



Policy Forum 97-18: Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification



The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 97-18: Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification", NAPSNet Policy Forum, August 22, 1997, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/napsnet-forum-9-prospects-and-implications-of-korean-unification/>

NAPSNet Forum #9 -- Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification

NAPSNet Forum #9 -- Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification

Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

"Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification"

#9 -- August 22, 1997

The is intended to provide expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia, and an opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis. The Forum is open to all participants of the [Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network \(NAPSNet\)](#) . As always, NAPSNet invites your responses to this report. Please see ["NAPSNet Invites Your Responses,"](#) below, and send your responses to the NAPSNet Coordinator at: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org .

PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF KOREAN UNIFICATION

Essay by William M. Drennan

CONTENTS:

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by William M. Drennan](#)

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Geostrategic Context](#)
- [3. The U.S. and the Korean peninsula](#)
- [4. Unification Scenarios](#)
- [5. Unification Challenges](#)
- [6. Questions for Policy](#)
- [7. Conclusion](#)
- [8. Endnotes](#)

[III. NAPSNet Invites Your Responses](#)

PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF KOREAN UNIFICATION

I. Introduction

The following essay, "Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification," was written by Colonel William M. Drennan, USAF, presently Senior Military Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University in Washington DC. Colonel Drennan is an Asian specialist, with primary emphasis on Korean issues. His previous positions include professor at the National War College; Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations; and Chief of Strategy and Policy, J-5, US Forces Korea. He has served in the White House and the Pentagon and has published works on Korean international and domestic politics. The following essay assesses current views on the prospects of Korean unification, taking issue with both the "hard" and "soft" landing scenarios often taken to comprise the only possible outcomes of contemporary circumstances.

Colonel Drennan's essay continues discussion of the prospects for peace on the Korean peninsula begun in previous NAPSNet Policy Forums . The views expressed and arguments made in the following essay are those of the author. NAPSNet presents the essay as received, except for minor editing. Following the essay, the section ["NAPSNet Invites Your Responses"](#) provides information on how you can respond and participate in the online forum.

II. Essay by William M. Drennan

PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF KOREAN UNIFICATION

by William M. Drennan¹

1. Introduction

The Korea peninsula has long been an area where major power interests have collided. Since the mid-19th century Korea has lived under Chinese suzerainty, Japanese colonial rule, American and Soviet military occupation, and finally as a divided nation. During this period, China, Japan, Russia and the United States have all fought over (and in) Korea. As a result of Cold War antagonisms, the temporary division of Korea for the purpose of disarming remnants of the Imperial Japanese Army took on a permanence it was never intended to have. With the establishment in 1948 of the Republic of Korea (ROK -- South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK -- North Korea), nearly 1300 years of national unity came to an end. Now, as the 20th century draws to a close, the future of the Korean peninsula is once again a fundamental geostrategic question facing the countries with a stake in Northeast Asia.

Will Korea be made whole again, and if so, when and how? Or will the present division continue, perpetuating a de facto "Two Kingdoms" era, an era marked by irreconcilable differences between the two Koreas even as major power competition over the peninsula has been moderated? How will the U.S. affect, and in turn, be affected by, the future of the peninsula? This paper examines the possible implications of Korean unification, and suggests an alternative to the widely discussed "soft" and "hard" landings in order to enhance prospects for maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula and in the region.

Despite the desire of people on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone (especially separated families) to end the division of the peninsula, all efforts to reunify the country have foundered: neither war nor diplomacy has succeeded in putting Korea back together again.

The DPRK, never self-reliant despite the overblown claims of *juche* ideology, nonetheless was able for years to surpass the ROK economically. Now, in the midst of one of the most economically vibrant regions in the world, the North's systemic shortcomings are so severe that the regime is incapable of providing the barest essentials to the population.

With widespread malnutrition and even starvation, North Korea's "own style of socialism" is more than a failure -- it is a disaster. The extent of North Korea's economic decline is striking. The loss of major power sponsors, combined with the structural deficiencies of its command economy and a series of natural disasters, have led to seven straight years of economic retraction, with no end in sight.² The North's military forces -- large, heavily armed, and forward deployed near the DMZ -- continue to pose a serious threat to ROK and U.S. forces, but the larger reality is that in virtually every area of competition save that of the military, the South, with the strong backing of the U.S., has emerged as the clear winner in its rivalry with the North.

For years an economic ward of the U.S. following the devastation of the Korean War, South Korea has since vaulted to the ranks of the world's leading industrial nations.³ The ROK's economic performance since the mid-1960s is the envy of much of the world, and the resulting growth of the middle class has accelerated the pace of democratization as well. As raucous as it may seem to outsiders, the current South Korean political scene is relatively calm, certainly in comparison to the turmoil and violence of the first forty years of the Republic.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s tensions on the peninsula temporarily eased as both U.S. and ROK officials engaged DPRK counterparts in bilateral diplomatic dialogues. North Korean recalcitrance over its suspected nuclear weapons program, however, quickly stifled any new-found optimism. Pyongyang's threat -- in response to warnings of economic sanctions and open speculation about preemptive strikes against its nuclear sites -- to turn Seoul into "a sea of fire" seemed to confirm that

the Korean peninsula remained locked in a Cold War time warp. By the spring of 1994, the confrontation over North Korea's nuclear weapons program made war a distinct possibility.⁴

The immediate crisis eased when former president Carter's visit with Kim Il-sung gave the stalemated U.S.-DPRK nuclear talks renewed impetus, culminating in the signing of "The Agreed Framework Between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" in October 1994. With the establishment of the multinational Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, and with all parties living up to their obligations (despite the strains caused by the September 1996 submarine incident) the focus of international attention has shifted from the nuclear confrontation and talk of war to the convening of Four Party peace talks and to continued speculation about the staying power of the DPRK and the prospects of unification.

