Policy Forum 08-079: The Facts and Fables of a Unified Korea

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By Andrei Lankov

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I. Introduction

Andrei Lankov, Associate Professor in Kookmin University, Seoul, and adjunct research fellow at the Research School of Pacifica and Asian Studies, Australian National University, write, "Despite all the grave doubts, people will not dare to openly say that they do not want to share the state with what they perceive as impoverished and under-educated Northerners. Nonetheless, one thing is clear: the enthusiasm about unification is waning, and sooner or later this quiet transformation of the public mind may have political effects."

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II. Article by Andrei Lankov

- "The Facts and Fables of a Unified Korea"
By Andrei Lankov

Roh Moo-hyun, former president of Korea (2002-2007), this month delivered a lengthy speech on the policy he believes Seoul should follow in dealing with North Korea.

The text was remarkable for its frankness. The former chief executive of South Korea said that the only viable form of unification with the North is a confederation (he made a number of comparisons with the European Union), and this confederation might be achieved with the current North Korean regime staying in power.

Roh explained that "putting emphasis on liberal democracy" is not a sign of a realistic approach to unification. He also stated that unilateral concessions and giveaways to the North are vital for keeping peace in the peninsula. The former president also explained that "questions of refugees and questions of human rights in North Korea should be treated with care" because both support for human rights and aid to refugees are likely to irritate the Pyongyang government.

The speech was interesting and honest, although ideas expressed are not quite new. It is clear that Roh merely explained the ideology and assumptions behind his own previous policy. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that its full text was published not by Roh's left-nationalists supporters but by his rightist opponents who see some of these statements (perhaps correctly) as a major blow to Roh's reputation and legacy.

However, what is of special interest about the speech is a clear tendency to abandon the vision of unification as the supreme national goal. Roh stressed a number of times that while unification is desirable, peace and stability on the peninsula are more important. In fact, this is what many Koreans think - and an increasing number doubt whether unification is really such a good idea.

This is a remarkable break with the past. When the Republic of Korea was established in 1948, its government unequivocally stated that its jurisdiction should extend straight to the Chinese border. Officially, the North Korean state was not a state at all, but merely a bunch or rebels who came to control some areas in the northern part of the country.

It is not incidental that in those days a common name for North Korean forces was kongpi or "communist bandits". (Nowadays, one suspects, they would be called "terrorists", but in the 1940s this term had far less explosive connotations). In time, it was assumed, the "communist bands" would be driven away and order would be restored throughout the land.

Incidentally, the North Korean official world picture was no different. Pyongyang described itself as the sole legitimate regime on the peninsula and insisted that the Seoul government was nothing a bunch of American collaborationists. But both sides remained firmly committed to unification, although each side believed that it should be achieved under its complete control.

In 1950, the North attempted to unify the country by force, but failed. Nonetheless, the commitment to unification as a supreme goal - albeit increasingly theoretical - remained the basis of the worldview in both parts of the divided country.

Under Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) unification was presented as the major goal of the government.

During the subsequent rule of the military (1961-1987) the emphasis switched to economic growth, but even this was explained as a way to create foundations for eventual unification. The official rhetoric became less heated as well, but it was still assumed in Seoul that unification should be basically achieved on South Korean conditions. South Korean middle school students were told about sufferings of the compatriots under the communist yoke and of the need to liberate them at the first opportunity.

While actual interest slowly waned, lip service to unification continued to be paid in countless public rituals. In the South Korean political vocabulary, the word "unification" came to designate everything related to North Korea. The government agency which handled the North Korean policy was named the Ministry of Unification, and studies of North Korea in the 1990s were frequently described as "unification studies".

However, from around 1980, a powerful leftist movement emerged in the South. Young people who had grown up amid one of the greatest economic breakthroughs in modern history came to reject the booming society around them. In some cases, the attention of the young dissenters turned to the Soviet-style Leninist project while others began to read North Korean literature and imagined the North as a paradise of social justice, unspoiled Koreanness and, somehow, democracy. Ironically, this boost of enthusiasm for both Soviet socialism and North Korea's *juche* philosophy happened exactly when the Soviet Union began to crumble. Soon after, the North Korean economy nosedived.

