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KOREAN REUNIFICATION

POSSIBILITY OR PIPE DREAM?¹

Norbert Eschborn / Young-yoon Kim

On New Year's Day 2011, as has become its tradition the German tabloid newspaper BILD offered its readers a selection of satirical "headlines we would like to see in 2012". Surprisingly, one of the headlines referred to Korea. Alongside a photo of the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl a headline boasted: "He's still got what it takes! Kohl unifies Korea." However, that year there was to be no German-style reunification, and in 2013, the 60th anniversary of Korea's division into North and South, the peninsula is still no nearer to such reconciliation.

The Republic of Korea (as South Korea is officially known as) has committed itself to the reunification of South and North Korea on the basis of the principles of freedom and democracy, as was the case in West Germany before 1989/1990 in the preamble to its constitution of the time.² Leading politicians regularly trumpet the ideal of reunification – with varying degrees of frequency and credibility, depending on their particular political persuasion.³ Again, today's Korea is very similar to West Germany in this respect. But as happened in Germany, cracks have also begun to appear in the façade of unity on this issue. Having said that, none of the leading politicians have so far documented their despair like former Chancellor of West

- 1 | The authors would like to thank JuHong Lee, Jonas Kessner and Nadja Noll for the vital research they carried out during the preparation of this article.
- 2 | Art. 4 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, http://korea.assembly.go.kr/res/low_01_read.jsp (accessed 5 Nov 2012).
- 3 | Irrespective of the fact that reunification is not one of the 100 official political tasks and goals the administration of President Lee Myung-bak has set itself since 2008; cf. <http://korea.net/Government/Administration/Lee-Administrations-Main-Policies> (accessed 6 Nov 2012).

Germany, Willy Brandt, who in his 1989 memoirs described German reunification as the “central sham of the second German Republic”.⁴

Germany was divided for “only” 40 years. However, after Korea’s civil war (an experience that Germany was mercifully spared), which has clearly had a lasting effect on the people of South Korea, and after 60 years of division, the differences in the lives of people in the North and South of the Korean Peninsula are probably greater than ever, the interests of the people have shifted and the idea of one nation has perhaps become much less important than those who officially promote the idea of reunification in Seoul⁵ would like to admit.

WHAT STANDS BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA AND HOW DO NORTH AND SOUTH KOREANS FEEL ABOUT REUNIFICATION?

Hardly a day goes by in South Korea without some discussion on the issue of reunification with the North. Government and private research institutes and civil society organisations regularly conduct surveys on the issue of reunification. The question is constantly being asked as to when Korean reunification might be possible. This question is particularly annoying in as much as nobody who answers it is actually in a position to give any real justification for their opinion.

Is Korean reunification actually possible, or is it destined to remain a pipe dream for the South Korean people? The answer to this question is not simple, because potential reunification is dependent on a whole number of complex factors. It would be more practical to pose the question the other way round: “Why have North and South Korea not been able to achieve reunification so far?” At least here there is a chance of finding some answers. An assessment of the seriousness of the political will on both sides, for example, would suggest that both nations’ respective positions are so different that there seems little potential

4 | Willy Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 1990, 156 et seq.

5 | This would include, for example, the National Advisory Council for Democratic Peaceful Reunification, <http://nuac.go.kr> (accessed 6 Nov 2012).

for success. Another key issue is whether the topic of reunification is simply being exploited in an attempt to gain and expand political power in the region. Also, from South Korea's perspective, there do not appear to be any globally influential individuals in the world's major capitals who are in a position to champion Korea's reunification. In the many public debates on the issue in South Korea, mention is regularly made of the decisive role played by Mikhail Gorbachev in Germany's reunification. There is nobody of a similar stature who seems likely to promote reunification in Korea.



Cemented separation: A concrete bar, marking the border between North and South Korea, runs through the UN armistice commission buildings. | Source: © Norbert Eschborn.

It is clear that one of the keys to rapprochement between the two Korean nations lies in their internal relations. Could reunification come about through a redefining of these relations? Is it possible to change the status quo? If so, what changes would need to be made and what would be the key issues involved? In recent Korean history, there have been numerous attempts to change various aspects of the relations between the two countries that were thought to be hindering reunification, but so far they have been far from successful. Why is that the case? In 2011, the South Korean public TV network KBS (Korea Broadcasting System) carried out a survey amongst North Korean refugees

in China on the issue of reunification. The results were as follows:⁶

Would you like to see a unified Korea?

Very much	92%
Possibly	8%
Not at all	0%

If you would like to see reunification – what is the most important reason?

“We are one people”	42%
Better life	45%
To remove the enmity or tension between the two countries	5%
Possibility of freedom to travel	8%

In your opinion when do you think reunification might be possible?

Within 10 years	26%
Within 20 years	6%
Within 30 years	23%
Never	45%

Under what kind of political system should reunification take place?

Capitalism	2%
Socialism	58%
The “Chinese model” (two systems within one country)	40%

How do you view South Korea?

As an enemy state	3%
As our brothers	37%
As a colony of the USA	60%
As an independent state	0%

6 | Cf. *KBS special*, “The Grand Plan for Reunification”, first broadcast Part 1, 3 Dec 2011; Part 2, 4 Dec 2011. All translations from the Korean by Dr. Young-yoon Kim. 102 people were surveyed.

What do you think of the South Korean economy?

It offers the possibility of a much better life than in North Korea	80%
It offers the possibility for many people to become rich, but with huge differences between rich and poor	16%
It results in people there being poorer than in North Korea	4%

What should South Korea do to bring about reunification?

