an impetus for strengthening U.S. alliances with both Korea and Japan and enhancing the American military presence in Northeast Asia, which China views as damaging to its national security. As long as China fails to prevent North Korea's dangerous nuclear/missile tests and conventional provocations, the U.S. has legitimate grounds to increase

19. Jonathan D. Pollack, "Is Xi Jinping Rethinking Korean Unification?" The Brookings Institution, January 20, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/presentations/2015/01/20-xi-jinping-korean-unification-pollack>.

20. Ming Liu, "Korean Peninsula Division/Unification and China: From the Security Perspective of China," in *Korean Peninsula Division/Unification: From the International Perspective*. eds. Kyuryoon Kim and Jae-Jeok Park (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2012), pp. 61-63.

its security involvement in the region.²¹ The potential deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea is the most recent example of the increased threat to Chinese security resulting from Pyongyang's military advances.

Another major potential benefit of Korean unification for China is the reshaping of the security alliance between South Korea and the United States, and the possible eventual removal of American troops from the Peninsula. Chinese researchers believe that unification could end great power competition on the Peninsula and replace bloc politics with economic cooperation and trade.²² Furthermore, experts foresee that a united Korea would become an independent force that would forge equal and normal relationships with international powers, creating a more stable security situation in Northeast Asia.²³ In the long run, some Chinese analysts even predict the emergence of a China-South Korea alliance once China becomes a superpower.²⁴

Unification could also bring significant economic benefits to China's northeast provinces as well as to Inner Mongolia. Sharing a border with a backward and isolated North Korea has impeded economic development in China's northeast region. According to one estimate, peaceful unification of the two Koreas could increase the gross domestic product (GDP) of northeast China, including Jilin, Liaoning and Heilongjiang provinces, by around RMB one trillion, or roughly USD 162.6 billion.²⁵ Chinese companies would benefit from the investment opportunities in infrastructure and public works projects as well as by serving the expanded Korean market. Essentially, China would

21. "China Will Benefit Rather Than Lose by Helping South Korea Achieve Unification of the Peninsula" (in Chinese), *LianHeZaoBao*, June 27, 2013.

22. Zhang Liangui, "Reunification of the Korean Peninsula and China" (in Chinese), China Academy of Social Sciences, <http://yataisuo.cass.cn/Bak/ddyt/0405-3.htm>.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Chen Dingding, "Is a China-South Korea Alliance Possible," *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2014.

25. Jin Jingyi, "Unification of Koreas to Benefit Neighbors: Experts," *Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao)*, September 17, 2014.

profit from what President Park has referred to as the “unification bonanza.”²⁶ Unification would also greatly contribute to China’s “strategy to revitalize the industrial base in China’s northeast.”²⁷

In addition, the economic development of the entire Korean Peninsula could provide a boost to regional economic growth and cooperation, and promote closer economic cooperation between China and Korea.²⁸ Yang Xiyu from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ China Institute of International Studies suggests that a united Korea would create an extended market that could serve as a new external driving force for the development of China’s economy.²⁹ Moreover, if Korea were to reunite, China’s decades-long economic assistance to North Korea to prop up the Kim regime would finally come to an end. This would free up those resources for China’s own use. Although Chinese aid to North Korea remains a state secret, it is widely believed to be substantial, and has not been reduced significantly despite growing friction between the two countries in recent years. According to a 2012 report by a pro-Beijing Hong Kong newspaper, “every year China supplies the DPRK with 300,000 to 400,000 tons of food and 500,000 tons of crude oil.”³⁰

Peaceful unification of the two Koreas could also inject new momentum into China’s efforts to bring to an end to its own internal division. Chen Xiangyang of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) maintains that Korean unification would serve as a model for Mainland China’s unification with Taiwan.³¹ A successful Korean unification experience, Chen argues, could crucially inform China’s “One Country, Two Systems” approach

26. Ibid.

27. Zhang Liangui, “Reunification of the Korean Peninsula and China.”

28. Chen Xiangyang, “China’s Policy of Unification of the Korean Peninsula” (in Chinese), *Asia and Africa Review*, no. 5 (2012), pp. 21-24.