2. Geostrategic Context

Of course, the U.S. brokered nuclear agreement would not have been possible without the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the other major regional powers. For the first time since the "opening" of Korea to the outside world in the 1870s, the intersection of major power interests on the Korean peninsula has not meant a clash of interests. How long this condition will last is anyone's guess. But it is clear that major power interests concerning the Korean peninsula in the late 1990s include the following:

- Avoiding a renewal of the Korean War
- Preserving peace and stability on the peninsula
- Fostering continued economic growth
- Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction
- Preventing the peninsula from being ruled by a hostile government
- Preventing Korea from being dominated by, or aligned with, a hostile power

This listing is compatible with long-standing U.S. interests in the region, interests that have remained remarkably consistent since the U.S. emerged as a Pacific power a century ago.⁵ These include preventing the rise of a hostile hegemon on the Asian mainland, ensuring freedom of navigation and open sea lines of communication, and maintaining access to open markets. In support of these interests, the U.S. has had significant military forces in (or fighting their way back into) the East Asia Pacific region since the Spanish-American War in 1898 -- the U.S. fought three major wars in the region between 1941 and 1973 and currently has about 100,000 military personnel deployed in the region, including 37,000 in South Korea.

3. The U.S. and the Korean peninsula

The U.S. has consistently reaffirmed that peace and stability on the Korean peninsula are central to the security of Northeast Asia, which in turn is vital to the security of the U.S., and that U.S. forces will remain in South Korea as long as they are wanted and needed.⁶ The U.S. has supported ROK diplomacy, particularly in its dealings with former adversaries as well as with the DPRK, and has endorsed peaceful unification on terms acceptable to the Korean people.⁷

To give teeth to its security commitment under the 1954 U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, the U.S. has extended its nuclear umbrella to cover South Korea, stations substantial conventional combat power in the ROK, and heads both the United Nations Command (with the mission of Armistice maintenance) and the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (responsible for deterrence and defense.) Deterrence has worked remarkably well since 1953, but a credible U.S. military presence on the peninsula and in the region remains essential if deterrence is to continue to hold in the future.

It has become increasingly clear, however, that while deterrence remains absolutely necessary, it is no longer sufficient by itself to address the evolving, multifaceted threat posed by North Korea in the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War and the erosion of North Korean power, the equilibrium that has long characterized the security situation on the Korean peninsula has begun to shift. For years following the cease-fire, the U.S. had to contend, in macro terms, with South Korean weakness and North Korean strength. Today that relationship is reversed, and while the military instrument is still indispensable to deter any latent tendency on the part of the North's leadership to try to unite the peninsula via military conquest, conventional deterrence is of much less utility in countering the additional threats posed by North Korean weapons of mass destruction and by the dangers inherent in the deterioration of the North's economy. The challenge for the U.S. is to formulate policy sufficient to cope with a more comprehensive threat and to prepare for unification of the peninsula, whenever and however it occurs.

4. Unification Scenarios

Given the current "correlation of forces," as well as trends, on the peninsula -- both of which are decidedly in the South's favor -- unification under the North's terms is no longer a realistic possibility. Speculation regarding the fate of North Korea, therefore, has tended to center on (variations of) two broad alternatives -- a soft landing and a hard landing. The central dilemma is that under present and foreseeable circumstances the more desirable outcome -- a soft landing -- is highly unlikely, and the least desirable outcome -- a hard landing -- is highly destabilizing. An examination of the problems inherent in each suggest that an alternative needs to be found to manage the Korea conundrum.

Soft Landing : The term "soft landing" is generally taken to mean that Korea is reunited by mutual agreement between the South and the North. Implicit in this scenario is that unification results from decisions reached by pragmatic negotiators motivated by a common desire to end the artificial division of the nation.

Such an outcome is devoutly to be wished for. However, there is little in the Korean political tradition, the Korean approach to negotiations, or the history of episodic South-North interaction to suggest that a political compromise ending division is likely anytime soon.

The two Koreas, to be sure, have had direct discussions in the past. On rare occasions the two sides have even crafted bilateral agreements, most recently following a series of prime ministerial meetings in 1991. The signing of the "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the North and South" and the "Joint Declarations of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" in early 1992 raised hopes that a new era of cooperation had replaced confrontation. These hopes were soon dashed. More than five years later the accords have yet to be implemented (for reasons having as much to do with the inherent "Korean-ness" of the stand-off as they do with residual Cold War antagonisms.)

The belief that negotiators from the South and the North will strike a compromise agreement to

reunify the peninsula rests more on hope than experience. Koreans have a well-deserved reputation as extremely tough negotiators, even in cases where the stakes are relatively low and the opposing positions are not far apart.⁸ A major impediment to a negotiated settlement is that in Korean culture, compromise is viewed as dereliction of duty, a retreat from morality, treachery, even treason.⁹ Consequently, each side approaches negotiations as a zero-sum game; unless and until one side is convinced that continued resistance is more painful than agreement, negotiations will remain stalemated.¹⁰

