

## North Korea's Nuclear Test and Prospects for Peninsular Unification: A Chinese Perspective\*

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North Korea's fourth and fifth nuclear tests and its subsequent actions and reactions have changed the conditions for unification of the Korean Peninsula. This article attempts to interpret these changed dynamics and explore the prospects of unification after nuclear testing by focusing on the nature of the Kim Jong-un regime, its unpredictability, and instability. Now it is likely that escalatory sanctions, coup d'état, and concerns stemming from Kim Jong Un's health will lead to the collapse of the North Korean regime and an accelerated process of reunification. Multiple tests cannot help Pyongyang acquire the status of a nuclear state, and forced unification under North Korea's nuclear threatening will be a suicidal act for Pyongyang. All major stakeholders must adequately prepare themselves for an accelerated unification process given nuclear tests and the subsequent developments.

**Keywords:** North Korea, China, Nuclear Test, Korean Peninsula, Unification

2016 began with the shocking news that North Korea had conducted its fourth nuclear test on January 6. Later, on February 7, North Korea claimed to have "launched a satellite, *Kwangmyongsong-4*."<sup>1</sup> Only

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1. "Reported that North Korea Launched a Satellite," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 8, 2016.

nine months later, on September 9, North Korea announced that it has “successfully carried out its fifth nuclear test.”<sup>2</sup>

The Korean Peninsula once again became a potential flashpoint as regional powers scrambled to manage an increasingly unpredictable, defiant, and provocative regime, making regional security more complicated and sensitive. North Korea’s fourth and fifth nuclear tests and the regime’s subsequent actions and reactions have also changed the conditions for Peninsular unification. In this article, the author attempts to interpret these changed dynamics and explore the prospects of unification after nuclear testing by focusing on the nature of the Kim Jong-un regime and in particular, its unpredictability and instability.

## **Nuclear Tests: Their Nature and Consequences**

Despite some initial skepticism, international experts conceded later that the fourth nuclear test turned out to be the detonation of a hydrogen bomb — just as Pyongyang had claimed it to be — although “the explosion and the earthquakes it set off were less powerful than a normal hydrogen bomb.”<sup>3</sup> Others believed that the explosion is not so powerful because North Korea had conducted a “mini-scale hydrogen bomb to reduce the impact.”<sup>4</sup>

Each of the tests were followed by North Korea’s proclamations of victories: “The first test is a safe and successful underground nuclear test; the second one has elevated the explosive and operational capabilities of the bomb to a higher stage; the third one detonated a miniaturized and light bomb; and the fourth test of a hydrogen bomb is safe

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2. Kirk Spitzer, “‘Fanatic Recklessness’: Nations Rip North Korea for Reported Nuke Test,” *USA TODAY*, September 9, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/09/09/north-korea-nuclear-test/90110856/> (accessed November 30, 2016).
  3. “North Korea Conducted Fourth Nuclear Test,” *The International Nuclear News* 1 (2016), pp. 12-13.
  4. Li Mei, “North Korea’s H-bomb Ability,” *Weapons Knowledge* 3 (2016), p. 49.

and perfect.”<sup>5</sup> In September of 2016, North Korea claimed that the fifth test was “examined and confirmed,” and that they had “successfully conducted a ‘higher level’ test of a nuclear weapon.”<sup>6</sup>

A country must meet four conditions to be formally deemed a nuclear-weapon state (NWS): possession of an explosive device; long-range ballistic missile capability; a light and miniaturized warhead able to fit on a ballistic missile; and reentry technology that would allow the warhead to survive its plunge through the atmosphere. Pyongyang has tried to prove itself through its missile technology and nuclear capability, though international experts have still not deemed North Korea a fully “nuclear-armed state.”<sup>7</sup> Some Chinese experts believe that North Korea is now “capable of making thermonuclear weapons (A-bomb and H-bomb) mounted with miniaturized warheads. And in terms of missile technology, it is fast moving toward greater serialization, diversification, and stratification.”<sup>8</sup> Multiple tests and satellite launches have established North Korea as a nuclear-capable state, if not a nuclear-armed one. As things stand now, the

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5. Elizabeth Philipp, “North Korea Claims Hydrogen Bomb Test,” *Arms Control Today*, January/February, 2016, pp. 36-37.
  6. The Nuclear Weapons Institute of North Korea announced that the successful nuclear test confirmed the “specific features of the nuclear warhead that has been standardized to be able to be mounted on strategic ballistic rockets of the Hwasong artillery units of the Strategic Forces.” It added that “there was no radioactive materials leakage” from the detonation, and that the “standardization of the nuclear warhead will enable the DPRK to produce at will and as many [warheads] as it wants [of] a variety of smaller, lighter and diversified nuclear warheads of higher strike power with a firm hold on the technology for producing and using various fissile materials.”
  7. Scott A. Snyder, “A U.S.-ROK-China Dialogue on North Korea’s Nuclear Stalemate: Update, Review, and Assessment,” (paper presented at the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) hosted a Track 1.5 meeting in New York on March 22-23, 2016).
  8. Zheng Jiyong, “Assessment of North Korea’s Nuclear Capability and China’s Response,” (paper presented at “The Korean Peninsula Security Environment the Fifth North Korean Nuclear test after and the Sino-ROK relations,” China Policy Institute of Ajou University, South Korea, November 17, 2016).

nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula will become increasingly complicated, politicized, and sensitive. The crisis not only concerns North Korea's nuclear ambitions, but, more importantly, the Kim regime's survival and longevity, and East Asian regional security. It has involved an increasing number of regional and global players such as major powers like China and the United States as well as international organizations like the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency. A political settlement that could serve the interests of all stakeholders seems increasingly unlikely, if not impossible, especially when multilateral mechanisms are virtually powerless. In the absence of a robust regional security architecture based on mutual trust and effective communication and dialogue, this protracted crisis is also becoming increasingly delicate, threatening to trigger military conflict as a result of strategic miscalculation.