Achieve independence from U.S. rule	50%
Give support to the people of North Korea	28%
Drop hostile policies towards North Korea	22%
Put pressure on North Korea	0%

Which country do you like the most?

USA	4%
Russia	0%
South Korea	29%
China	66%
Japan	1%

The small size of the sample and the fact that it is not clear under precisely what circumstances the North Koreans were questioned in China must be taken into account when considering the significance of these results. That being said, there are a number of constants when it comes to North Koreans' attitudes towards reunification that point to the persistence of long-term attitudes and opinions gleaned from a socialist upbringing and education and the inherent indoctrination. This is especially obvious in the high correlation of positive answers that correspond to North Korean state doctrine, and also in the preferred option of reunification under a socialist system, the strong dislike of the USA and the associated poor opinion of South Korea. But in spite of all this criticism, there is also obvious admiration for what South Korea's economy has to offer, as well as a clear desire for better material circumstances in their own country. When 80 per cent of those questioned consider the quality of life in South Korea to be "much better" than their own, this shows that North Koreans are clearly

capable of differentiating their quality of life from that of others in spite of the fact that their country is cut off from the outside world. It also suggests that the promises made by the country's leaders that things will get better are not likely to be believed indefinitely. The somewhat cautious or even pessimistic estimations of when reunification might take place, or whether it is even likely to happen at all, also appear to suggest a high degree of realism. However, an evaluation of these responses must also take into account the fact that it is North Korea itself that creates and maintains an environment which gives rise to such opinions.

In August 2012, KBS also carried out a survey on the issue of reunification amongst South Koreans. The results of this second survey were as follows:⁷

How interested are you in the reunification of Korea?

Extremely	24.6%
Very much	49.2%
Not very	22.8%
Not at all	3.4%

What is your attitude towards reunification?

It should definitely happen	25.4%
It is desirable as long as it doesn't put too big a burden on South Korea	43%
Both Korean states should co-exist on the basis of mutual cooperation	24.6%
It should definitely not happen	7%

7 | Cf. 24th research edition of the KBS programme on reunification, "Examination of people's attitudes to the reunification of Korea 2012", first broadcast, 15 Oct 2012. 1,027 people were surveyed.

What would be your biggest concern in the event that reunification takes place?

Massive financial burden on the people of South Korea	54.1%
Social unrest, unemployment, crime	18.5%
Political and military conflict	15.3%
Mass migration from North Korea to South Korea	11.1%
International diplomatic difficulties	1%

What is the most important goal of reunification?

Economic cooperation, cultural exchange, reuniting of families, travel opportunities	68.9%
Strengthening South Korea's economic power	12%
Building trust between the two countries' militaries	11.6%
A summit meeting of the two countries' leaders	5.8%
Dismantling of national security legislation	1.7%

Which other country could be useful in helping to bring about reunification?

None	51.7%
China	21.6%
USA	19.5%
Japan	2.6%
Russia	2.1%
Other countries	2.5%

How willing are you to bear the costs of reunification?

Not willing at all	39.6%
Less than 1% of my annual income	41.4%
1-5% of my annual income	15.7%
5-10% of my annual income	2.6%
More than 10% of my annual income	0.6%

When do you think reunification might be possible?

Within 10 years	17.1%
Within 11-20 years	35.7%
Within 21-30 years	21.2%
After more than 30 years	14.8%
Never	11.2%

These results reflect the mainstream opinion in South Korean society for some time now, i.e. a resounding “Yes, but...” attitude towards reunification: a general sympathy towards the idea amongst around two-thirds of the population, a belief amongst the majority that this historic development could still happen within their lifetime and the alarmingly clear position of 81 per cent of those questioned that they would either not be willing to contribute towards these costs or only to a very limited extent. Financial concerns appear to be a common thread when it comes to South Koreans’ attitudes towards reunification and outweigh even the fear of social tensions should the two Korean nations be reunited. Surprisingly China is seen as a potentially more helpful partner than the USA when it comes to implementing such a massive undertaking, although only by a narrow margin. However, this assessment does in fact tally with the feeling commonly expressed, particularly amongst intellectuals, that it is the USA and not China who represent the biggest obstacle to Korean reunification.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF INTERNAL KOREAN RELATIONS SINCE 1945

The tragedy of the Korean Peninsula, which was colonised by Japan from 1910 to 1945, began with the ending of the Second World War when the country was occupied by both American and Soviet troops, between whose forces the dividing line ran along the 38th parallel. Up until 1970 there were apparently no joint efforts made to recognise both halves as one nation. For its part, South Korea unilaterally decreed in Article 3 of its constitution that the Republic of Korea included the whole of the Korean Peninsula and its associated islands, thus effectively laying claim

to sovereignty over North Korean territory. The United Nations also initially saw the Republic of Korea as the only legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula. The South Koreans interpreted this to mean that North Korea was effectively an illegal entity, that land belonging to the Republic of Korea was being illegally occupied and the Republic of Korea's right to exercise sovereignty was being hindered. North Korea remained totally unconcerned by these interpretations. As far as Pyongyang was concerned, South Korea had been forcibly occupied and colonised by the "imperialist" United States. It was clearly stated in the preamble to the statute of the Workers' Party of Korea that the aim of North Korea was to establish a communist society throughout the whole of the Korean Peninsula.