Under current conditions, neither the South nor the North has a sufficiently strong inducement -- positive or negative -- to compromise. A negotiated "soft landing" implies some form of power sharing. But with its security underwritten by the U.S. and the perception that time on its side, South Korean leaders have little incentive to settle for less than the total victory that many assume will eventually be theirs. In Pyongyang, even the prospect of widespread famine has not been enough to induce compromise, with the elite more concerned about their future in a united Korea than they are about the suffering of the people. To be sure, the food crisis has forced Pyongyang to swallow some of its pride and request international assistance. But, while the North desperately needs food aid, it remains as hostile as ever to a compromise settlement with the South. Propaganda notwithstanding, regime survival has replaced unification as the real imperative for Pyongyang's top leadership, an imperative made all the more compelling by the fate of South Korea's two most recent past presidents

Despite recent progress in democratization, there are still few constraints on South Korean politics. The cases of Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo demonstrate that, just as when they occupied the executive mansion, what the Blue House gives the Blue House can take away, even under a democratically elected civilian government. Shielded for almost three years by President Kim Young Sam from demands for justice, the two former presidents were suddenly arrested, tried and convicted under a "special law to punish" mandated by President Kim when he found it politically expedient to do so.¹¹ While suspicious of both President Kim's motives and the constitutionality of the action against them, a large majority of South Koreans nonetheless approve of the punishment of the two former presidents.

And yet, the imprisoning of Chun and Roh illustrates an enduring feature of South Korean politics with clear implications for a negotiated settlement: those who lose political power potentially lose far more than income or status (as distressing as that may be in extraordinarily status-conscious South Korea); they may find themselves defenseless against political enemies in a system where victors have not hesitated to use the full resources of the state against their opponents. The North Korean leadership surely understands the potential implications for them of South Korean enthusiasm for "setting history straight." While President Kim speaks reassuringly of achieving unification through reconciliation and cooperation,¹² other South Korean officials talk privately of retribution and war crimes tribunals once they are in possession of the territory and population of the DPRK -- and not without justification, one hastens to add.¹³ Given the persistence of "grudge politics" in South Korea, the Northern elite would likely find ROK assurances of amnesty, immunity, pardons, or other guarantees of personal security less than convincing, heightening the probability that they will cling to power rather than entrust their futures to the vicissitudes of South Korean politics following a "soft landing."

Hard Landing : The term "hard landing" is generally taken to mean that unification results from the collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime, the Kim Il-song system, and/or the North Korean state, leading to the DPRK's absorption by the ROK. Considering the dire straits in which the North finds itself, a hard landing may well be the most likely outcome.¹⁴ Short of a renewal of war, it is certainly the least desirable. To be sure, the odious nature of the North Korean system makes the temptation to

want to push it over the edge hard to resist: the world, and certainly the Korean people, would be better off without it. But the dangers of such a policy are real, and they should not be minimized or assumed away.¹⁵ The potential for instability and violence following a collapse is high, with no guarantee that it would not spill over the DMZ or the borders with China and Russia.

Moreover, the requirement to absorb the North following a collapse -- even if it is not accompanied by violence -- could well prove to be more than the South could handle, stalling its economic engine and overwhelming its fragile democracy. Of course, the South may not have any choice -- North Korea could go the way of Romania, and Seoul urgently needs to accelerate preparations for such an outcome. But preparing for collapse and seeking collapse are two very different propositions: the former is prudent; the latter potentially dangerous. The Korean People's Army (or elements thereof), rather than ending with a whimper like the remnants of the Yi dynasty military after 1907,¹⁶ might decide to end with a bang, emulating the fanaticism of the Imperial Japanese Army units that fought to the rather than surrender, long after there was any hope of staving off defeat in World War II.

5. Unification Challenges

Even without an "I die -- you die -- we all die" lashing out by the KPA,¹⁷ unification by absorption following a "hard landing" by the North would be more difficult than the Federal Republic of Germany's absorption of the former German Democratic Republic. The disparity in the two Koreas' economic performance is only one reason why the German unification model is of limited utility in analyzing the challenge of Korean unification. West Germany's problems integrating the East socially and politically as well as economically -- difficult though they have been -- are relatively minor compared to what the ROK potentially faces in consolidating the peninsula.¹⁸

To begin with the most obvious difference, unlike West Germany, South Korea was attacked by, and suffered millions of casualties at the hands of, its communist rival. North Korea has been isolated from the outside world to an extent that East Germany never came close to experiencing. In addition, the North Korean population has for decades been subjected to the most virulent propaganda savaging the leadership of the other half of the divided country, fed a steady diet of *juche* ideology, and compelled to worship at the alter of "Kimilsung-ism." Unlike the two Koreas, value integration between the people of the two Germanys had begun years before the government of the FRG was faced with the requirement for structural integration of the East following unification.¹⁹

The situation on the Korean peninsula is exactly the opposite -- inter-Korean relations have been marked by value disintegration, such that after decades of near total estrangement the two Koreas may find that they have little left in common other than language.²⁰ Anecdotal evidence suggests that, while the concept of unification continues to have a strong emotional appeal among South Koreans, enthusiasm wanes quickly once timing and cost factors are considered.²¹ In particular, large numbers of the affluent younger generation in South Korea, with only tenuous ties to North Korea,²² reportedly want to avoid the turbulence of unification.²³ In the event of a collapse, Seoul would be faced with the requirement for simultaneous value and structural integration, a task sufficiently daunting to give pause even to those South Koreans who advocate crushing the North.

As impressive as the ROK's economic performance has been for the last quarter century, South Korea is not as well positioned to bear the costs of unification as was West Germany.²⁴ Whereas the West German population is four times that of the East, the South Korean population is only twice that of the North, meaning the average South Korean will have to shoulder a heavier economic burden than his West German counterpart. While the South would undoubtedly eschew some of the

policies adopted by West Germany (such as a one-for-one currency exchange), estimates of the cost of Korean unification still range from 3 to 10 percent of Gross National Product for a decade or more, with the total amount running anywhere from US\$130 billion to over \$2 trillion dollars.²⁵ As formidable as they may be, however, the financial costs are hardly the only difficulties associated with Korean unification.