29. Yang Xiyu, “To Break Deadlock on the Korean Peninsula, What role for China and South Korea” (in Chinese), *Huanqiu Shibao*, March 3, 2014.

30. Shi Chun-yu, “China cannot pick up the tab for the DPRK’s nukes” (in Chinese), *Ta Kung Pao*, February 13, 2013.

31. Chen, “China’s Policy of Unification of the Korean Peninsula.”

to Taiwan and improve the prospects for peaceful unification of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait.³²

Potential Risks

Most Chinese writings emphasize the potential risks of unification for Chinese security. The most frequently cited concern is the possible deployment of American troops north of the 38th parallel. North Korea is still regarded by many Chinese, especially by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as a crucial buffer against military encroachment by the U.S. and the ROK.³³ In the event of serious instability in North Korea, Chinese experts worry that American troops, dispatched to the North for the purposes of securing WMD facilities and stabilizing the country, would become permanently stationed on China's border.

Another risk is that the fall of one of the few remaining socialist nations would pose challenges to the viability of China's own political system.³⁴ Although Xi Jinping is attempting to play down the importance of ideology in China's relationship with North Korea, the special ideological value of North Korea is nevertheless emphasized by some Chinese analysts. The continued presence of non-democratic regimes such as North Korea on its periphery psychologically reduces China's sense of vulnerability to perceived mounting U.S. pressure. Moreover, the preservation of common ideological bonds between the two governments, ensures that North Korea remains dependent on Beijing, which provides China with leverage over Pyongyang should the Chinese opt to use it. In the words of Chinese Korea specialist Li Dunqiu, "since the DPRK has a socialist political system, it can hardly have any other geopolitical choice than China."³⁵ Others dispute the

32. Ibid.

33. Interview with a Chinese scholar, Beijing, December 2012.

34. Chen, "China's Policy of Unification of the Korean Peninsula"; Yang Junfeng, "China should abandon the 'negative equity' North Korea" (in Chinese), *Financial Times*, July 7, 2014.

35. Li Dunqiu, "We cannot 'give up' the 65-year Partnership with North Korea" (in Chinese), *Huanqiu Shibao*, November 27, 2014.

ideological value of North Korea to China. Lieutenant General Wang Hongguang maintains, for example, that “the DPRK has long abandoned Marxism and Leninism as the guiding thought for its party building. It has nothing in common with China ideologically, and is neither a proletarian party nor a socialist country in the real sense.”³⁶ China and North Korea have therefore “no common goal, no common road.”³⁷ Assuming that the role of ideology in China’s policy toward North Korea further diminishes, concern about this factor will likely wane over time.

Korean unification may pose a particular risk to stability in north-east China. There are approximately 2 million ethnic Koreans living in China, most of whom reside in provinces bordering North Korea.³⁸ Chinese experts fear that ethnic Koreans could “display nationalist tendencies,”³⁹ and be more loyal to a new unified Korea than to Beijing.⁴⁰ If unification occurs as a result of a loss of political control in North Korea, it might result in a massive influx of North Korean refugees into China, which many Chinese fear would aggravate social and political tensions in the northeast.⁴¹ To avert this danger, one Chinese analyst proposed establishing a “quarantine zone” in the border region so that refugees could be interdicted before entering China.⁴²

Another worry is that a united Korea may exhibit extreme nationalism, which could introduce new strains into China-Korea relations.

36. Wang Hongguang, “No such thing as ‘abandoning the DPRK’ for China” (in Chinese), *Huanqiu Shibao*, December 1, 2014.

37. Ibid.

38. “The nationality issue of the Korean ethnic group after the anti-Japanese war: many chose Chinese nationality” (in Chinese), *Academic Journal of Yanbian University*, April 29, 2014, <http://nk.news.sohu.com/20140429/n398986026.shtml>.

39. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, April 2004 and June 2006.

40. Stephanie T. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, “Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on China’s Relations with North Korea,” June 5, 2014, p. 2. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/USCC-Kleine-Ahlbrandt-China-DPRK-6-5-14.pdf>.

41. Ibid.

42. Fu Bo, “China’s Interest in the Korean Peninsula’s Reunification” (in Chinese), *21ccom*, January 2, 2014.

Chinese experts express concern that hyper Korean nationalism could lead unified Korea to compete with China for regional influence and prestige. This risk could be magnified in the event that a territorial dispute flares over the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo, which, between the first century B.C. and the seventh century A.D., controlled land that would now include all of North Korea as well as contiguous territory in northeast China, along with parts of South Korea.⁴³

Another potential downside of unification is the possibility that a unified Korea could emerge as an economic powerhouse and a major political player, thereby altering the balance of power in Northeast Asia. Some Chinese experts suggest that unification could create an inflated sense of Korea's importance that could undermine China's efforts to establish itself as the dominant power in Asia.⁴⁴ Countering this view, a minority of academics, including Professor Yan Xuetong from Qinghua University, argues that a unified Korea will serve as a bulwark against Japan, but will be unable to challenge China meaningfully owing to its status as a "global power."⁴⁵

The economic implications of unification are still being debated. After unification, Korean investment in China may decline as Seoul reallocates that money to the northern portion of the Peninsula. This could negatively affect the Chinese economy.⁴⁶ Direct investment by Korean companies in China reached almost USD 4 billion in 2014, up 29.8 percent over 2013,⁴⁷ bringing total South Korean direct investment in China to USD 69.6 billion, 52.5 percent of the nation's total external investment.⁴⁸ China's existing investments in North Korea

43. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, "Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission," p. 2.

44. Interview with Chinese analysts, Beijing, December 2012.

45. Yan Xuetong, "A Glimpse on South Koreans' Attitudes toward Reunification from Their Distorted Report," *Global Times* (Huanqiu Shibao), February 10, 2011.

46. Interviews with Chinese experts, Beijing, April 2004 and June 2006.

47. Korea's Investment in China Jumps 29.8 pct in 2014," *The Korea Times*, January 16, 2015.

48. "China emerges as S. Korea's No. 2 Investment Destination," Yonhap News Agency, May 7, 2015.

could face uncertainty as well. Seventy percent of Chinese investments in the North are concentrated in resource development projects. For example, Jilin Province has secured rights to accessing the iron ore mines in the Musan County of DPRK's North Hamgyong Province for the next 50 years.⁴⁹ Deals that provide China access to Rajin Port, located on the border of North Korea and Russia, as well as the port of Chongjin in Hamgyong Province, which enable China to ship cargo out of its landlocked northeast provinces and have strategic implications, might be voided.

China's Evolving Relations with the U.S., South Korea, and North Korea

In his meeting with President Obama at Sunnylands in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for the establishment of a new model of major power relations with the United States.⁵⁰ The following year, Xi underscored the need to avoid the "Thucydides trap" in which a rising power inspires fear in a prevailing power, resulting in war.⁵¹ Under this framework, the Korean Peninsula is considered an opportunity for U.S.-China cooperation to prevent "conflict and confrontation."⁵² Indeed, China's stronger emphasis on denuclearization and willingness to apply greater pressure on North Korea than in the past are interpreted by Chinese analysts as aimed at strengthening cooperation with the United States.⁵³

49. Yu, "Strategy and Prospects for China Regarding a Unified Korean Peninsula."

50. John Podesta, C.H. Tung, Samuel R. Berger, and Wang Jisi, *Toward a New Model of Major Power Relations*, Center for American Progress, December 2013, <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/China-Report-Topper.pdf>.

51. Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels, "How the World's Most Powerful Leader Thinks," *Huffington Post*, January 21, 2014.

52. "Xinmin Global Forum on the Korean Peninsula" (in Chinese), *Xinmin*, November 6, 2014.

53. Interview with Chinese scholar, Beijing, February 2013.

Nevertheless, Chinese experts bear no illusion that the new model of major power relations will eliminate the competitive nature of Sino-American relations, especially in East Asia. They anticipate that the U.S. will continue to view China as a strategic competitor and will not agree to reduce its strategic presence in Northeast Asia, including its military alliance with South Korea, unless Seoul insists. As long as North Korea exists and poses a military threat to the South, there is virtually no possibility that U.S. force presence will be reduced. Whether U.S. forces would remain after unification is a major Chinese concern. Building closer ties between China and South Korea is seen as a means to exert influence on this outcome.

China-South Korean relations have made positive strides since Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye became presidents of their respective nations in 2013. Presidents Xi and Park exchanged state visits and accorded priority to promoting Sino-ROK relations, reversing the negative trend that marked the previous Lee Myung-bak administration, according to Chinese analysts.⁵⁴ In June 2013, Xi and Park announced that their two nations would establish a strategic cooperative partnership. Economic complementarity is an important driver of the bilateral relationship. The two countries signed a free trade agreement in June 2015 that is expected to boost bilateral trade to over USD 300 billion a year. Shared concerns in China and South Korea about Japan's whitewashing of the history of Japanese imperialism in Asia are seen by China as an opportunity to forge closer ties.⁵⁵ Chinese experts regard South Korea as the "new model" for China's periphery diplomacy and the "new example" of peaceful coexistence among Asian countries.⁵⁶

In contrast to warming Sino-ROK relations, China's relationship with North Korea has experienced significant deterioration in the past two years. Ignoring stern warnings from Beijing, North Korea

54. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, May 2014.

55. Chen Xiangyang, "Firmly grasp the strategic initiative in Northeast Asia" (in Chinese), *Guojijiwang*, August 4, 2014.

56. "Xinmin Global Forum on the Korean Peninsula" (in Chinese), *Xinmin*, November 6, 2014.

conducted its third nuclear test in 2013.⁵⁷ The unexpected execution of Jang Sung-taek later that year set off alarm bells in China about the purging of China-friendly factions inside North Korea.⁵⁸ In 2014, North Korea sought to improve ties with Russia as part of a larger effort to diversify its foreign relations. China viewed Pyongyang's gambit as a renewed attempt to break away from Chinese influence.⁵⁹ North Korea's actions have caused great displeasure in Beijing and produced a series of Chinese policy adjustments: China unprecedentedly elevated "denuclearization" to the top of its stated goals on the Korean Peninsula in its public statements;⁶⁰ Beijing took steps to more strictly implement some of the UN sanction resolutions on North Korea;⁶¹ and exchanges of senior visits came to a halt. Most significantly, more than three years after Kim Jong-un took power, he has not yet visited China, and Xi Jinping has not expressed interest in visiting North Korea.⁶² Xi's visit in July 2015 to China's Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, which borders North Korea — the first by a Chinese head of state in eight years — signaled the priority he attaches to the region's economic development, but does not necessarily suggest a shift in policy toward Pyongyang.

According to Chinese analysts, China's change of heart on North Korea is in large part driven by Xi Jinping personally. Unlike his predecessors, Xi has little tolerance for smaller countries' blatant defiance of China and disregard for Chinese national interests. While Kim Jong-un's provocations have not matched the audacity of his father's sinking

57. "China cherishes Sino-North Korea friendship, North Korea needs to cherish it as well" (in Chinese), *Huanqiu Shibao*, February 6, 2013.

58. Interview with Chinese scholar, Beijing, May 2014.

59. "North Korea Sends Special Envoy to Russia to Break Isolation" (in Chinese), *Xinjingbao*, November 18, 2014.