The fourth and fifth nuclear tests and subsequent escalatory international sanctions against Pyongyang have fundamentally changed the dynamics on the Peninsula. North Korea has now crossed the point of no return towards becoming a nuclear power, advancing in plutonium-uranium enrichment technology and being capable of initiating a preemptive nuclear strike. Initially a mediator, China has now become a major stakeholder in peninsular affairs. With the Six-Party Talks gridlocked, three-party, four-party, or even five-party talks<sup>9</sup> may become the new format, focusing on guarding against contingencies rather than on maintaining stability.

Moreover, the nuclear crisis has also changed the structure and nature of international relations of Northeast Asia. First, advances in nuclear technology will help North Korea increase the quantity and quality of their nuclear weapons over time, posing security challenges in its neighborhood. Second, North Korea's nuclear programs may trigger a region-wide arms race in which regional powers scramble to

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9. Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press, said that "Other parties have also suggested some ideas, including flexible contacts in a three-party, four-party or even five-party format," March 9, 2016, Chinese Foreign Ministry, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/t1346238.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1346238.shtml) (accessed November 30, 2016).

rearm, both conventionally and with nuclear arms, creating a classical security dilemma on the Peninsula. Third, Pyongyang's nuclear blackmail and intimidation has legitimized potential military intervention by the United States<sup>10</sup> and "pushed South Korea and Japan closer toward the United States."<sup>11</sup> Fourth, nuclear proliferation as a possible result of illicit leaks and transfers of North Korea's nuclear technology and materials could have grave impacts on international security overall.<sup>12</sup> Finally, acquisition of nuclear capabilities solely by North Korea would create an asymmetrical balance of power, undermining the stability of the Peninsula.

China holds a clear position on the nuclear issue: "We are committed to realizing denuclearization of the Peninsula, upholding peace and stability and properly resolving issues through dialogue and consultation. The Peninsula has seen an escalation of tensions since the DPRK conducted its fifth nuclear test. We call on all relevant parties to exercise restraint and avoid taking actions that may add to tension."<sup>13</sup> China also believes that sanctions are neither an end nor the only approach. "We believe that it is necessary for the Security Council to further respond to the nuclear test by the DPRK, and their response should be focused on nuclear activities by the DPRK for the purpose of resolving the Korean nuclear issue and safeguarding peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula."<sup>14</sup>

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10. China said very clearly that "Oppose the deployment of the anti-missile system of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) by the United States in the Republic of Korea."

11. Jia Xiudong, "North Korea Nuclear Test Cannot Change their own Security," *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, January 7, 2016.

12. "North Korea as a de facto Nuclear State," *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Department of Defense, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2016).

13. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on September 21, 2016, Chinese Foreign Ministry, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1399373.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1399373.shtml) (accessed November 30, 2016).

14. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on September 14, 2016, Chinese Foreign Ministry, <http://www.fmprc.gov>.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi also said that China upholds the following points: “Firstly, under no circumstances could the Korean Peninsula be nuclearized, whether the DPRK or the ROK, self-produced or introduced and deployed. Secondly, there is no military solution to the issue. If there is war or turbulence on the Peninsula it is not acceptable for China. Thirdly, China’s legitimate national security interests must be effectively maintained and safeguarded.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Nuclear Ambitions and the Kim Jong-un Regime: Stability and Contradictions**

Kim Jong-un was officially declared the supreme leader after his father’s sudden death on December 17, 2011. Contrary to outsiders’ predictions about possible domestic upheaval or even regime collapse following a leadership transition, in the four years since his accession to power, Kim Jong-un has consolidated his leadership of the party, the government, and the military despite the inherent instability and unpredictability of authoritarian regimes through political, economic, military, and diplomatic means.

Politically, after five years, the Kim Jong-un regime, at the Seventh Party Congress which convened on May 6, 2016, Kim Jong-un managed to acquire a new title: Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea, officially “becoming the paramount leader of North Korea’s *Juche* revolution.”<sup>16</sup>

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cn/mfa\_eng/xwfw\_665399/s2510\_665401/2511\_665403/t1397608.shtml (accessed November 30, 2016).

15. On February 12, 2016, Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave an exclusive interview to Reuters in Munich, Germany, Wang Yi Talks about Principles China Upholds in Dealing with the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue on February 13, Chinese Foreign Ministry, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/t1340527.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1340527.shtml) (accessed November 30, 2016); On February 25, 2016, Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered a speech entitled “The Developing China and China’s Diplomacy” at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) of the US, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/t1344190.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1344190.shtml) (accessed November 30, 2016).

Economically, in terms of industrial development, his regime has given priority to metallurgy, electricity, coal, and rail transport along with the mining, machinery, chemical engineering, and light industry. The Seventh Party Congress declared that "We will work out the phased strategy for the national economic development in a scientific and realistic manner and carry it out without fail and carry through the five-year strategy for the state economic development from 2016 to 2020 for the present."<sup>17</sup>

Militarily, Kim Jong-un unveiled the *Byungjin* Line, which is the simultaneous pursuit of nuclear and economic development, and emphasized that North Korea must devote more resources and energies to economic construction in tandem with strengthening and developing their nuclear capabilities. Pyongyang has already declared that it will pursue a de facto "nuclear power status"<sup>18</sup> and it is estimated that, according to current trends, North Korea will possess "at least 20 pieces of nuclear weaponry or at most hundreds of pieces by 2020."<sup>19</sup> North Korea continues to seek "asymmetric advantage through its ongoing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development."<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Pyongyang has strengthened its diplomatic ties with longstanding friendly nations.