After the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, both North and South Korea focused on maintaining and developing their respective political systems. Political, social and cultural exchange between the two Koreas was effectively suspended, with the result that the partitioning of the country was further intensified. North Korea put all its efforts into strengthening the one-man dictatorship of Kim Il-sung and preparing the ground for a reunification along communist lines. During the 1960s, North Korea repeatedly attempted to infiltrate the South using spies and armed partisans. It significantly strengthened its military power, while various ideas and options for bringing about reunification by force of arms were considered by South Korea. Seoul declared anti-communism to be state policy and focused on developing its economy. There were no real

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attempts made to improve relations between the North and South. By the end of the 1960s, there was no dialogue or exchange taking place between the two Koreas whatsoever. The atmosphere was more one of extreme confrontation. This situation gradually improved due to political influences from outside, especially the Nixon Doctrine and the Sino-American summit of 1972. These developments had a huge influence on the Korean Peninsula, as it was from this time onwards that North-South relations started to change. In 1970, President Park Chung-hee suggested to the North that there should be *bona fide* competition between the two systems, while at the same time encouraging the creation of a political framework for peaceful reunification

through dialogue, exchange and cooperation. This effectively constituted recognition of North Korea's existence, including Kim Il-sung's claim to political power, and North Korea became a dialogue partner for South Korea.

On 23 June 1973, President Park released his Seven-Point Declaration for Peace and Unity, which confirmed that South Korea would establish diplomatic relations even with those countries that had different political and economic systems. Implicit within this statement was an acceptance of Pyongyang establishing diplomatic relations with Western countries. At the same time, South Korea was also proposing that both Koreas be allowed to join the United Nations. This proposal would have meant both sides recognising and accepting the existence of two Korean states, and was rejected by North Korea on this basis. Pyongyang for its part wanted to join the UN as a unified Korean state. In 1974, North Korea called for the signing of a peace agreement with the USA in order to avoid military confrontation. This was a change of strategy by North Korea, as up till then it had been calling for a peace agreement with South Korea itself. This new North Korean position was interpreted as an acceptance of the co-existence of both Koreas and the continuation of the division of the peninsula into two parts. The rule of Park Chung-hee, who was assassinated in 1979, will be remembered as a time when numerous contacts were established between the two nations. However, these contacts did not necessarily lead to an improvement of the situation on the peninsula or a rapprochement between North and South.

The Chun Doo-hwan regime came to power in 1980 and pursued an active reunification policy towards the North, which was officially committed to finding a peaceful road to reunification. Chun proposed a summit meeting of the heads of state and a total of twenty cooperation projects, all of which North Korea rejected. In 1984 South Korea received aid from North Korea after extensive flooding caused a state of emergency.

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reuniting of families and cultural exchanges by artists from both countries. The Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 should have provided an ideal opportunity to improve relations between the North and South. Because of its superior economic power at the time, South Korea felt confident of being able to develop its relationship with the North. The collapse of Cold War structures around the world at the end of the 1980s was also having a significant influence on the political situation on the Korean Peninsula and changed the relationship between North and South Korea. However, the North was suffering from shortages of food, energy and hard currency and instead decided to focus on bolstering its own system during this phase.

During this period, the next South Korean president, Roh Tae-woo, floated the idea of achieving reunification through a kind of Korean "Commonwealth", especially in his "Special Declaration for National Unity and Prosperity" of 7 July 1988. This was later seen as being South Korea's official policy towards the North. In October 1998, South Korea announced at the UN General Assembly that it was prepared to address issues raised by

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North Korea, such as disarmament, a peace treaty, etc. This gesture clearly had an effect on the North as it paved the way for a public meeting between the heads of government of the two countries. These high-ranking talks would eventually lead to the signing of a Basic Agreement between North and South Korea in 1991. This agreement established for the first time the basic foundations upon which relations between North and South Korea could be built. Both countries agreed to respect each other's systems, to refrain from the use of force and to actively seek areas of cooperation in order to facilitate the creation of a national alliance. One of the other outcomes of the talks was that both sides would start to use the official state names "Republic of Korea" and "Democratic People's Republic of Korea". This was seen as a reflection of both Seoul's and Pyongyang's claims to have the right to be seen as independent players on the international stage following the successful application by both countries to join the United Nations.

In spite of this, both North and South continued to define their relationship not so much as one that is between two separate countries, but as a special kind of temporary relationship within a process of eventual unification. The main reason for this was that neither government wanted to totally abandon the option of reunification at some point in the future. For this reason, it was necessary to characterise the relationship between North and South Korea as an internal Korean matter, as had happened in Germany. As a result, expectations were high that it would actually be possible to introduce the appropriate institutional measures needed to satisfy the provisions of the Basic Agreement. Unfortunately, these hopes were dashed by North Korea's first nuclear crisis and the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, which made it impossible for a planned summit meeting to go ahead. What followed was a loss of impetus in the improvement of relations between North and South Korea, which to an extent was due to the worsening food shortages in North Korea since the mid-1990s.

The government of President Kim Dae-jung, who came to power in February 1998, began a policy of détente known as the "Sunshine Policy",⁸ for which the former civil rights campaigner Kim was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000. This policy led to an increase in cooperation between North and South Korea in non-governmental areas. Humanitarian aid to North Korea was stepped up and various types of dialogue between the two countries were given a fresh impetus. A visit by Kim Dae-jung to Pyongyang and a summit meeting with Kim Jong-il led to the Joint Declaration of 15 June 2000. This document was a turning point in relations between the two countries. It was followed by substantive political discussions and increased cooperation, which resulted in the signing of numerous agreements, including the construction of an industrial complex in Kaesong (North Korea), where many South Korean companies set up new production facilities. The process of reuniting families also resumed. The atmosphere of mistrust that had lasted for half a century was beginning to change.

