

Policy Forum 05-53A: Korea's Slow-Motion Reunification

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By John Feffer

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I. Introduction

John Feffer, author of "North Korea, South Korea," and a contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus, writes: "It's time for the United States to stop fantasizing about an imminent North Korean collapse. Let's support instead the Korean reunification happening right before our eyes."

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II. Essay by John Feffer

- Korea's Slow-Motion Reunification
by John Feffer

Something extraordinary is happening in Korea, and Washington appears to be paying no attention. The two Koreas have plunged headlong in to unknown territory: reunification. For 50 years, aside from the occasional defector, it was impossible to cross the demilitarized zone dividing the Korean Peninsula.

Today a bus leaves the capital of South Korea every day to bring workers to an industrial complex just north of the DMZ. There, at the Kaesong complex, North and South Koreans labor together at new factories that produce kitchenware and clothing. South Korea has stretched electricity lines across the DMZ to power the facilities and laid an optical cable for direct phone calls. Raw materials and finished products are passing back and forth along what was once considered a major invasion route.

True, the heavily militarized DMZ that separates the two Koreas is still there. North Korea hasn't given up its nuclear weapons. The Bush administration still considers North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il, a disreputable negotiating partner and Pyongyang an "outpost of tyranny." North Korea recently labeled Vice President Dick Cheney a "bloodthirsty beast."

But despite this inauspicious atmosphere, the two Koreas have departed significantly from business as usual with their slow-motion reunification. As South Korea's president, Roh Moo Hyun, meets this week with President Bush, the fate of the Korean Peninsula hangs precariously between war and peace. The two leaders see peninsular politics very differently.

Bush has refused to negotiate seriously with North Korea in the hopes that it will collapse just as East Germany or the Soviet Union did. Roh's government is making the case for a peace agreement that pairs economic incentives with nuclear disarmament. South Korea has beefed up engagement efforts while the United States continues its drift toward confrontation.

The clashing US and South Korean approaches can be explained by the way they view an ideal reunification process. The way communist states collapsed in Europe led Americans to expect that states reunify with a bang, not a whisper.

According to conventional wisdom, German reunification started with the Berlin Wall's collapse and was cemented by elections and mass celebrations. Koreans don't want a bang. Besides, the German experience turned out to be much more expensive than anyone expected. When translated into the Korean context, it would cost more than Seoul could afford. A "big bang" collapse of North Korea would unleash an economic shock, a potential outflow of refugees, and an uncertain future for an unknown number of weapons of mass destruction.

Because of its fear of the "big bang," South Korea would prefer a gradual phasing in of reunification instead of a single, explosive event. Indeed, the leaders of both Koreas speak of reunification as a decades-long project that will only gradually bridge the large economic, political, and cultural gaps between their countries. That's what happened in the German case: dozens of years of exchanges and economic cooperation before reunification became a possibility.

South Korea's President Roh will likely try to convey this pragmatic perspective to Bush, arguing that better economic relations between the North and South would improve the peninsula's investment climate, which would be good news for both South Korean and US business. Perhaps he will even show Bush pictures of the shiny new Kaesong factories as evidence of the North-South reunification already taking root and that Kim Jong Il is more economically sensible than he is usually given credit for.

Here's the rub: Korea's fragile and all-too-reversible reunification depends on the United States. Major foreign investors, corporations, banks, and multilateral financial institutions await détente between Washington and Pyongyang before pouring money into the infrastructure that could support a gradually reunified peninsula. In the meantime, the Kaesong project will not truly get off the ground until tariff reductions make its products competitive in large consumer markets like the United States.

The Bush administration should consider cutting the tariff for goods made at Kaesong as a good will gesture to jump-start the stalled nuclear talks. Kaesong imports would make nary a dent on the already huge US trade deficit. But the boost to inter-Korean relations and potentially to the negotiations to denuclearize the peninsula would be immeasurable.

It's time for the United States to stop fantasizing about an imminent North Korean collapse. Let's support instead the Korean reunification happening right before our eyes.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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