60. "Li Keqiang: China advocates for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the maintenance of the long-term peace and stability of the peninsula and Northeast Asia" (in Chinese), *Renmin Ribao*, November 13, 2014.

61. Daniel Salisbury, "China Strengthens Stance on North Korean Exports," *Project Alpha*, September 26, 2013; "Seoul: China Strengthens Resolve against North Korea Nuclear Test," *Voice of America*, March 28, 2014.

62. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, May 2015.

of the Cheonan and attack on Yeongpyeong Island, young Kim has failed both to adequately explain his actions to Beijing and to show due respect to China's positions.⁶³ Pyongyang's insolence has revealed Xi Jinping's inability to rein in North Korea's dangerous behavior and thus damaged the Chinese leader's prestige internationally.⁶⁴

China's changing relations with North and South Korea, and growing Chinese confidence in their ability to shape a favorable strategic environment, have intensified debates about whether abandoning North Korea would be more advantageous.⁶⁵ So far, however, there is no consensus in support of a fundamental shift in Chinese policy. Although Xi Jinping has become increasingly irritated with North Korea, his displeasure does not alter Chinese strategic interests in sustaining the North Korean regime. Moreover, Beijing's improved ties with South Korea and its understanding with the U.S. on building a new model of major power relations are not significant enough to alter China's outlook on the potential challenges posed to China's national interests by a unified Korea. In the absence of reassurances about the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance and American force presence in a unified Korea, China is not certain that the endgame will be in China's favor and therefore does not see any incentive to pursue changes to the status quo.

In the view of Chinese analysts, if South Korea is eager to enlist Chinese cooperation in support of Korean unification, Seoul needs to provide guarantees that Chinese interests will not be harmed in the process.⁶⁶ This includes the positioning of Korea to be more equidistant between China and the U.S., if not closer to Beijing, and creating an acceptable "arrangement" regarding the future U.S. role on the Peninsula.⁶⁷ The Chinese are undertaking efforts to influence South Korean thinking and policy in this regard. Expressions of concern by

63. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, November 2013.

64. *Ibid.*

65. The most prominent example is Deng Yuwen, "China Should Abandon North Korea," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2013.

66. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, November 2013.

67. *Ibid.*

Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan to Seoul about the possible deployment of THAAD in South Korea is a case in point.⁶⁸ When Chinese officials say that the U.S. is the most important variable in resolving the Korea issue, they imply more than the need for the U.S. to engage North Korea in a dialogue on peaceful and diplomatic normalization. The embedded message to Seoul is that China's support for unification depends on whether the U.S.-ROK military alliance will be dissolved or restructured, including the withdrawal or significant reduction of U.S. troops deployed on the Peninsula.

Chinese Views of Unification Scenarios

As noted above, official Chinese policy statements consistently assert that Beijing's support for Korean unification is contingent on two conditions. First, the process must be peaceful. China objects to unification that is achieved by the use of force. Most Chinese experts envision a lengthy process of North-South talks that produces a permanent peace agreement and resolves the nuclear issue as part of a comprehensive mutual security arrangement.⁶⁹ Second, unification must be independent or self-determined, which means that it is achieved voluntarily by the two Koreas, without any outside influence.⁷⁰ China insists that Korea's future is foremost a matter for Koreans to resolve by themselves.⁷¹ With these two conditions in mind, Chinese analysts rule out three unification scenarios as unacceptable to Beijing:

68. "China Voices Concern about US Missile Defense in South Korea," Agence France-Presse, February 4, 2015.

69. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, 2012.