Administration of the North . The myriad challenges the ROK government will face administering the North following a hard landing include establishing a functioning governmental structure, demobilizing all (or significant portions) of the Korean People's Army, controlling military equipment and armaments (including weapons of mass destruction), feeding the population, treating disease, and preventing mass migration. Only the ROK military has the resources to handle such an undertaking, but the military is neither organized nor trained for administration and pacification on such a vast scale. Even absent residual violence spawned by a collapse, martial law may be necessary to maintain order. In any case, while Seoul may have no alternative but to turn to the military, its involvement in the governance of the North would reinsert the military into politics to a significant degree, and could test the extent to which civilian control of the military has taken root in the ROK.²⁶

Economic development . The costs of unification, the imperative to prevent hordes of impoverished refugees from moving south,²⁷ and the need to create jobs on the one hand, coupled with an abundance of natural resources and an industrious, disciplined, even docile, Northern work force on the other hand, would likely convince the ROK government that it has no alternative to giving the chaebol -- South Korea's huge, family-owned conglomerates -- a green light to expand into the North, perhaps the last great economic frontier open to them.²⁸ To preclude economic development from mutating into economic exploitation, in which North Korean workers compete against South Korea's large, organized, volatile, and well-paid labor force,²⁹ requires breaking the government-conglomerate linkage that has existed since the earliest days of the Republic. South Korean workers are unlikely to relinquish the benefits won in the bitter labor disputes since the late 1980s without a struggle. Moreover, as the strikes following the December 1996 passage of controversial new labor laws showed, there is still no "labor party" in South Korea,³⁰ leaving workers and unions little recourse but to strike. Injecting an unorganized, desperate, and exploitable labor pool into the job market could push the combustible chaebol-worker mix to critical mass.

Social and political integration . Korea for centuries has been plagued by bitter regional animosities, particularly between the southwestern Honam and southeastern Yongnam regions in South Korea.³¹ The seeds of a potentially even more intractable regional rivalry between the impoverished, defeated North and the rich, victorious South have already been planted. Northerners for decades have been fed a steady diet of propaganda excoriating the South as a land of "puppets" led by "collaborationist, flunkeyist, nation-selling traitors" in the pocket of American "imperialists." In addition, the distinction Southerners have drawn between the North Korean state and the North Korean people may be eroding, replaced by suspicions about the people's complicity with the hated regime in Pyongyang.³² The indifference and prejudice shown the 600 or so defectors currently living in the South hardly bodes well for the prospects of reconciliation and the social, economic and political integration of 23 million after a hard landing.³³

Following unification, would a victorious South extend the full benefits of citizenship to the population of its former adversary? To do so would require a greater degree of compassion and sense of fair play than has usually been evident in Korean politics. Furthermore, since the demise of the Yi dynasty, Northerners have known only Japanese colonization, Soviet occupation, war, and the Kim Il-sung system. Not one North Korean has experienced even a single day of freedom, and it is hard to imagine a population less well prepared for the rights and responsibilities of life in a

democracy. Failure to extend full citizenship expeditiously, however, would be counterproductive to national reconciliation, would likely further alienate an dispirited, wary population, and carries with it the potential for political unrest.³⁴

With a population twice that of the North and firm control over the levers of power, the South would seem to be in position following unification to dominate the peninsula politically well into the future. On the surface, then, there would seem to be little risk in incorporating Northerners quickly into the Korean polity. However, there is a "nightmare scenario" that might give even the most ardent democrat in the South second thoughts. Once enfranchised, were North Koreans to band together politically, replicating the solidarity of the Honam region of South Korea -- becoming one huge, regionally based "faction" -- they could have the numbers to dominate politically, especially in light of Southerners' propensity to fragment politically along provincial lines. The emergence of a charismatic leader, a "favorite son" personifying North Korean identity, aspirations, and resentments, and capable of garnering support similar to that enjoyed by Kim Dae Jung among Honam natives³⁵ could put Southern devotion to democracy to the test. Would Southerners, having "won" the Korean Cold War, passively accept "defeat" via the ballot box?³⁶

6. Questions for Policy

The experience of a decade or two of democratization in the South may not be sufficient to overcome centuries-old political traditions. What plans has the ROK government made for the administration of the North following unification? Would the ROK national security apparatus be able to cope adequately with civil unrest? Would the South's middle class, as it has in the past, support military intervention if prosperity were threatened?

What role, if any, would international organizations such as United Nations agencies play in administering the territory of the North and providing relief to the people? What would be the roles of the U.S.-led United Nations Command and Combined Forces Command? Would U.S. forces deploy along with ROK forces north of the DMZ after unification? What would be the mission? Would China and/or Russia insist on a military presence as well?