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16. "Kim Jong-un Thrills North Koreans with hours of Brilliance," *The Economist*, May 14-20, 2016, p. 19.
  17. "Decision of Seventh Congress of WPK Adopted," *Korean Central News Agency*, May 10, 2016.
  18. Wang Sheng and Ling Shengli, "Discussions on New Ideas of 'Double Track' to Solve DPRK Nuclear Issue," *Northeast Asia Forum (Jilin)*, No3, Total No. 125 (2016), pp. 17-20.
  19. US experts claimed that North Korea had about 20 uranium-based warheads with a major production capacity to produce another eight to ten uranium warheads annually; for more details, see "The Danger Next Door," *Washington Post*, May 11, 2015. Moreover, some top Chinese nuclear experts estimate that North Korea may already have 20 nuclear warheads, and may be able to double its arsenal in 2016; see Jeremy Page and Jay Solomon, "China Warns North Korean Nuclear Threat is Rising," *Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2015.
  20. Van Jackson, "The Korean Peninsula's Status Quo Crisis," *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2015.

## **Characteristics of the Kim Regime**

### Inheritance

As the third leader of the Kim dynasty in North Korea, Kim Jong-un has inherited and carried forward his ancestors' legacies.

Kim Jong-un shares many outward similarities with his grandfather and founder of the regime, especially through his hairstyle and demeanor. To build a cult of personality in contemporary North Korea, Kim Jong-un has presented himself as a reincarnation of his grandfather Kim Il-sung.

Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un's father, attached great importance to nuclear development and military modernization. As early as the 1990's, he introduced *Songun* politics as the general principle guiding North Korea's socialist revolution and Workers Party leadership. Under the *Songun* policy, Kim Jong-un has established the People's Army as the pillar and vanguard of the revolution and claimed to have turned North Korea into a "great power that can produce man-made satellite and nuclear weapon" through nuclear test.

Kim Jong-un has enshrined his father's and grandfather's policies into the so-called the *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* theory, which is regarded as the perpetual guiding theory for the party and state. He also emphasized that North Korea will "continue to march unswervingly on the path envisioned by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un toward independence, *Juche*, socialism. This is the country's one hundred-year strategy and the 'people first' policy must be manifested in the activities of the party and the state."

### Independence

Apart from inheriting his ancestors' teachings, Kim Jong-un has also left his own imprint on North Korea's national strategy by calling for the establishment of North Korea as a "highly-civilized power."

In Kim Jong-un's new year's addresses for 2013 and 2014, the term *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* appeared four times and two times, respectively, but did not appear at all in the 2015 address. Kim delib-



erately skipped the phrase to focus public attention on his own merits and achievements in order to strengthen his leadership role.

Over the past four years, Kim Jong-un's role as the paramount leader has been further enhanced by his frequent public appearances, such as inspection tours, meetings with foreign dignities, public speeches, decree issuance, and other appearances. He is quickly being idolized among ordinary citizens.

Since taking over in 2011, Kim Jong-un has lost no time in consolidating power through a sweeping reshuffle of the party, the administration, and the military, replacing officials leftover from his father's regime with his own trusted confidants. Now that he has successfully built his authority and power on his pedigree and merits, Kim has begun to define his own distinct leadership style. Believing that long-term regime survival and sustainability are essentially unopposed, Kim seems to think that he is now "ushering a new era by launching ambitious and aggressive reforms."<sup>21</sup>

### Peculiar characteristics

For seven decades, the survival of the Kim dynasty has been predicated on certain characteristics:

(1) Deification and indoctrination. The sustainability of the regime and universal loyalty has been achieved through mass indoctrination, which underscores the Kim family's *Paektu* pedigree. After assuming leadership, Kim launched a sweeping propaganda campaign to deify himself by imitating his grandfather in appearance and demeanor, accentuating his political orthodoxy by invoking Kim Il-sung's glorious image in the hearts and minds of ordinary North Koreans.

(2) Hereditary elites and cronyism. Revolving around Kim Jong-un are a number of interest groups consisting of the Kim clan and its trusted cliques. These elite groups mainly include Kim's family mem-

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21. Fang Hanfan, "The 7th National Congress of Korean Workers' Party and China's Countermeasure," *Journal of Yanbian University (Social Science)* 49, no. 2 (March 2016), pp. 5-6.

bers (such as his younger sister Yeo-jong), offspring of revolutionary heroes, and his most loyal cronies. Hereditary bureaucrats hold the most important posts in the party, the government, the military, and businesses. These elites have huge vested interests in the regime and pledge the highest allegiance to the rule of the Kim family.

(3) Military loyalty and the state apparatus. In the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras, the military had played the central role in sustaining their absolute rule. *Songun*, Kim Il-sung's signature doctrine, placed the army at the main position in North Korean politics. Military allegiance and the overall state apparatus ensured a smooth leadership transition at the outset of the Kim Jong-un era.

(4) Double emphasis on nuclear development and the economy. Chronic economic woes have weakened Pyongyang's hands in the conventional arms race. To compensate for this disadvantage, North Korea pursues nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles to gain the upper hand over South Korea. For North Korea, the virtue of the *Byungjin* Line lies in the fact that it can decisively deter against attack while saving additional defense spending on conventional weaponry that can then be devoted to economic construction and people's livelihood.