A summit meeting between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il in 2000 led to a joint declaration which made political discussions and an increasing cooperation possible.

8 | A detailed explanation and defence of this policy has recently been published by one of its architects: Chung-in Moon, *The Sunshine Policy. In Defense of Engagement as a Path to Peace in Korea*, Seoul, 2012.

2002 saw the start of the so-called second nuclear crisis. North Korea was suspected of uranium enrichment and there was a hostile exchange of fire between the two sides on the Yellow Sea. In spite of this incident, the new relationship based on reconciliation and cooperation showed that it was capable of enduring, and in October 2007 there was a second summit meeting between the heads of state Roh Moo-yun and Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang. This led to the Joint Declaration of 4 October 2007, which among other things envisaged closer economic cooperation.

This era of active cooperation between the two Koreas eventually came to an end when President Lee Myung-bak came to power in 2008. The second nuclear crisis had brought about a shift in public opinion amongst the people of South Korea, who were increasingly beginning to question the country's policy of greater openness and détente and were calling for a change of policy in light of the fact that the quality of life for people in North Korea had still not improved. The Lee Myung-bak government therefore altered the country's North Korea policy to one based on the principles of reciprocity and conditionality. Not surprisingly, other political initiatives coming out of

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Seoul, such as the offer of increased economic cooperation to help raise North Korea's average per capita income to 3,000 U.S. dollars within ten years in exchange for North Korean denuclearisation, met with resistance in Pyongyang. Tensions were further escalated in 2010 following the sinking of the South Korean frigate "Cheonan" (for which North Korea denies any responsibility) and the North Korean bombardment of the island of Yeonpyeong. Dialogue between the two countries was provisionally suspended. Despite this, international experts on Korea⁹ acknowledged that there were some positive aspects to Lee Myung-bak's North Korea policy, especially the attempt to persuade Pyongyang to adopt a rational approach to its

9 | Cf. Bradley O. Babson, "South-North Relations: Present Situation and Future Challenges and Opportunities", speech delivered at the conference Unification and the Korean Economy, 21/22 Oct 2012, Seoul. The conference was jointly organised by the Institute for Global Economics (IGE), the Korean Export-Import Bank, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), the Korea Development Institute (KDI) and the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE).

dealings with South Korea based on common interests and a sensible amount of give-and-take. This approach might have provided the basis for a respectful attitude towards dealing with each other and served as a prerequisite for a long-term process of reunification. North Korea, however, saw no material benefits in this policy and perceived it as an attempt by Seoul to force conditions such as denuclearisation on Pyongyang with the aim of promoting the South's long-term dominance of the Korean Peninsula.

CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IN SEOUL IN 2013: HOW WILL IT DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF NORTH KOREA?¹⁰

The topic of Korea's internal relations was debated with interest during South Korea's 2012 presidential elections, but it was not necessarily one of the key issues in the election. The manifestos of the various candidates who stood for election on 19 December 2012 were not markedly different on this issue. What was clear, however, was that both the conservative candidate Park Geun-hye, daughter of the former president Park Chung-hee, and the candidate from the progressive camp, Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party, wanted to make some changes to the country's North Korea policy. Park wanted to pursue a more careful approach, as she could not openly break with the policies of President Lee Myung-bak, her fellow party member, without losing support in the conservative Saenuri party. In contrast, Moon, as a former close ally of past president Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), wanted to revert to the "Sunshine Policy" that Roh had essentially carried over from his predecessor Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003). Moon, formerly President Roh's chief of staff and son of a displaced North Korean, was considered to be very much in favour of re-unification. His main goal was to put in place a comprehensive peace plan for the Korean Peninsula. He spoke in favour of more regional integration in Northeast Asia and a multilateral cooperation initiative, to be made possible through six-party talks.¹¹ North Korea's nuclear weapons

10 | The information in this section has been taken from statements made by close advisors to the presidential candidates on foreign and reunification policy issues during discussion forums organised by the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation (KCRC) on 6 Nov 2012 in Seoul.

11 | This refers to talks aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue that have been held predominantly in Beijing since 2003. The regular participants are the two Koreas, the

programme would be abandoned as part of a peace agreement to be concluded between North and South Korea. An internal Korean economic coalition would help to generate profits for both Koreas and so act as the basis for reunification and provide an economic boost to Korea as a whole. His defeat in the presidential elections of December 2012 not only ensured that Moon's political ambitions would come to nothing, but also acted as a pointer to the kind of North Korea policy that could be expected from the new head of state.¹²

Trust is the key word in the foreign and reunification policies of newly-elected president Park Geun-hye, who will be sworn in on 25 February 2013.¹³ She believes the lack of fundamental trust within internal Korean relations is the main reason for the current problems between North and

Park is willing to develop a humanitarian and cultural exchange with the North without preconditions, which should serve as the foundation for long-term cooperation.

South Korea.¹⁴ Experts see some similarities between her policies and those of President Lee-Myung-bak in terms of retaining certain ideas and principles. However, in contrast to Lee, Park is willing to develop a humanitarian and cultural exchange with the North without preconditions, which should serve as the foundation for long-term cooperation. As far as North Korea's nuclear programme is concerned, she is prepared to stand by her earlier statements and call for the programme to be stopped. There are three main strands to Park's position: the country's North Korea policy must be further developed; both North Korea and South Korea must be prepared to change and South Korea's North Korean policy should not be overhauled every time there is a change of government.

USA, China, Japan and Russia.