However, the revived South Korean left was surprisingly nationalistic and fervent believers in unification. In their worldview, the major obstacle was the position of the South Korean elite and their evil paymaster, United States imperialism. It was assumed that without their resistance the unification would be achieved easily - perhaps with some confederation being a first step towards the goal. Of course, the young firebrands believed that the North was a land of prosperity and economic power, bestowed with the world's most progressive social system, so they did not expect any economic troubles ahead. If anything, their fervor for unification was stronger than that of their opponents. As time went by, the anti-communist right lost much interest in the North, although this could not be admitted openly.

By about 1990, the South became a deeply divided society, with left and right arguing about pretty much everything. Still, they shared the belief that unification should be the major goal of Korea. One of the most common political terms of abuse in the country was to describe an opponent as an "enemy of unification".

Meanwhile, serious changes began to occur. First of all, the number of people in the South who have ever had direct contact with the North is dwindling. As of 2005, people born before 1940 constituted merely 5.8% of South Korea's population. They are the only people, however, who might possible have first-hand memories of the North or North Korean relatives and family members. The younger generation have spent their lives in a world where the North has sometimes mattered as a military threat, but otherwise remained a complete unknown and, generally, irrelevant geographic area.

Second, around 1996-1997, the South Korean nationalist left faced a major crisis. The economic collapse and subsequent famine experienced by North Korea at the time seriously undermined the myth of the North as a viable alternative to the South. Remarkable increases in contact with the Northerners (both direct and indirect, via China) made it impossible to deny reports of North Korea's destitution as "fabrications of the reactionary forces".

It began to dawn on South Korean leftists that the North was a very poor Third World country. Some - but not all - of the Seoul leftists also came to realize that the North's political system was highly repressive, although they still try to find excuses and play down the brutality of the North Korean

dictatorship (while being unforgiving when it comes to much softer dictatorial regimes on South Korea's own part). Still, only a small faction of people in the South now seriously consider the North as a viable alternative.

Third, the bitter German experience made the Seoul decision-makers and general public realize that the unification of the North and South would be more expensive and painful than anybody had imagined. The difference in per capita income between East and West Germany was 1:2/5, while in Korea, even if one believes the most optimistic estimate, the ratio is 1:17 (pessimists think it is actually closer to 1:50). The ratio of the population is also less favorable then in Germany. Taking into consideration the ongoing German troubles, well known in Seoul, this sounds like a recipe for disaster.

Thus, in 1997, when the left-of-center administration was elected for its first chance to run the country, the entire paradigm began to change. On the declaratory level and in the political rhetoric, unification remained universally accepted as the supreme national goal, even though from the late 1990s one could see a decline in commitment to this stated goal among the younger generation of South Koreans. However, under the new circumstances Seoul was not in a great hurry to reach this goal, and did not make a secret of its reluctance. A prolonged period of peaceful co-existence and collaboration came to be seen as a necessary first step on the way to complete unification.

Such was the background which led to a switch in the "Sunshine" policy. This policy was launched by Kim Dae-jung's government in 1997 and continued by Roh throughout 2002-2008. The stated goal was to encourage the gradual evolution of North Korea. The policy's name refers to one of Aesop's fables, "the North Wind and the Sun". In the fable, the North Wind and the Sun argue about who is able to remove a cloak from a traveler. The North Wind blows hard but fails to succeed, since the traveler wraps his cloak even more tightly to protect himself. The Sun, however, warms the air, thus forcing the traveler to remove the unnecessary cloak.

Officially, the policy was based on the assumption that a soft approach would persuade the North to institute large-scale social and economic reforms, more or less similar to those undertaken in China and Vietnam. However, an important aspect of the underlying assumptions of this policy was a belief that reform would prolong the existence of the North Korean state and make possible a gradual elimination of the huge economic and social gap between the two Koreas. As Korea expert Aidan Foster-Carter has noted, "Despite the rhetoric of unification, the immediate aim [of the 'Sunshine' policy] was to retain two states, but encourage them to get on better."