Satisfactory answers to these and other questions need to be worked out in advance if the unification is to be kept manageable. South Korean policy toward the North, however, has tended to vacillate,³⁷ and as a consequence, contingency planning and coordination between Seoul and Washington on these issues are reportedly only in the initial stages.³⁸

Muddling Through . It is difficult to look at North Korea -- its founding father, the self-styled Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, dead; his heir, Kim Jong-il, still consolidating power in his own hands more than three years after the elder Kim's death; its economy collapsing; the population ill-fed at best and starving at worst -- and not conclude that its days are numbered. And yet predictions of North Korea's imminent demise may be premature. North Korea has already proven to be more resilient than many had assumed, and the possibility that it might be able to continue to muddle cannot be dismissed. A combination of the regime's instinct for self-preservation; the population's capacity to endure extreme hardship and bad government; concern in the South over the economic, social and political costs of absorbing a failed state; the shared interest of the major powers and South Korea in peninsula and regional stability; and the potential for increased international trade and aid might be sufficient to keep the North sputtering along until reforms -- initiated by the current or a successor regime -- begin to close the economic gap between the two Koreas.³⁹

U.S. Policy . U.S. policy toward North Korea is designed to "build a durable peace on the peninsula as a key contributor to regional stability and to facilitate progress by the Korean people ... toward

national reunification."⁴⁰ In order to foster stability and promote a process of change that is manageable and peaceful, the U.S. has called for building positive relations that complement and move beyond deterrence.⁴¹

The U.S. objective is neither to prop up the regime or system in the North, nor to seek its collapse;⁴² rather, the U.S. shares South Korea's stated goal of seeking a manageable and peaceful process of change resulting in a reunified peninsula that contributes to peace and stability in the region. Those who suspect that the U.S. has adopted a "Two Korea" policy confuse means with ends. U.S. engagement of North Korea does not seek to perpetuate the division of the peninsula, nor will the U.S. allow its limited dealings with North Korea to get in front of South-North relations.⁴³ American policy is based on an assessment that present conditions are not conducive to achieving the preferred outcome on the peninsula -- a negotiated settlement on terms acceptable to Koreans on both sides of the DMZ. Therefore, the objective of U.S. engagement of North Korea is to assist in changing conditions on the peninsula so that reconciliation and reunification can proceed. The U.S. approach is consistent with its "active and cooperative role in support" of the Four Party talks' objective of initiating a process "aimed at achieving a permanent peace agreement" formally ending the Korean War.⁴⁴

No one knows how long it will take the two Koreas to establish a level of trust sufficient to arrive at a permanent peace agreement and ultimately a negotiated end to division, or even if such settlements are possible, but as long as deterrence and the Agreed Framework hold, there are huge advantages to a carefully managed joint approach by the U.S. and South Korea, especially in light of the alternatives.

7. Conclusion

The history of failed South-North interaction strongly suggests that the traditional Korean approach to negotiations makes a compromise solution to national division a remote possibility. A negotiated settlement will likely require more than a change in regimes in Pyongyang. It will require a fundamental alteration in political habit patterns on both sides of the DMZ.

That is not to say that the U.S. should abandon efforts to facilitate South-North dialogue; clearly, talking is better than fighting, and dialogue could help lower the level of suspicion that currently exists, even if it doesn't lead to dramatic breakthrough agreements. But, in light of current circumstances on the Korean peninsula, a negotiated end to national division resulting from such dialogue is not yet a realistic prospect. The North Korean elite will likely continue to view the perpetuation of the status quo as a rational -- indeed, a "moral" -- position, especially when they contemplate their future following a negotiated settlement

In all likelihood, Korean unification will not unfold as we would wish; the South may have no choice but to react to the collapse of the North, placing severe, possibly intolerable, stresses on the ROK political and economic system. U.S. and South Korean policy needs to continue to be guided by the knowledge that quick reunification benefits no one -- not the U.S., the ROK, or the DPRK, nor the other major players in the region -- China, Japan, and Russia.

The best -- maybe the only -- antidote against an unstable, undemocratic, reunified Korea resulting from unification is time. The South needs time for democracy's roots to sink deeper, for a civil society's political institutions to mature, and for the government and people to prepare for the historic task of consolidating the nation. The North needs time to open up, reform, and accustom itself to life as a more normal member of the international community. Koreans on both sides of the DMZ need time to resolve the legacy of over half a century of bitter division and rivalry.

If the history of South-North relations is any guide, Koreans, by themselves, are unlikely to be able to marshal the political, diplomatic, economic, and psychological resources necessary to bridge the huge chasm separating them. As the concept of the Four Party Talks suggests, the cooperation and assistance of major regional powers, especially the U.S., will almost certainly be essential.⁴⁵

In any case, while no outsider can impose a unification solution on Korea -- and would be foolish to try -- the major powers have significant stakes in the future of Korea, and are likely to see the fate of the peninsula as too important to be left for the Koreans alone to resolve. The major powers as well as the two Koreas need to capitalize on the current unprecedented period of stability and convergence of major power interests so that when unification does occur, it is via a process that enhances rather than hazards peace and stability on the peninsula and in the region.

8. Endnotes

1 The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent the positions of any element of the U.S. government.

2 Percentage changes in North Korea's Gross Domestic Product through 1996 are as follows:

Year % GDP growth 1990 - 3.7 1991 - 5.1 1992 - 7.7 1993 - 4.2 1994 - 1.8 1995 - 4.6 1996 - 3.7

[Source: The Bank of Korea]

3 Currently the eleventh largest economy in the world, the ROK joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1996, the second Asian nation to be admitted (Japan was the first.)

4 Michael R. Gordon, "North Korea's Huge Military Spurs New Strategy in South," New York Times 6 Feb. 1994: A1; Michael R. Gordon, "Team Confirms North Koreans Extracted Rods," New York Times 20 May 1994: A9; Douglas Jehl, "U.S. is Pressing Sanctions for North Korea," New York Times 11 Jun. 1994: 7.