- 12 | Cf. Norbert Eschborn, "Park Geun-hye erreicht ihr Lebensziel", *KAS-Länderbericht*, 20 Dec 2012, <http://kas.de/korea/de/publications/33169> (accessed 22 Jan 2013).
- 13 | In the English translation, Ms Park's positions on foreign and reunification policy as well as on national security are therefore referred to by the title "Trustpolitik and a New Korea" by the Saenuri Party.
- 14 | An example of the problems that exist is the drastic reduction in the number of inter-Korean meetings and projects during President Lee Myung-bak's time in office (2008-2013) compared to the corresponding number under President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), cf. also Song Sang-ho, "Inter-Korean exchanges drop sharply under Lee", *The Korea Herald*, 19/20 Jan 2013, 3.

After the election, as her transitional team was preparing for her term in office, Park constantly repeated her position during discussions with high-ranking representatives from international governments and frequently confirmed that she was open to dialogue with the North, including the provision of humanitarian aid. However, in January 2013, the first doubts began surfacing in the media as to whether the country's North Korean policy during her time in office would really be able to effect change. One of the reasons for this was the surprising resignation from the transition team of an acknowledged expert on North Korea, Professor Choi Dae-seok, Head of the Institute for Unification Studies at the Ewha Women's University in Seoul. His resignation was never publicly explained, but members of the press assumed that he must have been overruled during discussions on North Korea by "inter-Korean hawks" within the transition team. Experts with close ties to the opposition speculated that, with Choi leaving, not much could really be expected in the future from the new government's North Korea policy. This pessimistic outlook was based on the common perception in expert circles that Choi and his support for dialogue and rapprochement with the North were the main thing, if not the only thing, that distinguished Park from her predecessor Lee when it came to North Korean policy. Added to this is the worry that policy could once again be dictated by those who favour use of the military over dialogue when it comes to the concept of "defence vs. dialogue" (as the English-speaking press in South Korea like to call it).

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NORTH KOREA AS THE SPRINGBOARD FOR REUNIFICATION?

In his 2013 New Year's Address, which was followed with great interest by the Western media in particular, Kim Jong-un, First Secretary of the North Korean "Workers' Party", spoke about internal Korean relations as one of the six central topics of his speech. What he had to say was interpreted by experts as being more conciliatory towards the South than previous statements by the regime. This may have been partly because, with the new presidency of Park Geun-hye on the horizon, Pyongyang wanted to test the willingness of the new head of state to enter into

dialogue with the North (critics are concerned that this could turn out to be a willingness to compromise). To be fair, this was nothing new in terms of North Korea's policy, as the regime's New Year's Addresses in 2010 and 2011 also paid lip service to the idea of improving internal Korean relations.¹⁵ Kim Jong-un's specific references to the joint declarations released after the North-South summit meetings of 15 June 2000 and 4 October 2007 and his desire to see them fully implemented would appear to be ostensibly in line with this approach. Experienced observers in the South fear that this may be a strategy aimed at splitting South Korean public opinion and driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington, with Pyongyang ensuring that the options of "dialogue vs. confrontation" or "war vs. peace" are never far from the public debate. The fact that North Korea wants to replace the existing ceasefire agreement with a peace treaty is seen by some as

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clear evidence of such a strategy. In critically analysing the New Year's Address, particular attention has also been paid to the opinion of some of those in the West who have warned against a romanticised false assessment of Kim's words and have called for an in-depth analysis of his true intentions.¹⁶ This would appear to be fully justified, as, in light of the growing repressive measures introduced by the regime during Kim Jong-un's first year of rule (including further restrictions on freedom of assembly and freedom of travel, the strengthening of the country's borders and the procurement of several thousand surveillance cameras to be installed throughout the country, etc.) it would be wrong to speak of any genuine reform in the North. A popular uprising against the regime in North Korea – along the lines of the German example – which might then serve as a springboard for a process of reunification, can also be considered highly unlikely, given the prevailing circumstances in the country.

15 | Cf. Kim Jong-un, "The 2013 New Year's Address", 3 Jan 2013, http://kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_05_01.jsp?bid=EINGINSIGN&page=1 (accessed 22 Jan 2013).

16 | Christopher Green, "Ancestor Shadows and Strategic Fog: A Parting Shot at the Kim Jong-un Speech", *sino-nk*, 4 Jan 2013, <http://sinonk.com/2013/01/04/ancestor-shadows-and-strategic-fog-a-parting-shot-at-the-kim-jong-un-speech> (accessed 22 Jan 2013).

THE VALUE AND COMPLEXITY OF A POTENTIAL KOREAN REUNIFICATION

Any factual analysis of the relevant foreign policy, security and economic issues would show conclusively that, in the medium and long term, reunification could be of great benefit not only to the Korean Peninsula itself, but also to the wider Northeast Asia region as a whole.



Despite Kim Jong-un's New Year's Address: There can be no talk of reforms. | Source: © Norbert Eschborn.