### ***Contradictions within the Kim Jong-un Regime***

Interpretations, judgments, and reviews regarding the North Korean regime and Kim Jong-un himself differ so significantly that there is no consensus on whether the regime is rigid or flexible, whether Kim Jong-un's policies are strategic or tactical, rational decisions or improvised responses, or short-lived remedies or long-term visions.

Contradictions within the regime are reflected in the following aspects:

#### **Proactive yet Superficial Reforms**

Under the rules of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang announced a set of programs to improve North Koreans' livelihood, such as "[exchanging] meat for grass," "turning all mountains into gold mines,"

"[the] provision of more meat and eggs for the people," and "provision of more clothes for the people." With Kim Jong-un at the helm, Pyongyang unveiled the *Byungjin* Line to promote balanced progress in military modernization, industrialization, and social solidarity with a view towards building a socialist power.

In fact, in terms of at least economics, Kim Jong-un's many signature construction projects, such as amusement parks, ski resorts, and horse-riding clubs have been inspired by his overseas experiences in Europe, rather than ordinary citizens' essential needs.

Despite Ri Su-yong's intensive foreign visits to Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, Pyongyang hasn't earned its much-anticipated international clout, multilateral cooperation, or economic assistance.

### Pursuing Economic Development without Reform and Opening

Although Pyongyang withstood the economic contractions of the 1990s, its general economic picture is not encouraging. In the eyes of the political elite, North Korea has realized three dimensions of a strong socialist power, namely, ideology, politics, and military, leaving only the economic dimension unfulfilled.

North Korea watchers are wondering whether a young leader like Kim Jong-un, who has returned after years of study abroad and presented a distinct leadership style, will usher in a new age of Chinese-style reform and opening for the North Korean people.

Indeed, since 2012, positive signs have been noted regarding Pyongyang's opening up to the outside world. North Korea has dispatched technocrats to China for inspection and study tours as well as dispatching workers to earn foreign currency. However, large-scale opening up is not without risks for North Korea, as increased exchange with the outside world might threaten regime stability. The "execution of Jang Song-thaek,"<sup>22</sup> the overseer of Sino-North Korean Special

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22. "Traitor Jang Song-thaek Executed," *Korean Central News Agency*, December 12, 2013.

Economic Zones (such as *Raseon*), represented a major setback for Sino-North Korean trade cooperation.

Therefore, the prospect of reform and the opening of North Korea has always “had a negative outlook, resulting in failure rather than success, given the crisis [in] the system and the regime.”<sup>23</sup>

### Tranquil on the Surface but Unstable Deep Inside

For now, it seems that the leadership transition has been largely uneventful. Compared with Kim Jong-il’s takeover of the leadership role after three years of mourning following Kim Il-sung’s death, Kim Jong-un’s ascendance and coronation was much faster in that he has swiftly entrenched his supreme position through a sweeping and well-calculated purge in which second-in-command figures “including Ri Yong-ho, Jang Song-thaek, Choe Ryong-hae, and Hyon Yong-chol, [have been] either demoted or executed.”<sup>24</sup>

North Korea watchers note that the young and aggressive Kim Jong-un, without rich experience in politics, may antagonize some of the hereditary elite by concentrating overwhelming power into his own hands. In terms of foreign affairs, they are concerned that as a youthful newcomer, Kim Jong-un has a strong inclination toward adventurism and extremism, which may exacerbate the already tense regional situation into an escalatory spiral.

### Uncertainties about Regime Preservation

Some in South Korea have discerned some noticeable changes within North Korean society, including an expanded role for the market, entrenched social stratification, worsening social inequality, greater

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23. Park Hee-jin, “The Status and Evaluation of Economic Reforms of the Four-year-old Kim Jong-un Regime: Geopolitical Strategies and the Performance of Opening Policies,” *Journal of Peace and Unification* 5, no. 1 (2015), pp. 20-31.

24. “How Kim Jong-un Gets Rid of Threats to His Power,” *Chosun Ilbo*, May 18, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/05/18/2015051801489.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/05/18/2015051801489.html) (accessed October 20, 2016).

application of information technology, and inflows and circulation of foreign concepts. Changes in public society include growing commercialism and worship of money, distrust of the government and its policies, diminishing loyalty toward leaders and the country, and ideological indifference to socialism and *Juche*.

The sudden deaths of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il from massive heart attacks have raised concerns over Kim Jong-un's health conditions. Rumors began to circulate about Kim Jong-un's whereabouts and personal security when he disappeared from public view for several weeks after watching a performance by the *Moranbong* Band on September 3, 2014, and was absent from the second session of the 13th Supreme People's Assembly on September 25. Missing for more than 40 days from public view, Kim was reported to have inspected a new residential block newly completed on October 14. During these days, speculation, mostly international, "about Kim's sudden death, assassination, home arrest, and so on went rampant."<sup>25</sup>

### **Contradictions within North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions**

North Korea's nuclear programs "serve multiple purposes."<sup>26</sup> Domestically, they help consolidate Kim Jong-un's position by exaggerating his leadership ability and strengthening his military capabilities by achieving sufficient operational nuclear capabilities to serve a *fait accompli* as a nuclear-capable state to strengthen its hand in negotiations with the United States. Externally, Kim Jong-un is taking advantage of the period leading up to the inauguration of a new US president and exploiting tensions between China and the United States and between China and Japan. It seems that Barack Obama has neither interest nor time and energy to work on North Korean issues.

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25. "Kim Jong-un Back on the Road," *Chosun Ilbo*, October 23, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/10/23/2014102301220.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/10/23/2014102301220.html) (accessed November 30, 2016).

26. Jin Canrong, "China has a Fear of Sanctions Against North Korea," *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, September 23, 2016, <https://cn.nikkei.com/columnviewpoint/viewpoint/21591-20160923.html> (accessed October 20, 2016).