70. Spokesperson Hua Chunying said: "China always supports the South and the North to improve their relations through dialogues, promote reconciliation and cooperation, and eventually achieve the independent and peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula." PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson answers questions on the election of Park Geun-hye as the 18th President of ROK"

71. Pollack, "Is Xi Jinping Rethinking Korean Unification?"

1. Not peaceful and not independent. China opposes unification through the use of force either by North Korea and/or by the U.S. and the ROK.
2. Peaceful but not independent: China opposes unification through absorption that is against the will of one of the two Koreas, and possibly under the influence of external actors.
3. Not peaceful but independent: China opposes unification achieved through the use of force, but without the involvement of any external actor.⁷²

The means by which unification is achieved is of critical importance from China's perspective because different modes of unification would create different arrangements on the Peninsula, and thus bring about different consequences for China's national security and strategic interests.

In a unification by force scenario, a military confrontation between the two Koreas would result in one party defeating the other. Chinese analysts doubt that North Korea would attack the South at the current stage, since it would likely end in its demise. Chinese experts believe that a South Korean attempt to unify by force would be backed by the U.S. and would likely succeed if China chooses not to intervene.⁷³ This scenario is seen as undesirable by China for several reasons:

- China might be compelled to intervene to fulfill its treaty obligations, depending on the nature of the contingency.⁷⁴ Involvement in

72. Chinese experts view this scenario as unlikely due to the existence of the U.S.-ROK military alliance.

73. None of the experts interviewed view as feasible a scenario in which the ROK invades the North without U.S. support and involvement. Interview with Chinese scholars, Beijing, December 2012.

74. Article II of the 1961 "Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty" states "In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal." Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Chinese experts privately say that Beijing has repeatedly asked Pyongyang to excise this

a war would set back China's economic development and delay attainment of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation.

- If both the U.S. and China are involved in the conflict, this could lead to a major military confrontation between the two largest powers in the region. Prolonged hostility between the U.S. and China would be the likely outcome.
- If China did not intervene, Pyongyang would be out-numbered, out-witted and out-powered. If it is pushed into a corner, North Korea might not refrain from suicidal moves, including use of nuclear weapons.
- Even if South Korea/U.S. defeats North Korea/China in the end, the war would leave the Peninsula in complete ruin.
- A Korea that is reunified by force with the help of the United States is likely to be part of the U.S. alliance system.

In a unification by absorption scenario, either the North or South would take over the other Korea and assimilate it into the existing political, economic and social system of the dominant Korea. Chinese analysts believe that the only realistic absorption scenario is that which is dominated and driven by South Korea. Moreover, the most probable catalyst for unification by absorption is an implosion or a collapse of the North Korean regime.⁷⁵ The best example of this scenario is the "German model," in which East Germany was assimilated by West Germany in 1990.⁷⁶

Chinese experts think that unification by absorption is the model preferred by South Korea and the U.S. They also contend that Washington and Seoul perceive China as the main obstacle to realizing the absorption of the North by the South due to its policy of propping up the North Korean regime. However, Chinese analysts widely challenge the fundamental assumptions on which the preference for the "German

clause from the treaty, but North Korea has refused. These experts believe that China would intervene militarily only if it judged that doing so was essential to protect Chinese security. Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing and Washington DC, 2009-10.

75. Interview with Chinese scholar, Beijing, December 2012.

76. Wang Linchang, "Why is the Reunification of the Korean Peninsula so Difficult?" *Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao)*, March 4, 2011.

model" is based. The majority view holds that:

- North Korea is not likely to collapse. The sustainability of North Korea, including the viability and legitimacy of the Kim Jong-un regime, is in fact stronger than the West had predicted.
- If China does not continue to assure North Korea's survival, a weak and isolated Pyongyang will seek retaliation against all parties, including China.
- South Korea is neither financially nor psychologically ready for unification by absorption. Chinese analysts question whether Seoul can afford the astronomical costs associated with the assimilation of North Korea.⁷⁷

The idea of promoting regime change in North Korea is anathema to Beijing because it is contrary to China's long-standing position that all nations' sovereignty and integrity must be respected. Moreover, regime change would likely involve military conflict that could potentially escalate to an all-out war.