Foreign Policy and Regional Security

One of the great benefits of reunification would be improved regional security through the re-establishment of peaceful relations. Currently "the unpredictable (conventional and nuclear) threat and aggression potential of North Korea represents the highest risk in the area of security policy

in Northeast Asia".¹⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Seoul therefore sees creating a reunified Korea as a necessary prerequisite to creating a stable security environment in the region, and there could even be a peace dividend for those neighbouring countries who are willing and able to support the reunification process.¹⁸

However, it is also important to recognise the reservations regarding Korean reunification that may still be held by certain stakeholders in the region, particularly China. Officially, Beijing has always supported the principle of Korean reunification by peaceful means. However, it has been more or less openly insinuated in Seoul that Beijing has no real interest in Korean reunification because China wants to keep North Korea as a *de facto* buffer state¹⁹ between itself and a South Korea that has strong ties to the USA. Beijing is also afraid of a mass influx of refugees into its own border provinces in the event that a rapid collapse of the Kim regime leads to a crisis situation. During the presidential elections, the tone of the campaigns was overwhelmingly positive towards China, which is hardly surprising given that South Korea is dependent on China for nearly 30 per cent of its exports. However, this has not prevented government representatives in Seoul from making indirect but nevertheless pointed criticisms of Beijing's actual position on the reunification issue. For example, South Korea's Unification Minister, Yu Woo-ik, stressed in autumn 2012 that "neighbouring countries now need to do away with their old ways of thinking regarding Korean unification. They should break free from the false impression that stable management of the status quo on the Korean peninsula best serves their national interests. This is a groundless misconception that needs to be closely reviewed."²⁰ According to Yu, this new way of thinking is all the more urgent as Northeast

17 | Peter Hefele, Benjamin Barth and Johanna Tensi, "Military build-up Dynamics and Conflict Management in East and Southeast Asia", *KAS International Reports*, 6/2012, 82, <http://kas.de/wf/en/33.31266> (accessed 24 Jan 2013).

18 | Kim Sung-hwan, luncheon speech, conference Unification and the Korean Economy, Seoul, 21/22 Oct 2012.

19 | During confidential talks, South Korean officials sometimes use the term "tribute state" when referring to North Korea, an allusion to the substantial amount of raw materials that Pyongyang delivers to Beijing under what are clearly preferential terms.

20 | Yu Woo-ik, keynote address, conference Unification and the Korean Economy, Seoul, 21/22 Jan 2012.

Asia is currently “riding a wave of paradigm shifts” and the Korean Peninsula cannot be excluded from these changes. A change in internal Korean relations is therefore inevitable. In light of this assessment of China’s real position on the issue, it is clear that not a great deal of credence has been given to the disclosures by Wikileaks over recent years suggesting that, even before the change of leadership in 2012, China’s leaders were tending towards the view that a reunified Korea under the leadership of South Korea might be acceptable, just as long as a unified Korea did not position itself in opposition to China.²¹ This notion seems less far-fetched when we consider that China now has a younger leadership elite who, in the spirit of the times, might be prepared in future to look at the considerable material and foreign policy support they provide to North Korea in a potentially more pragmatic and less ideological way than their predecessors and come to a different set of conclusions as a result. What does seem certain is that Beijing does not appreciate North Korea’s reluctance over recent years to accept outside advice, even from China, and it may even have some concerns about China’s long-term international reputation, given the nature of the regime they are supporting in Pyongyang. It would seem fair to assume, therefore, that there might be a certain openness on the part of Beijing to the idea of a solution based on a “unified Korea” as one of its preferred options for the Korean Peninsula, at least in the medium term.

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Support for Korean reunification constitutes official U.S. foreign policy, but we can only speculate as to the political significance of the somewhat sober and unenthusiastic approach to this issue adopted by Washington.²² In a recent statement on bilateral relations, the U.S. ambassador to

21 | Cf. Simon Tisdall, “WikiLeaks row: China wants Korean reunification, officials confirm”, *The Guardian*, 30 Nov 2010, <http://guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/30/china-wants-korean-reunification> (accessed 12 Nov 2012).

22 | The subject is not mentioned at all on the White House website. Significantly, the main reference on the U.S. Department of State website is to be found in the section “US relations with North Korea”: “The United States supports the peaceful reunification of Korea on terms acceptable to the Korean people and recognises that the future of the Korean Peninsula is primarily a matter for them to decide.”, <http://state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm> (accessed 19 Nov 2012).

South Korea made no mention of reunification.²³ It is no wonder that there is a widespread feeling amongst many of the Koreans from the student generation of the 1980s, i.e. those who were actively involved in the country's democracy movement, many of whom now have leading positions at universities, that the USA must bear at least some of the blame for the division of the country into two parts.²⁴

Improving peace and security on the Korean Peninsula necessarily means finding a solution to the problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons, if only because a unified, but nuclear Korea "is the last thing regional powers want to see on the Korean Peninsula", as Seoul has made very clear.²⁵ A unified Korea would have a significant impact on the existing balance of power in the region and the South Koreans believe that the six-party talks that have been ongoing since 2009 are the ideal vehicle to address the implications of such a reunification. In the long term this could also serve as a forum for creating a multilateral security architecture for the East Asia region as a whole. Any progress in this direction would have to include the replacement of the existing Korean War ceasefire agreement with some form of peace agreement. But this too will only be possible with the cooperation of all the countries that have vital interests associated with the Korean Peninsula, and South Korea is well aware of this fact. For Seoul "it is of paramount importance, inter alia, to develop the Korea-China strategic cooperation in harmony with the Korea-U.S. alliance"²⁶ – something that will require a real balancing act to be undertaken by the two rival major powers.

Costs and Economic Prospects

So far, the government of President Lee Myung-bak has defined its position on the politically highly-sensitive issue of the costs of reunification as follows: "Unification costs would be substantially big, but certainly smaller than the tremendous amount of the cost we have to pay to maintain

23 | Sung Y. Kim, "ROK-U.S. Relations and Alliance", speech at the 45th Korean Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) Defense Forum, Seoul, 16 Nov 2012.

24 | Cf. Daniel Tudor, *Korea. The Impossible Country*, Tokio, 2012, 151.

25 | Kim Sung-hwan, n. 18.