Meanwhile, the potential challenge of North Korea's nuclear capabilities is rising. It is not only because North Korea intends to increase their nuclear stockpile for reasons of security but also because a potential nuclear accident as a result of its poor technology is rising. What's more, North Korea also intends to expand its international clout and independence through nuclear blackmail.

In China's view, the focus of the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue is on the US and the DPRK, who are in a game theoretic situation. At the level of power politics, U.S.-North Korea game can be interpreted as North Korea's efforts to seek security with nuclear weapons since their military power cannot compare to that of the U.S. North Korea and South Korea cannot play leading roles regarding the Peninsular issues though they themselves are closely related to the issues. Thus, it is the U.S. that is playing the leading role and the North Korea nuclear issue will trigger further nuclear competition on the Peninsular. South Korea will likely either develop nuclear weapons itself or get them from the U.S. as a counterweight to North Korea.

While the diplomatic mechanisms for achieving cease-fire on the Peninsula have died, peace has not been established. Since 2003, parties have tried but failed to transfer the mechanisms related to the Six-Party Talks into an overall Northeastern Asian regional security apparatus. The failures of the non-proliferation regime together with security issues from American involvement have led to nuclear proliferation on the Peninsular. Making matters worse, there is no mature crisis management mechanism in Northeast Asia. Asymmetric confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea will last long into future.

As a result of the fourth and fifth nuclear tests, North Korea significantly improved its nuclear capability, and it is unlikely that North Korea will abandon its nuclear aspirations within the near future, casting doubts on the value of a strategy of patience.

## Prospects for Unification: Acceleration or Deceleration

### *China's View of Peninsular Unification*

By virtue of its location on China's border, the Korean Peninsula's geopolitical position, its history, and current status have been closely related to China's political, military and economic security. Should the nuclear crisis give rise to a large-scale riot or even a war, the international environment that China faces would seriously deteriorate and social stability and economic development in Northeast China would be greatly impaired. Therefore, it is of vital importance to China's strategic interests to lower the possibility of the crisis escalating into a war, to help pull the Peninsula out of the Cold War, and to prevent, or at least postpone, the outbreak of acute conflict on the Peninsula. To maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula, however, does not mean to maintain the current separated state that exists between North and South Korea. On the contrary, China is playing an active role in breaking the impasse between the United States and North Korea, helping with a soft landing of North Korea's economy, and promoting the peaceful reunification of the Peninsula, which is not only in China's interest, but will "satisfy the common interest of all parties to the greatest extent."<sup>27</sup>

As a close neighbor to the Peninsula, China not only expects to maintain friendship with North Korea, but also looks forward to developing a strategic cooperative partnership with South Korea both on the political level and in other fields. "China does not seek a leading position, scope of influence, or self-interest on the Peninsula."<sup>28</sup> In fact, the Chinese government and its leadership have repeatedly declared that "China supports the [advancement of the] two sides on the Peninsula towards détente, and then peaceful reunification, on

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27. Kim Donggil, "The 'Tipping Point' of China's Patience with North Korea," *The Harmony of Civilizations and Prosperity for All — Different Paths with Common Responsibilities*, *Beijing Forum* 2007, pp. 2-5.

28. Yu Shaohua, "Reunification of the Korean Peninsula: Foundation and Path," *China International Studies* 2 (2015), pp. 71-72.

the condition that no external forces get involved."<sup>29</sup>

China's view on the reunification of the Korean Peninsula is "Détente, Peace, and Reunification," which is also a hope shared by the people of both the North and the South on the Korean Peninsula. The leaders of both countries are adjusting their policy according to the changing situation, trying to enhance peace and stability on the Peninsula. However, due to the lasting mutual distrust and huge differences between the two Koreas in their social systems, ideologies, economic systems, and values, a breakthrough in their political relationship is barely visible in the short term.

The key interests are enshrined in Beijing's "No War, No Instability, No Nukes" (*buzhan, buluan, wuhe*) policy.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, neighboring countries rife with divisions, conflicts, and strife would never be considered a blessing by China, let alone a convulsed Peninsula that "might generate large swarms of refugees flowing into China's northeast."<sup>31</sup> Thus, according to many experts, "China wants to maintain North Korea and its regime as a buffer protecting China from all of these alleged dangers."<sup>32</sup>

China thinks that "it is impossible to push Pyongyang to renounce its nuclear [ambitions] without at the same time taking into account the regime's security concerns."<sup>33</sup> Guided by a policy of "strategic restraint," the Obama administration has rejected Pyongyang's proposal of a peace agreement and call for ending South Korea-U.S. joint

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29. Jamie F. Metzl, "The Korea Peninsular Unification and China's Nation Interests," *Sungkyun China Observer* 3 (2015), pp. 53-54.

30. Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula," *Center for Strategic and International Studies Report*, November 2012, pp. 1-5.

31. "The collapse of North Korea would send millions of refugees over the 880 mile (1415 km)" border into China, bringing with them social and economic anguish," see Charlie Campbell, "A North Korean satellite launch angers China," *TIME* 187, no. 9 (2016).

32. Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, "Preparing for the Sudden Change in North Korea," *Council Special Report* 42 (January 2009), pp. 19-21.

33. Leon V. Sigal, "Getting What We Need with North Korea," *Arms Control Today*, April, 2016, pp. 8-10.



military exercises, on the one hand, and “has strengthened its defense ties with the Seoul by deploying additional troops on the Peninsula, on the other.”<sup>34</sup>

### ***Three Types of Unification***

In China’s view, the approaches of unification of the Korean Peninsula include the following:

#### **Military-led (by Force)**

The Korean War has proven that the use of force is no solution for the problem of reunification, and turmoil will only produce disastrous outcomes. Both the DPRK and the ROK have clearly expressed their wishes for peaceful reunification, and major neighboring powers also clearly object to a military solution. China similarly sees poor prospects for military operations, and opposes unilateral military intervention either by the ROK or the US, be it through a surgical strike on its military and nuclear facilities or through highly intensive offenses on potential targets such as in Libya.