Since China objects to unification achieved through force, absorption, or regime change, the only path to unification that Beijing favors is a mutually acceptable integration negotiated by North and South Korea. Chinese experts foresee a prolonged process of economic cooperation and social exchanges that lay the foundation for economic integration and eventual political dialogue about unification. This approach will bring minimum disruption and create de facto unification of the two entities through equitable participation. Chinese experts maintain that the high economic complementarity between the North and the South is a solid foundation on which to create economic interdependence. The abundant capital and advanced technology of South Korea, if combined with rich North Korean natural and labor resources, would stimulate rapid growth for both and in turn foster a common

77. South Korea's Finance Ministry estimated in early 2013 that unification could cost the South up to 7% of annual GDP for a decade. In 2014, 7% of South Korea's GDP was KRW 99.2 trillion (USD 88.2 billion). Christine Kim, "Korean Unification May Cost South 7 Percent of GDP: ministry," Reuters, January 1, 2013.

identity of "one Korea." Engagement efforts such as increasing South Korean investments in the North and permitting North Korean labor flows to the South, in China's view, are all good starting points for such integration. The key obstacle is how to ease mutual political hostility and set aside the nuclear issue so that engagement can begin.

Although China has a clear preference for the peaceful and independent unification through negotiation scenario, realizing this outcome is not China's top priority on the Peninsula and it cannot be achieved by China alone. Progress toward this goal must be made by the two Koreas and the current state of North-South relations does not bode well for substantial improvement in the near-term. President Park Geun-hye's "trustpolitik" policy, which emphasizes inter-Korean trust building, signifies goodwill toward North Korea, according to Chinese experts. But Kim Jong-un's response to Park's overtures has been erratic, and he has not embraced a process that could lead to integration with the South. Meanwhile, despite Seoul's desire for better relations with China, President Park's commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance remains firm, and the U.S. and South Korea have shown no sign of reducing the intensity of their joint military preparedness. From China's perspective, the foundation for a peaceful and independent process of unification based on economic integration does not yet exist. Any premature attempt to promote unification is judged to be dangerous and strategically unwise.

Influencing Chinese Policy

China's reluctance to abandon North Korea and genuinely support Korean unification is due to many factors. First, there is enormous uncertainty associated with unification and its implications for Chinese interests. In particular, the possibility that U.S. troops might be deployed north of the 38th parallel is an unacceptable risk. The nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance after unification is also unknown. Despite the fact that Chinese interests are in many ways being harmed by the perpetu-

ation of the status quo, the costs to China are mostly discernable and manageable. The threats to Chinese security under a unified Korea are unknown and potentially considerable. Whether Chinese interests can be protected under a unified Korea is unclear.

Second, even if China had confidence that its interests would not be undermined in a unified Korea, the transition to a new status quo carries risks. Except in the case of China's preferred scenario of a peaceful and independent negotiated integration of the two Koreas, the process of achieving unification is likely to be chaotic and involve instability that spills over North Korea's borders. Third, institutional constituencies in China that fiercely oppose any change in Chinese policy toward North Korea cannot be easily ignored. Xi Jinping needs the support of conservative elements in the PLA, who seek to preserve the military's revolutionary legacies and avoid new threats to Chinese security that many believe would result from unification. A portion of the CPC apparatus also remains staunchly committed to the friendship with North Korea that was sealed in blood and was once commonly referred to "as close as lips to teeth." The U.S. rebalance to Asia, which is widely viewed as an effort to strategically encircle China and contain its re-emergence as a great power has undoubtedly intensified the misgivings of these constituencies and their resistance to any change in China's two Koreas policy.