26 | Ibid.

peace and stability under the divided nation. We have also clarified that unification costs are a one-time payment, while the benefits of the unification will be generated over a long period of time into the future.”²⁷ Considering the substantial differences between North and South Korea in terms of per capita income, standard of living, development and size of population, it is reasonable to assume that South Korea would have to bear the lion’s share of the costs of reunification and that these costs would be significantly higher than was the case in Germany. For this reason, an analysis of the economic benefits of reunification becomes all the more important when attempting to weigh up the trade-offs and returns of such an investment.

The debate on just how high the costs of reunification might be has been going on for more than 20 years. However, international experts²⁸ have criticised the inadequate or complete lack of economic modelling carried out by South Korean economists and think tanks. They argue that such models are necessary not only to ensure that the public discussions on what may well be a decisive issue in the reunification debate are based on accurate information, but also to ensure that public and elected officials are given expert advice and reliable data on which to base their decisions. This kind of criticism would appear to be justified, as estimates carried out between 1991 and 2012²⁹ range from 500 to 3,200 billion U.S. dollars, or an annual expenditure of between seven and twelve per cent of South Korea’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for a period of anywhere between ten and 40 years. Some of these estimates were arrived at by simply doubling the known costs of Germany’s reunification, based on the assumption that Korea’s reunification would be twice as expensive because North Korea’s economic potential is significantly lower than that of the GDR. What is clear to Korean experts, however, is that their country would have to ensure that the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were closely involved, in the

Estimates of the costs of reunification carried out between 1991 and 2012 range from 500 to 3,200 billion U.S. dollars.

27 | Yu Woo-ik, n. 20.

28 | E.g. the economist Michael Funke, who teaches at the University of Hamburg, during the conference Unification and the Korean Economy, Seoul, 21/22 Oct 2012.

29 | A detailed breakdown will not be provided at this point as there are many sources currently available on the internet.

early phases of reunification at least, even if the bulk of the costs were covered by transfer payments from the South to the North.

In 2009, Goldman Sachs produced an analysis of the economic potential of a unified Korea.³⁰ The report suggested that within 40 years the GDP of a unified Korea could exceed those of France, Germany and possibly even Japan. However, this assumed a gradual integration of the North and South and not an "instant German-style unification".

In summing up, the author came to the conclusion that, while the North Korean planned economy may be stagnating and on the brink of collapse, it also had untapped potential in the form of valuable raw materials (the so-called "rare earth metals" that are particularly important in IT and communications technology),

North Korea's working population will grow at a rate of 1.4 per cent per annum over a period of ten years, while South Korea's will begin to shrink.

along with enormous potential for growth in productivity. Kwon believes that the country's human resource potential also warrants closer consideration. By looking at data from 2007, he concluded that North Korea's population is growing twice as quickly as that of the South and that its working population will grow at a rate of 1.4 per cent per annum over a period of ten years, while South Korea's will actually begin to shrink after 2013. The military could also potentially provide a significant addition to the workforce, as it currently represents around 16 per cent of the country's males between the ages of 15 and 64.³¹

With the shift in the global economy towards East Asia, this combination of capital, human resources and raw materials could potentially turn a unified Korea into a major driver of growth in the region and at the same time further increase its geopolitical significance. For example, the overland transport of goods between Eurasia and the Asia Pacific region could become quicker and safer. The development of North Korea's domestic economy could also act as an incentive to neighbouring Russia and China to integrate their underdeveloped regions around the borders with North Korea and set in motion an effective cross-border structural policy.

30 | Goohon Kwon, "A United Korea? Reassessing North Korea Risks", *Global Economics Paper*, 188, 21 Sep 2009.

31 | *Ibid.*, 11.

The Korean Peninsula currently represents one of the world's most dangerous potential flashpoints. This fact has also been recognised by the international financial markets in the shape of the so-called "Korea discount", a regular devaluing of South Korean shares by investors who believe that the long-term risk of investing in the country has to be taken into account. However, if there were a unified, democratic Korea, then resource-intensive confrontations could be abandoned in favour of economic cooperation and so provide a "meaningful version of 'turning swords into ploughshares'".³² Behind these kinds of statements there is often a belief amongst political decision-makers in Seoul that their country could act as a link between Eurasia and the Asia Pacific region, or at the very least could be one of the major players in the Asia Pacific region. While they are aware of the financial risks involved in reunification, they generally tend to believe that it represents a unique opportunity they cannot afford to ignore.

REUNIFICATION AS AN ONGOING POLITICAL CHALLENGE

When viewed against the rapid political and economic changes that have swept the world over recent years, Korean reunification now appears to be a realistic prospect rather than a forlorn hope, even if the timetable still remains unclear. However, over the last 60 years North and South Korea have been heading down very different paths – indeed many in the South believe the two countries could not be any more different. These differences are one of the reasons why the South Korean public has so many doubts about reunification.

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However, there is also public discussion about the fact that reunification is becoming an unavoidable historical challenge for Korea. Experts are unanimous in believing that when this historic phase commences, South Korea's political leaders must be totally prepared to deal with this critical moment. As South Korean Finance Minister Bahk Jaewan put it in 2012, "we must remember that our fear may come

from our ignorance".³³ With this comment, he was referring to the widespread ignorance within Korean society of the political factors and financial costs of unification.