#### **Merger (by Annexation)**

According to various research reports,<sup>35</sup> many emergencies can occur on the Peninsula. The ROK has a much higher probability of taking advantage of such emergencies to realize reunification on its own terms since it has substantially more resources.

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34. Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), pp. 336-342.

35. Bruce Bennett, “Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse” (RAND Corporation, 2013), pp. 88-93, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR331.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR331.html) (accessed June 10, 2016).

### Step-by-step (by Peaceful Means)

The two sides on the Peninsula could gradually increase their levels of equal and peaceful economic and cultural communication, increasing confidence in and reduce hostilities against each other. On this basis, the two sides should establish a framework for peaceful and stable unification.

This approach best serves the interests of the two sides, and complies with the aspirations for peace and development of the international community and the Northeastern Asia region in particular. It is also the most viable in theory, historic practice, and reality.

It is obvious that the different ways in which the reunification could occur would bring about different risks and benefits for China.

### ***The Nuclear Issue Variable***

There are four issues relevant to unification, such as the nuclear issue, foreign policy of the unified Korea, the military forces of the US in ROK, and the prospects for China-US relations. "These four issues will be major factors that China will consider during and even long after the unification."<sup>36</sup> By far the most important is the nuclear issue.

China's positions regarding the North Korean nuclear issue include denuclearization of the Peninsula, peaceful resolution of disputes, and maintenance of peace and stability of the region. China thinks that its interests can be maintained if the issue is addressed in this fashion. Therefore, China has frequently and consistently emphasized these principles.

Some scholars used to argue that "the DPRK with nuclear weapons but not chaotic will be more in China's national interests rather than one chaotic but without nuclear weapons."<sup>37</sup> Peace and stability will

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36. Gong Keyu, "The Korea Peninsular Unification and China," *Sungkyun China Observer* 2 (2014), pp. 52-55.

37. "China, North Korea and America: Between Punxsutawney and Pyongyang," *The Economist*, February 13, 2016, p. 19.

be more relevant than the question of whether the DPRK has nuclear weapons.

But they changed their perspectives after the DPRK conducted nuclear tests for the fourth time, earlier this year. A growing number of Chinese experts began to argue that "their only treaty ally is a strategic liability rather than a strategic asset."<sup>38</sup>

They argued that China was no longer a mediator but an immediate victim since DPRK's capability of strategic deterrence had produced negative effects on China's strategic interests. Firstly, the DPRK has already achieved a sufficient capability to threaten China's national interests, and some of China's major cities and most-developed coastal areas are all in range of the DPRK's strategic weapons. Secondly, DPRK's growing deterrence capability will stimulate other regional actors to advance their military facilities and even create their own nuclear weapon systems, which will worsen China's neighboring environment. Thirdly, the DPRK's nuclear tests and military threats provided the US with excuses to input more strategic resources in Asia-Pacific region, which increased strategic pressure on China. Therefore, China persistently stands for denuclearization of the Peninsula.

China's major concern has always been what kind of measures relevant parties will take to ensure nuclear security, and how a unified Korea will address the nuclear issue. China is particularly worried about these issues if North Korea were to be annexed by South Korea.

For such an annexation to succeed, something dire must have befallen North Korea's nuclear weapons and relevant facilities. How the leaders and high officials of DPRK would react and use these nuclear facilities remains uncertain. The wanton use of nuclear weapons or the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nonstate actors would cause large casualties and cause serious pollution to neighboring environment. That would be a grave burden for China to shoulder.

Another concern for China would be whether a unified Korea would keep these nuclear weapons. A number of South Koreans

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38. Bonnie Glaser and Yun Sun, "Chinese Attitude toward Korean Unification," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 24 (2015), p. 72.

argue that the DPRK's nuclear weapons belong to the Korean nation, and South Koreans should be proud of them despite the current separation. By that logic, a unified Korea would regard nuclear weapons as valuable assets.

As such, how to deal with nuclear technologies and facilities and whether to eliminate nuclear weapons will both be issues of major concern to China for the foreseeable future. The North Korean nuclear issue will have direct and indirect impacts on Chinese national interests, with negative impacts more probable than positive ones. This is why some Chinese scholars would like to argue for maintaining the status quo rather than seeing the prospect of a reunified Korean Peninsula.

### ***External Factors Accelerating Toward Unification***

South Korean policy has shifted toward "an approach that emphasizes sanctions, deterrence, and preparation for Korean unification."<sup>39</sup> South Korean President Park Geun-hye's Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation, announced in February 2014, has sought to develop a comprehensive approach to planning for unification.<sup>40</sup> After North Korea's fourth nuclear test, President Park has changed South Korea's policy toward North Korea after Kim Jong-un's repeated provocations by broaching the possibility of "regime change." After the fifth such test, President Park even called the detonation an act of "fanatic recklessness."<sup>41</sup> Although lawmakers in South Korea's parliament raised the idea of "decapitation" operation, "the South is unlikely to initiate a

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39. Scott A. Snyder, "A U.S.-ROK-China Dialogue on North Korea's Nuclear Stalemate: Update, Review, and Assessment," (paper presented at the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) hosted a Track 1.5 meeting in New York on March 22-23, 2016.)

40. Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation, <http://www.pcup.gp.kr/main.do> (accessed September 30, 2015).