5 Norman D. Levin, "US Interests in Korean Security in the Post-Cold War World," Asian Flashpoint: Security and the Korean Peninsula, ed. Andrew Mack (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1993) 21-28. Japanese as well as U.S. interests are largely unchanged from the Cold War years (see, for example, Nathan White, "Japan's Security Interests in Korea," Asian Survey 16.4 (1976): 300.) It is the post-Cold War embrace of these interests by China and Russia that has led to the dramatic lowering of major power tension regarding the Korean peninsula.

6 See the joint communiqués issued at the conclusion of the annual U.S.-ROK security consultative meetings, as well as U.S. presidential statements during U.S.-ROK summit meetings over the years.

7 See President Clinton's address to the ROK National Assembly on 10 Jul. 1993. Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. William J. Clinton 1993, Book I--January 20 to July 31, 1993. (Washington: GPO, 1994): 1054.

8 Regarding the Korean approach to negotiations, a senior American analyst made the following observation: "As anyone who has ever negotiated with Koreans can attest, there is a deep-seated psychological brinkmanship inherent in their approach to such things. Even when both sides can visualize the rough parameters of an eventual compromise, each side plays total hardball. Unlike the Japanese, Koreans are prone to a bitterly confrontational style of consensus building in which both

sides often emerge battered and bearing grudges. In instances when the probable shape of the compromise remains highly uncertain and one side believes that time is on its side, the prospects for an amicably negotiated and lasting settlement will be bleak." Edward A. Olsen, "Korean Politics and U.S. Policy," *Asian Survey* 27.8 (1987): 843.

9 Hahm Pyong-choon, "Shamanism: Foundation of the Korean World-view. Part two: Society and Social Life," *Korean Culture* 2.1 (1981): 17-25; David I. Steinberg "On Compromise and Surrender," *Korea Times* (Internet edition) 17 Feb. 1997; Kang Hyo-sang, "Allergy to Opening Up," *Choson Ilbo* 13 Dec. 1996: 2 (FBIS-EAS-96-241.)

10 The 1996 submarine incursion is a case in point. Pyongyang issued its "statement of regret" only after it became convinced that progress toward its premier foreign policy goal-improving relations with the U.S.--was impossible without it. See, inter alia, "NK Must Express Regret for Sub Intrusion to Improve Relations with US," *Korea Times* (Internet edition) 18 Dec. 1996; and Kang Tae-ho, "Diagnosis of North Korea's 1997 Foreign Policy," *Hangyore Shinmun* 27 Jan. 1997: 6 (FBIS-EAS--7-017.)

11 From the beginning of his administration until Nov. 1995, President Kim, in blocking all attempts to hold Chun and Roh accountable for the Dec. 1979 intra-army coup and the May 1980 Kwangju uprising, urged Koreans not to "dig up the murky past...or to mete out punishments against specific persons," and to "let history determine the full truth" of the suppression of the Kwangju uprising. Only in the face of demands that he reveal the extent to which Roh's slush fund might have been used to finance his 1992 presidential campaign did President Kim declare a need to "fulfill this historic task" of "rectifying wrongs of the past." President Kim Young Sam, address, "Kwangju's Sacrifices Uphold Civilian Democracy," 13 May 1993, *Korea's Quest for Reform & Globalization: Selected Speeches of President Kim Young Sam* (The Presidential Secretariat, 1995) 32-36; Andrew Pollack, "Seoul Bars Prosecution of Presidents," *New York Times* 30 Oct. 1994: 4; Lee Sung-yul, "Reinvestigation Opens Into 1979 Coup; Ex-Presidents Chun, Roh May Face Insurrection Charge," *Korea Herald* (Internet edition) 28 Nov. 1995; "President Kim Pledges to Punish Two Former Presidents," *Korea Herald* (Internet edition) 2 Dec. 1995; Shim Jae Hoon, "Beating the Heat," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 7 Dec. 1995: 18.

12 "Full Text of Policy Speech by President Kim Young Sam to the National Assembly [21 Sep. 1993]," *Korea Observer* 24.4 (1993): 613-20.

13 In addition to the death and destruction of the Korean War, the ROK has suffered the 1968 commando assault on the Blue House, the 1983 Rangoon bombing, the 1987 destruction of Korean Airlines flight 858, and the 1996 submarine incursion, not to mention a host of other, less well publicized, provocations by the DPRK. See Ministry of National Defense, "Major Provocations by North Korea," *Defense White Paper, 1991-1992* (Republic of Korea, 1992) 357-366 for a partial list.

14 See, for example, Aidan Foster-Carter, "The Gradualist Pipe-Dream: Prospects and Pathways for Korean Reunification," *Asian Flashpoint: Security and the Korean Peninsula*, ed. Andrew Mack (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1993) 159-175.

15 Karen Elliott House, "Let North Korea Collapse," *Wall Street Journal* 21 Feb. 1997: A14 and Nicholas Eberstadt, "Hastening Korean Unification," *Foreign Affairs* 76.2 (1997): 77-92 argue for rapid unification.

