Policy Forum 07-077: What Korean Unification Means to China

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By Zhang Quanyi

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I. Introduction

Zhang Quanyi, an associate professor at the Zhejiang Wanli University in Ningbo, China, and a research fellow at the School of International Studies at Yonsei University, writes, "Both China and Korea have been greatly influenced by Confucianism. What's more, they share an unhappy history with Japan. In the face of recent moves toward a possible military alliance between the United States, Japan, Australia, India and other countries, China may seek to strengthen its cultural and

historical ties with Korea to boost its position in Asia."

This article was written prior to the Second Inter-Korean Summit but represents an interesting perspective on Inter-Korean Relations.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Zhang Quanyi

- "What Korean Unification Means to China"
By Zhang Quanyi

The summit meeting on the Korean peninsula signifies another step toward reconciliation between two long-time adversaries. South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il will meet in Pyongyang in early October. Their meeting will be only the second between leaders of the two countries, following the 2000 summit between former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

Although the timing of the summit has brought criticism from opposition parties in the South, the act itself indicates that the two Koreas have the intention to pursue reconciliation, and are ready to take steps toward the peaceful settlement of their differences.

What is China's reaction to this development? The Chinese government has many times expressed strong support for the Korean peninsula peace process. However, academics and the media have voiced doubt over China's real position; many conclude that China's expressions are merely symbolic and diplomatic. Skeptics believe that the Chinese do not favor reunification of the two Koreas and thus do not wholeheartedly encourage the peace process.

To the skeptics, a unified Korea would be a powerful next-door neighbor to China. According to their logic, a powerful neighbor on one's doorstep would pose a threat to the country. This mentality is typical of geopolitics in the 19th century or during the Cold War. Geopolitics holds that a strong and powerful neighbor will automatically pose a threat, and offer opportunities for that neighbor to make alliances with one's enemies.

By this analysis, China would not be happy to see a united and strong, rising Korea. It could very likely challenge China's status in Asia, threatening and destabilizing current political arrangements. What's more, some analysts even deduce that a future united Korea may seek revenge on China over its dominance of Korea at certain times in history. Therefore any step toward real unification on the peninsula would most likely hurt China's national interests.

Are these reasonable assumptions? According to such deductions, China should take preventative action before a real integrated and powerful Korea emerges. To avoid this scenario, should China now take precautions against steps toward reconciliation between the two Koreas, even though such moves might cause a setback in its goal of denuclearizing North Korea?

Sensible analysts would say, "No." In fact, rather than trying to contain an integrated Korea, China recently has been taking the initiative in encouraging the two Koreas to sit down together for talks that could lead to a cooperative agreement or a roadmap toward unification. China's recommendations to the two Koreas are not drawn up in an ivory tower, but are based on both Chinese and global interests.

Korea's reunification is significant for Chinese, as it parallels China's own story. The process of interaction between the two Koreas can provide Beijing with a model for narrowing its differences with Taiwan. Korea's successful negotiations on economic, ideological and political arrangements can serve as an example to mainland China and Taiwan in dissolving their political crisis.

Contrary to the thinking of many geopolitical analysts, a powerful Korea will serve China's own interests as well. The growth of a united Korea is not likely to surpass Japan's sustainable growth in the foreseeable future; Japan will remain a powerful force in Asia. China and Korea share many cultural similarities and traditional ties, which are likely to bring them into closer strategic cooperation.

Both China and Korea have been greatly influenced by Confucianism. What's more, they share an unhappy history with Japan. In the face of recent moves toward a possible military alliance between the United States, Japan, Australia, India and other countries, China may seek to strengthen its cultural and historical ties with Korea to boost its position in Asia.

This alliance would benefit not only China and Korea, but would help maintain a balance in the region and the world. However, this does not imply an antagonistic stance toward other players in the region. Given that all the nations in the region have friendly ties and shared economic interests, the era of mutually exclusive alliances is already over. Globalization has created an interdependent world in which domestic and global affairs are inseparably intertwined. Human beings are already living in the same village; within that village, China and Korea may be viewed as belonging to the same family.

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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