41. Kirk Spitzer, "Fanatic Recklessness: Nations Rip North Korea for Reported Nuke Test," *USA TODAY*, September 9, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/09/09/north-korea-nuclear-test/90110856/> (accessed November 30, 2016).

military attack to accelerate the unification process."<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, the decision based on "the review of the work of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea" adopted at the Seventh Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea stated that North Korea will

stand for national reunification by federal formula and will make every possible effort for peace and reunification. But if the south Korean authorities opt for a war, persisting in the unreasonable 'unification of social systems,' we will turn out in the just war to mercilessly wipe out the anti-reunification forces and achieve the historic cause of national reunification, [a] long-cherished desire of all the Koreans. We will make positive efforts to ensure durable peace on the Korean Peninsula and reunify the country by federal formula under the banners of national independence and great national unity and thus build an independent and prosperous reunified country, the common desire of all Koreans, as soon as possible. Let us all vigorously fight for the completion of the socialist cause, independent reunification of the country and victory of the cause of global independence, firmly united around the Central Committee of the WPK under the unfurled banner of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.<sup>43</sup>

After North Korea's fourth and fifth nuclear tests, one unification scenario is that an increasingly provocative and assertive Kim Jong-un, equipped with nuclear missiles, seeks greater international clout and national independence, and uses nuclear weapons to blackmail the South into unification on North Korea's terms.

But as things stand now, especially given the internal and external

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42. Dong Xiangrong: "The Adjustment and Change of South Korea's Foreign Policy after North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test," *Contemporary World*, April 2016, pp. 30-31.

43. "In his report on the review of the work of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) at its 7th Congress, Kim Jong Un stressed that to achieve the reunification of Korea is an important and urgent task facing the WPK responsible for the destiny of the country and the nation." See Kim Jong-un, "WPK's Tasks for National Reunification," *Korean Central News Agency*, May 7, 2016.

factors after the fourth and fifth tests, it is even more likely that an accelerated unification process will take place in one of the three following scenarios:

### Regime Collapse as the Result of Escalatory Sanctions

After the fourth nuclear test, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2270 with a 15-0 vote in favor of stepping up economic sanctions against North Korea, imposing mandatory inspections of all cargo going into and coming out of North Korea, ban on all financial transactions, and restrictions on the export of North Korean strategic assets and supply of aviation fuel to North Korea.<sup>44</sup>

Unilateral sanctions by some Western countries and China's call for full implementation<sup>45</sup> of the UN resolution will certainly inflict huge impact on the North Korea economy, potentially to the point that Kim Jong-un's regime collapses under extreme circumstances.<sup>46</sup> The collective defection to South Korea by 13 North Koreans working in a Chinese restaurant in April 2016 might be an early sign of a cracking regime.<sup>47</sup>

Economic sanctions have blocked North Korea's path toward reform and opening. Even if Pyongyang emulates Beijing, the end result may still be regime collapse instead of economic growth. As

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44. "Sanctions on North Korea: Big Brother," *The Economist*, March 5, 2016, p. 22.

45. The sanctions resolution still has three primary loopholes that could enable circumvention of implementation. First, determination of whether items subject to inspection under sanctions are related to nuclear weapons is a discretionary decision based on the judgement of the state conducting inspections. Second, the exemption for trade in items related to people's "livelihood" could be exploited. Third, exemptions for humanitarian assistance could also be exploited.

46. Shin Dong-ik, "The Adoption of UNSC Resolution 2270 on Sanctions against North Korea: Lessons Learned and Future Response," *IFANS Focus*, IF-2016-9E, March 28, 2016, pp. 1-3.

47. Choi Song Min, "Latest Defection of Restaurant Workers Betrays Regime Weaknesses," *Daily NK*, June 9, 2016, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=13935&catald=nk00300> (accessed October 20, 2016).

some put it, "Fearing that once opening itself to the outside world, swarming in may not be only foreign products, investment, and technologies, but also an avalanche of information which may invalidate what it has propagated, Pyongyang thinks it's best to reject reform and impose tight control over its people."<sup>48</sup>

### Coup D'état

In a little over four years of leadership from his father's sudden death to his coronation at the Seventh Party Congress, Kim Jong-un had launched a sweeping reshuffle in which more than 70 senior officials were executed, demoted, or sidelined — most notable among them was his uncle-in-law Jang Song-thaek. His quick and reckless move has left many outside observers concerned with the increasing possibility of internal rebellion.

A Pyongyang watcher observes, "In such a highly-tense environment of power struggle, some elites within the regime, fearing for their own security, might initiate a preemptive rebellion, coup d'état, or assassination against Kim Jong-un, to preserve themselves, which might subsequently lead to great upheaval and collapse." Others think it is possible that "the erratic nature of and a deep sense of insecurity within the authoritarian regime usually create fear among its followers. Cruel and bloody power struggles are pervasive, increasing the possibility of coup d'état."<sup>49</sup>

### Concerns over Kim Jong-un's Health

Kim's health has always been a subject of much speculation. Over the past four years, Kim Jong-un has put on much weight. "Standing at 171cm, he weighs more than 130kg."<sup>50</sup> At the Seventh Party Congress,

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48. Deng Yuwen, "The Possibility of Collapse of North Korea and the Way," *Lianhe Zaobao*, April 30, 2016.