16 Henderson 335; Chong-Sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) 79.

- 17 A member of the South Korean National Assembly used this description in a conversation with the author.
- 18 On the continuing difficulties associated with German unification, see, inter alia, Cacilie Rohwedder, "East Germans Dependent on Job Subsidy Find Bonn's Budget Holds a Bitter Pill," *Wall Street Journal* 24 Sep. 1996: A18; William Drozdiak, "German Jobless at Post-WWII High," *Washington Post* 10 Jan. 1997: A28; Greg Steinmetz, "West German Riches Are Luring Easterners Desperate for Work," *Wall Street Journal* 8 Jul. 1997: A1.
- 19 Kang Suk Rhee, "Korea's Unification: The Applicability of the German Experience," *Asian Survey* 33.4 (1993): 360-375.
- 20 Shim Jae Hoon makes this point in "Welcome to reality," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 Mar. 1992: 60. There are indications, however, that even language is beginning to diverge. A common frustration among many North Korean defectors in the South is their unfamiliarity with Chinese characters, foreign "loan words," and English, all of which are used extensively in South Korea. See "North Korea Defectors Find it Hard to Adapt to South," *Korea Herald* (Internet edition) 9 Feb. 1996; "N.Korea defectors face new, hard reality," *Pacific Stars and Stripes* 17 Apr. 1996: 4; Kevin Sullivan "Detectors Live Warily in S. Korea," *Washington Post* 19 Feb. 1997: A15.
- 21 Mary Jordan, "Second Guessing Korean Unification," *Washington Post* 4 Mar. 1997: A1; Shin Il-chul, "Dilemma of Unification Concepts," *Korea Focus* 4.6 (1996): 115-117.
- 22 Approximately eighty percent of South Korea's population of 44 million was born after the outbreak of the Korean War.
- 23 "1997 to Mark Watershed for Inter-Korean Ties," *Korea Times* (Internet edition) 2 Jan. 1997.
- 24 See *Korea Herald* 30 Jun. 1996 for coverage of presentations by economists Hwang Eui-gak, Manfred Wegner, and Gary Hufbauer at a conference in Seoul on the challenges of unification.
- 25 Shim Jae Hoon, "The price of unity," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 Mar. 1992: 54-56; Gerritt W. Gong, "Korean Unification," *Korea and World Affairs* 16.4 (1992): 659; Kim Tae-ho, "Finance Ministry Estimates Unification Cost," *Maeil Kyongje Sinmun* 23 Jan. 1993: 2 (FBIS-EAS-93-046 p. 32); Charles Lee, "What Price Unity?," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 Jun. 1997: 69; Marcus Noland, "Why North Korea Will Muddle Through," *Foreign Affairs* 76.4 (1997): 105-118; "Putting Korea together again," *The Economist* 10 May 1997: 78.
- 26 Suspicions reportedly still linger among some political leaders about the professionalism and apolitical orientation of the ROK army, even after the 1993 purge of Hana Hoe, the clique within the army loyal to Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo. "Military Reacts to NKP Chairman Yi Hoe-chang's Remarks," *Yonhap* 15 Apr. 1997 (FBIS-EAS 97-105); Yi Hyong-sam, "Mortified at Having Been Loyal to the Totally Corrupt Civilian Government," *News Plus* 5 Jun. 1997 (FBIS-EAS 97-107.)
- 27 One recent ROK government study suggests that more than four million refugees may flee to the South. Kim Tang, "Over 4 Million People May Escape in Event of Emergency -- From the Government Report on Comprehensive Measures for North Korean Refugees," *Sisa Journal* 19 Dec. 1996: 12-13 (FBIS-EAS-96-242.)
- 28 Mark Clifford, "A rough fit: South Korean firms eye North's potential," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 Mar. 1992: 57-59; David E. Sanger, "East Asia's Time Bomb," *Impact* 21 Aug. 1996: 8-9.
- 29 Wages, long suppressed by government-chaebol collusion, have quadrupled since 1987 and are

now second in the region only to those of Japan. "Wage Increases in ROK Manufacturing Said World's Highest," Joong-Ang Ilbo 3 Nov. 1996 (FBIS-EAS-96-215); Andrew Pollack, "South Korea's Growing Pains," New York Times 4 Feb. 1997: D1; "Wage Levels in Korea Second Highest in Asia After Japan," Korea Herald (Internet edition) 6 Jun. 1997; "Wage Increase Rate Highest in World," Korea Herald (Internet edition) 24 Jul. 1997.

30 "Opposition NCNP In Dilemma Over Labor Laws," Korea Times (Internet edition) 10 Jan. 1997; Nam In-soo, "Opposition Parties in a Bind Over Labor Strikes," Korea Herald (Internet edition) 11 Jan. 1997; Nam In-soo, "Opposition Hesitant Over Labor Unrest," Korea Herald (Internet edition) 15 Jan. 1997; Nam In-soo, "NCNP, ULD Throw Their Full Weight Behind Union," Korea Herald (Internet edition) 17 Jan. 1997.

31 The Honam region, in the southwestern sector of the ROK, corresponds roughly to the territory of North and South Cholla provinces; the Yongnam region, in the southeast, to the territory of North and South Kyongsang provinces. For background on regional antagonisms in Korea, see Henderson 266; Seung-kuk Kim, "The Formation of Civil Society and the Rise of Regionalism in Korea," Korea Journal 28.6 (1988): 24-34; Eui-Young Yu, "Regionalism in the South Korean Job Market: An Analysis of Regional-Origin Inequity among Migrants in Seoul," Pacific Affairs 63.1 (1990): 24-39; Kyung-Hwan Min and Kai-Sook Kim, "Regional Conflict in Korea: A Pathological Case of Collectivism," Psychology of the Korean People, ed. Gene Yoon and Sang-Chin Choi (Seoul: Song-A Publishing & Printing Co., Ltd., 1994) 330-35. For the political impact of regionalism, see John McBeth, "A tale of two regions that remain apart," Far Eastern Economic Review 3 Dec. 1987: 52-54; Eui-Young Yu, "Regionalism in the South Korean Power Structure," The Korean Peninsula in the Changing World Order, ed. Eui-Young Yu and Terry Kandal (Los Angeles: California State University, 1992) 123-143; Bae Sun-kwang and James Cotton, "Regionalism in Electoral Politics," Korea Under Roh Tae-woo, ed. James Cotton (Canberra: Allen and Unwin, 1993) 170-184; "Deepening Regionalism May Alter Political Scene," Wolgan Chosun Jun. 1994: 252-266 (FBIS-EAS-153, pp. 52-62); "Lee Chang-sup, "Deep-Rooted Regionalism Raises Ugly Head in NKP Pres. Nomination," Korea Times (Internet edition) 13 Jun. 1997; Kim Byong-kuk, "Root Causes of Regionalism in Korea," Korea Times (Internet edition) 15 Jul. 1997; Kim Chin-kuk, "From the Three-Kim Era to the Era of Smaller Regions," Win Aug. 1997: 38-42 (FBIS-EAS-97-220.)