In other words, the "Sunshine" policy was, above all, about postponing unification until some unspecified point in the future when both sides would be "better prepared" for it. This is what Roh frankly admitted in his recent speech. The turnabout was complete: in the 1950s, the Seoul regime was deadly serious about unification and did not make secret of its willingness to use military force to reach this goal. In the subsequent decades, willingness and enthusiasm gradually cooled, but efforts to speed up unification were not abandoned.

In the 1990s, however, the same syrupy pro-unification rhetoric began to be employed to justify a policy whose goal - at least, in the short and medium terms - was to maintain division to keep the situation stable and South (but not North) Koreans affluent.

Meanwhile, even deeper changes began to impact Korean society. The politically active youngsters of the 1980s (now in their 40s and late 30s) wanted unification because they were both leftist and nationalist and because they did not associate it with economic hardships. The next generation was different. The younger Koreans have moved to the right; they are somewhat less nationalistic and they believe - rightly or wrongly - that unification will mean economic disaster. They also do not care

much about the North, which for them is a distant place. After all, it is far more common for the average South Korean 30-something to visit Paris or Sydney than Pyongyang. As a result, an increasing number of South Koreans have begun to wonder if they need this unification after all.

This trend is well reflected by public opinion polls. In 1994, 91.6% of the South Koreans said they considered unification "necessary". In 2007, according to a poll conducted by Seoul National University, the number of such people shrank to 63.8%. This is not a surprise - everybody who interacts with Korean university students knows that serious doubts about unification are increasingly common.

These fears are more common among the younger generations, but even older people are having doubts these days. A Korean businessman in his late 60s, himself born in what is now North Korea, and with great experience interacting with Northerners because of his business projects, recently described his feeling about the unification: "Well, they say there that they are so happy under the wise guidance of the Dear General. Let them be happy there, if they like it so much. Meanwhile, we'd rather suffer here a bit under [President] Lee Myung-bak or whoever will be next. They are so different from us by now. Even their physical appearance is different, they are so short! So, the later we'll have unification, the better. In a hundred years, perhaps".

Such views are not typical, but are increasingly popular nonetheless.

Are the two Koreas are drifting apart? Perhaps. But there is another interesting peculiarity. People express their doubts in private, but open critique of the unification paradigm still remains a strict taboo. Neither right nor left wants to be seen as "anti-national", and any politician would instantly ruin his or her career if they were to openly air the idea of a South Korean state which should not eventually incorporate the North.

So far, the confederation discourse, so vividly represented by Roh, is used as a convenient excuse, especially by the left. People do not say they are against unification in principle: this contradicts all major ideological discourses in present-day Korea. So, skeptics prefer to say that, while approving unification in principle, they would strongly prefer it happen peacefully, as a result of negotiations between governments, and gradually.

The left still insists that a confederation should be a step, clearly assuming that such a confederation can and should be negotiated with the current Pyongyang regime (this idea was the center of Roh's recent speech). Needless to say, the idea of a lasting "confederation" between a booming democracy and a destitute dictatorship is utterly unrealistic, but people prefer not to ask hard questions. There is also great irony in the fact that people who made their names and political careers as champions of the common people and opponents of dictators in Seoul tend to side with far more brutal dictatorships in the North and describe all forces of change in the North as "destructive and destabilizing".

If things take a dramatic turn, and if the North plunges into an acute crisis (a strong possibility), the South Koreans will have to make a choice. It is impossible to guess which choice they will make. It is quite probable that the decades of exposure to the unification rhetoric will become decisive. Despite all the grave doubts, people will not dare to openly say that they do not want to share the state with what they perceive as impoverished and under-educated Northerners.

Nonetheless, one thing is clear: the enthusiasm about unification is waning, and sooner or later this quiet transformation of the public mind may have political effects. Ex-president Roh's speech has reminded Koreans about this.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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