49. *Ibid.*

50. "Kim Jong-un 'Put on 30 kg Over 5 Years'," *Chosun Ilbo*, September 30, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/09/30/2015093000827](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/09/30/2015093000827).

after speaking for a little over one hour, Kim's body began to sway, his voice increasingly coarse. Some speculate that "the corpulent Kim is prone to cardiac [arrest], diabetes, arthrolithiasis, apoplexy, and other diseases."<sup>51</sup>

With poor sanitation and health infrastructure, the outbreak of communicable and infectious disease may prove to be deadly for North Koreans. In the case of Ebola and MERS, Pyongyang panicked to the point of closing its borders. In addition, Pyongyang is also vulnerable to natural disasters, such as floods and insect infestation.

### ***External Factors Decelerating Unification***

Early unification is only remotely possible if Kim Jong-un decides to preserve his rule with nuclear weapons, which may prolong the rivalry between the two Koreas.

Another scenario is a decelerated process due to North Korean dissatisfaction with South Korea.

Despite the role that the ROK might try to play, deceleration is also highly likely. The confrontation between the DPRK and the ROK is over which nation truly wields sovereignty on the Korean Peninsula. Hence, their competition is by nature a zero sum game; neither nation can tolerate the other side. What's more, after separation of more than half a century, the two have respectively established national frameworks with totally different ideologies, political and economic systems and social values. Not only the two political entities are conflicting against each other, but also the people of the two sides have little hope of coexisting peacefully.

The two sides might be able to overcome some of the differences in political, economic and social systems in the unification via assistance by neighboring countries, but they would certainly encounter

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html (accessed November 30, 2016).

51. "Kim Jong-un Wrinkle or Back of the Head as a Signal of Poor Health," *Yonhap News Agency*, August 12, 2015, <http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/newpgm/9908000000.html?cid=ACK20150812002200881> (accessed November 30, 2016).



problems in engagements and integrations. After all, the two have had different ways of thinking and ideologies for much too long, which is always an obstacle in building confidence.

### ***One More Variable***

In China's view, another uncertain external factor is the U.S. Election and its aftermath.

North Korea has already said that, "Obama is trying hard to deny the DPRK's strategic position as a legitimate nuclear weapons state but it is as foolish an act as trying to eclipse the sun with a palm. It is foolhardy for the Obama group to get itself busy while crying out for the senseless sanctions ballad even today when its 'strategic patience' policy became totally bankrupt and it is nearing the end of its tenure."<sup>52</sup> It seems North Korea is already trying to face the new president of the United States.

On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump won the presidency with 306 electoral votes to the 232 received by Clinton and he "promised to be a president to all Americans."<sup>53</sup>

According to previous experience, it will take at least three to six months for the new American administration to review and reevaluate the policy of the previous administration, and another three to six months to draft new policy. That is to say that, in the coming months, the U.S. will not have a serious policy toward Peninsular issues. On the other hand, North Korea will expectedly take various forms of provocations so as to increase their bargaining chips. North Korea will also likely reach out with olive branches since Kim Jong-un has already consolidated his power base.

On the U.S. side, three potential changes are worthy of attention. The first should be the personal style of the new president including

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52. "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Refutes Obama's 'Statement' against Nuclear Warheads Explosive Test," *Korean Central News Agency*, September 11, 2016.

53. Darcy Oliver, "It is time for us to come together: Trump strikes conciliatory tone in victory speech," *Business Insider*, November 9, 2016.

Donald Trump's willingness to resolve issues, the change of officials on some of key positions, and a change towards overall South Korean policy.

But it is very unlikely that the incoming American administration will give up the cause of de-nuclearization regardless of their party affiliation. Moreover, the United States will likely adhere to a set of goals consistent with the past. The U.S. will not recognize North Korea's status as a nuclear power; will not compensate North Korea's provocations; will not advance its relations with North Korea without improvements in North-South relations; will not tolerate provocations and threats by North Korea against its neighbors; and will strengthen policy coordination and military cooperation with its allies including South Korea and Japan.

Currently, some argue that "there appears to be growing debate in Washington about the need for direct negotiations with the North,"<sup>54</sup> while others opine that all relevant parties should jointly work for North Korea's regime change, or to initiate a unification led by South Korea. If so, North Korea's nuclear issues would be resolved for good.

## Conclusion

It has been nearly 70 years since the division of the Korean Peninsula. The two Koreas have worked persistently for reunification. They have still made great strides towards reunification despite huge differences between the two in the means and ends for achieving reunification and the strategic competition of major powers behind the two parties.

China expects a Korean Peninsula free of war, turmoil, dramatic upheavals and nuclear weapons, and supports gradual and peaceful reunification instead of reunification through radical and/or military means.

China has been a consistent supporter of the reunification of the Peninsula. China does not think that reunification itself is a problem,

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54. *Asan Korea Perspective* 1, no. 18 (2016).

but how it will occur, when, at what cost, and whether the Korean people can live a better life after reunification. China does have a say regarding the reunification, but will never dominate the process through forcing either the timing or the means by which reunification is to take place.

Unfortunately, the West has interpreted China's response as too simple and diplomatic since China has not provided clear and concrete answers of their own. Western policy-watchers have argued that China's real policy is to maintain the status quo on the Peninsula.

It is China's growing concern that Washington and Seoul are trying to press Pyongyang to the point of collapse with stepped-up sanctions on the one hand while dominating the unification process on Seoul's terms.

Risks and uncertainties within Kim Jong-un's regime are growing. Multiple tests cannot help Pyongyang acquire the status of a nuclear state, and unification via North Korean attempts for nuclear coercion would be a suicidal act for Pyongyang. All major stakeholders, China and South Korea in particular, must adequately prepare themselves for an accelerating unification process given Pyongyang's nuclear tests and the subsequent developments.

As the biggest stakeholder in the process, the ROK should consider China's major concerns regarding the reunification. It should also reflect on lessons from its history and jointly work with other parties for a more peaceful and stable regional order.

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