32 Roy Richard Grinker, "Learning from Defectors and Preparing for Unification," The U.S.-Korea Review 4.6 (1996): 9.

33 Hong Son-hui, "Half of North Korean Defectors Hardly Feel in Place in Capitalistic South," Korea Times 14 Dec. 1996: 3 (FBIS-EAS-96-242.) Northerners are already identifiable due to their accent as well as to the language usage differences noted above. Moreover, should current disparities in nutrition levels continue, the two populations will be increasingly differentiated by physical size as well. According to ROK press reports, the Korean People's Army has already had to lower its physical standards for the draft. The average KPA recruit today is the same height as the average South Korean female in her 20s, and a full five inches shorter than the average South Korean male in his 20s. "DPRK Soldiers' Growth Reportedly Declines Due to Food Crisis," Chungang Ilbo 23 Jun. 1996: 2 (FBIS-EAS-96-123); "New Generation's Physique Becoming More 'Westernized'," Joong-Ang Ilbo (Internet edition) 2 Sep. 1996; "Tallest Korean in Their 20s; Heaviest Middle-Aged," Korea Times (Internet edition) 9 Jan. 1997; "Korean Students Taller, Fatter, Weaker From 10 Yrs Ago," Korea Times (Internet edition) 4 Feb. 1997.

34 Failure to treat the people of the North equally would seem to be inconsistent with both the Constitution and the Supreme Court of the ROK. Clearly anticipating unification, Article 3 of the current Constitution, in language consistent with all previous ROK constitutions, states "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands."

Furthermore, the Supreme Court recently ruled that North Koreans are citizens of the Republic of Korea. See "Supreme Court Rules DPRK Residents Also ROK Citizens," Joong-Ang Ilbo (Internet edition) 13 Nov. 1996. In major speeches, President Kim Young Sam frequently addresses his "70 million compatriots" and "Dear fellow citizens."

35 Kim Dae Jung consistently gets more than 90% of the vote in his native Honam region. "Deepening Regionalism...." 56.

36 North Koreans, of course, may prove to be as factious as are South Koreans, and find it just as difficult to act politically in concert. But the prospect of an enduring "separateness" on the part of North Koreans following unification cannot simply be dismissed, given the enduring solidarity of Honam natives.

37 Song Mun-hong, "Foreign Policy in Disarray Causing Divided Public Opinion--an In-Depth Analysis of Kim Yong-sam's Governing Ability," Sindong-a Jun. 1997: 196-215 (FBIS-EAS-94-150, p. 41-52); Sanghyun Yoon, "South Korea's Kim Young Sam Government," Asian Survey 36.5 (1996): 511-522; Kim Tae-chung, "What Is More Important Than President Kim," Chosun Ilbo (Internet edition) 22 Feb. 1997 (FBIS-EAS-97-036.)

38 Barbara Opall, "Seoul Bars U.S. Access to N. Korean Defector," Defense News 16-22 Jun. 1997: 3; Nayan Chanda, Shim Jae Hoon, and Peter Landers, "On Borrowed Time," Far Eastern Economic Review 26 Jun. 1997: 22-28.

39 Marcus Noland, "Why North Korea Will Muddle Through," Foreign Affairs 76.4 (1997) 105-118; Christopher J. Sigur, "North Korea will survive these crises," Japan Times 3 Feb. 1997; Lee Jae-keun, "Challenging Predictions of North Korea's Implosion," Korea Focus 5.1 (1997) 33-40; "Article Predicts Situation in DPRK in 1997," Chugan Choson 9 Jan. 1997: 38-39 (FBIS-EAS-97-007); Chanda et al, "On Borrowed Time."

40 Charles Kartman, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, 26 Feb. 1997 (USIA transcript of remarks as prepared for delivery, courtesy of the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report, 26 Feb. 1997.) See also Winston Lord, address, "U.S. Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula," Korea-United States 21st Century Council, Washington, D.C., 8 Feb. 1996.

41 Ambassador James T. Laney, address, "North and South Korea: Beyond Deterrence," Asia Society Corporate Conference, Seoul, 11 May 1996.

42 Kartman; Laney; Son Key-young, "US Doesn't Want NK Collapse Nor Survival: Christenson," Korea Times (Internet edition) 30 May 1997.

43 Lord *ibid*.

44 "Korea-U.S. Joint Statement," 16 Apr. 1996, courtesy of www.kimsoft.com.

45 Rhee 365.

III. NAPSNet 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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
Wade Huntley, NAPSNet Coordinator & Program Director, Asia/Pacific Security
125 University Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94710-1616 USA
(510) 204-9296 * Fax (510) 204-9298 *

[Return to top of this page](#) NAPSNet Policy Fora Online

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/napsnet-forum-9-prospects-and-implications-of-korean-unification/>

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org