The role of German reunification and its function as a role model in this debate is somewhat contradictory. There has been no lack of statements – particularly from politicians and official bodies – on the South Korean side about how much can be learned from the German model.³⁴ After carrying out a plethora of detailed analyses on the various aspects of German reunification, the South Koreans must be aware that the geopolitical, demographic and economic conditions in the two examples are so different that the German experience can hardly be used as a model at all,

In Seoul, German reunification is not viewed as being historically unavoidable, but as the wonderful result of a unique historical constellation.

but at best as an inspiration. Anyone who studies South Korea's praise for the German model will in fact realise that it mainly revolves around how to avoid the excessive mistakes it believes were committed during the German reunification process which must absolutely be avoided in the much thornier case of Korea. In Seoul, German reunification is not viewed as being historically unavoidable, but as the wonderful result of a unique historical constellation. Behind closed doors there are of course other, much more critical views being expressed, such as the assessment that it was a "costly mistake". The likelihood of making such a mistake can be ruled out in the reunification method preferred by many in South Korea: namely, a gradual integration of North and South Korea over the space of many years or decades, rather than the kind of "instant reunification" that happened in Germany. Such a process could lead to cooperation, then confederation, and finally unification.³⁵

33 | Bahk Jaewan (Minister for Strategy and Finance), "Unification from the Perspective of New Possibilities in the Korean Economy", dinner speech at the conference Unification and the Korean Economy, Seoul, 21/22 Oct 2012.

34 | These should be taken with a pinch of salt, as is shown by German reports on the German-Korean consultation committee for Korean reunification; cf. Jochen-Martin Gutsch, "Frontbesuch in Seoul", *Der Spiegel*, 2 Jan 2012, <http://spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-83422502.html> (accessed 13 Nov 2012).

35 | This is referred to by experts as the "China-Hong Kong model".

In future, every head of state in Seoul will be faced with the challenge of how to harmonise the Republic of Korea's constitutional aspirations of peaceful reunification with the country's social realities, in so far as emphasis is placed on Realpolitik by the "Blue House" (the President's official residence). All major surveys point to the fact that those who bear the main responsibility for creating reunification – today's generation of 30-somethings and South Korean youth – are generally hesitant, sceptical or even totally reject the project because they do not feel it has any relevance to their own lives and future prospects. In autumn 2012, the incumbent conservative government recognised the existence of this problem and described it with an unusual degree of clarity: "Unfortunately, today we are at a point in time when younger South Koreans enjoy a greater degree of prosperity than any other generation of South Koreans [sic!] lived before them. The prosperity has made them become complacent while being less conscious of the need for national unification. In the meantime, those who have focused on the cost Germany had to pay for its unification became hesitant to support Korean unification."³⁶

As with all statements containing a similarly accusatory undertone, many of the counter-arguments turn back on the accuser. Firstly, the current government has done little of note to increase the South Korean public's awareness of the advantages of reunification. It merely paid lip service with its "unification jars" initiative that was launched in the summer of 2012.³⁷ Secondly, observers note that there has been a lack of effective, serious initiatives to provide civic education in schools and colleges on these issues. It is hardly surprising that school children and students say they have a negative view of North Korea when they are simply taught that their neighbour is their communist enemy. They have very little knowledge or appreciation of the many thousand years of history of a united Korea before 1945, nor is there much sympathy for the sufferings of the oppressed people of North Korea. The integration of North Korean refugees

36 | Cf. Yu Woo-ik, n. 20.

37 | These ceramic jars were specially designed and inscribed for the collection of voluntary donations towards reunification, but to date they have had only moderate success. Cf. Shin Hyon-hee, "Unification jars' latest effort to raise funds", *The Korea Herald*, 26 Jun 2012. Unconfirmed diplomatic sources say that only 320,000 U.S. dollars has been donated since the fund was set up in the middle of 2012.

into South Korean society is also beset with problems caused by the sense of foreignness experienced on both sides. This all has the effect that today's young generation in the South are gradually moving away from "a common desire for unity"³⁸ and explains the indifference and scepticism displayed by young South Koreans towards the idea of reunification. Thirdly, their government deliberately denies them opportunities to learn more about the realities of life in North Korea. Whereas any foreign tourist visiting Seoul can easily book a bus trip to the border and enter the Joint Security Area on the North Korean border, this is only allowed for South Koreans if they obtain official permission in advance. It is a criminal offence under South Korean law to call up North Korean websites. Concern about escalating reunification costs in debates on the subject is often the first of many excuses used to avoid dealing with a topic that is considered fundamentally unpleasant and inopportune. This flies in the face of official assurances that people should not become complacent about prosperity but should use the power and impetus that has transformed South Korea from an aid recipient into a donor country³⁹ in the service of achieving the goal of reunification.⁴⁰

In 1990 Helmut Kohl warned that a country that shrinks from unification for financial reasons is abdicating its role in history.⁴¹ This warning does not as yet seem to have been taken seriously in the case of Korea. Over the coming years, the economically successful South Koreans, with their ambitions to be major international players in many areas, will have to explain to the world whether reunification of the Korean peninsula is really "an imperative that sets the heart racing"⁴² or merely a pipe dream on the part of its people.

38 | Cf. Hayoon Jung, lecture given at the symposium Social cohesion and political education after unification: Germany and Korea, 14 Nov 2012, Seoul. The symposium was jointly organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), the Korean Association for Democratic Civic Education (KADE) and the office of the Minister for Special Affairs (OMSA).

39 | In 2009, the Republic of Korea joined the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), and hence received the status of donor country.

40 | Yu Woo-ik, n. 20.

41 | Helmut Kohl, *Vom Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung. Meine Erinnerungen*, Knauer, München, 2009, 269.

42 | Kim Sung-hwan, n. 18.