Despite these hurdles, it is nevertheless worth considering steps that could be taken to influence China's cost/benefit calculus regarding Korean unification. Developments in North Korea are unpredictable and could evolve in ways that make China's position on reunification an academic exercise at best. The Chinese themselves are concerned about the internal situation in North Korea, as noted in their 2015 Defense White Paper, which stated that "The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia are shrouded in instability and uncertainty."⁷⁸ The need to prepare for potential contingencies, even if China views them

78. Information Office of the State Council, *China's Military Strategy*, May 26, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm.

as undesirable, is obvious. Even if there is no spontaneous internal upheaval in North Korea, a discussion should begin with China about planning unification. A strategy should be formulated aimed at persuading Beijing to stop propping up North Korea and prepare to work with the U.S. and the ROK to manage the attendant instability and bring about a new end-state in which Chinese interests are protected. No single step is likely to alter China's approach, but an accumulation of measures aimed at easing Chinese fears and reducing the uncertainties associated with unification could have an impact on Chinese thinking and policies over time. Steps that could be taken include:

- Offer quiet assurances to Beijing that if the North Korean regime collapses due to economic or political pressures, China will not have to bear the consequences by itself. If large numbers of refugees flood across the border into China, relief would be forthcoming from the international community. The United States, Japan and South Korea could promise to help cope with the humanitarian and security challenges that would arise if North Korea were to implode.
- Inform China about some details of U.S.-ROK planning in the event of various contingencies. Sharing with Beijing how the alliance would respond to instability in North Korea could reassure the Chinese about the alliance's intentions. A dialogue with Beijing could include pledges to not send U.S. troops close to North Korea's shared border with China. A division of responsibilities could be agreed upon in which China secures WMD facilities located within a specific distance of its border. The U.S., ROK and China could agree in a crisis to inform each other of military activities, tactical movements, and agree on operational rules.⁷⁹ Advance planning and coordination to de-conflict U.S. and Chinese forces and, if possible, to work together in support of shared interests, should be considered.
- Pledge that U.S. troops will not be deployed north of the 38th parallel for a prolonged period. If North Korea collapses and the nation is unified under South Korea's control, the U.S. military, along with the ROK military, will play an indispensable role in stabilizing the

79. James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 128-129; Glaser and Billingsley, *Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula*, p. 23.

country, providing humanitarian assistance, and locating and neutralizing weapons of mass destruction. But U.S. troops would not have to remain beyond the period of time that it is necessary to perform those missions.

- Provide guarantees that all nuclear weapons would be removed from the peninsula. Chinese fears that a united Korea could have nuclear weapons can be relatively easily assuaged. There is no good reason why any nuclear weapons would need to remain in Korea after unification.
- Provide assurances that after unification the U.S.-ROK alliance would not be used to harm Chinese security interests. Whether the alliance is maintained in its current form or modified is up to Seoul and Washington, but both countries could agree that unless China is posing a security threat to the peninsula, U.S. bases in Korea would not be used as staging grounds for conducting military operations against China.

Conclusion

Although China officially supports unification of the Korean Peninsula, it essentially maintains a two Koreas policy. Beijing sustains this approach because even as the burdens and dangers of the status quo on the peninsula increase, it judges that the risks of unification are potentially greater. Nevertheless, China's growing economic and political clout along with the strengthening of its ties with South Korea are boosting Beijing's confidence that it can protect Chinese interests regardless of developments on the peninsula. The more permissible environment in recent years regarding discussion of Chinese policy toward the Koreas has engendered a robust debate among Chinese researchers about the potential costs and benefits for China of Korean unification.

Interviews with Chinese experts suggests that there is emerging support for actively shaping the development of events on the peninsula to facilitate a peaceful and independent unification. While these discussions among experts have likely not yet led to a reconsideration of Chinese policy, they suggest that Beijing's approach might change in the future if conditions are favorable. If Seoul is serious about

advancing its goal of Korean unification, it should, jointly with the U.S., consider ways to influence Chinese policy, including specific measures to affect China's cost/benefit calculus. A variety of steps aimed at easing Chinese fears and reducing the uncertainties associated with unification could be considered. Even though China does not favor a North Korean collapse, in the event that this occurs, the U.S., ROK, and China should be prepared for the challenges and opportunities posed by various contingencies.

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