

The German-Korean Unification Parallel

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This paper plots the greater difficulties of future Korean unification through a comparison with Germany 1989/90. The balance of forces favors a more politicized, more expensive, and more internationally contested Korean unification course than in Germany. Domestically: there are more North Koreans than there were East Germans, and they are much poorer. There are fewer South Koreans than there were West Germans, and they are less wealthy also. South Korea's state strength or capacity is lower than West Germany's was, while North Korea is a semi-failed state, even by East German standards. So, fewer people with a lower GDP per capita in a weaker system will support more people with less wealth from a worse system. Internationally: today's external patron (the United States) of the free Korean half is weakening, while the external patron (China) of the communist half is strengthening. The opposite was true of the United States and West Germany, and the Soviet Union and East Germany, in 1989. Today's northern patron (China) is trying to push further into the Asian continent, while yesterday's eastern patron (the Soviet Union) was looking for an exit from central Europe. Chinese peninsular intervention is therefore easier, while U.S. support for South Korea's unification terms will be more difficult.

Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, East Germany, West Germany, China, United States, Unification

At some point, Kim Jong Il will die. Because the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) is such a highly personalized system, the passing of the "Dear Leader" will have institutional impacts that far exceed the passing of leaders in office in other systems. Dictatorships regularly encounter generational and institutional turmoil in such transitions, and North Korea is more rickety than most. So it is widely expected that the transition to new leadership will be difficult and may indeed lead to the state's breakdown. President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea (ROK), for example, has publicly argued for a "unification tax" to prepare South Korea for the impending burden of unity.¹ North Korea has only gone through one leadership transition since 1945; hence this impending second one will inevitably be a huge disruption with the ever-present possibility of systemic collapse.

This article begins in this rising likelihood of systemic collapse to "pattern-match"² impending Korean unification against the best-known and most likely model for such unification—Germany in 1989/90. The transition to Kim Jong Il's son, Kim

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Jong Un, will be yet the latest in an accelerating series of crises burdening the DPRK system, raising yet further the prospects of regime implosion. This likelihood justifies the growing contingency planning by the ROK government³ and therefore the “counterfactual” parallel developed in this essay.

This paper’s treatment of North Korea is not a counterfactual in the strict sense of an alternative history of *past* events.⁴ Rather it posits a possible *future* history. Nevertheless, the methodology of counterfactualism—generating new insights based on reasonable and credible variations on known data points⁵—is retained. The wide agreement that a North Korean collapse is almost inevitable at some point sustains the counterfactual pattern-matching methodological choice.⁶ North Korea and East Germany, on the other hand, and West Germany and South Korea, on the other, are “most-similar” cases along the benchmark of divided states’ competition and unification.⁷ This article is a “structured, focused comparison”⁸ of them to suggest future probabilities about Korea’s unification course.

This paper’s central claim is that Korean unification will be more expensive, more politically challenging to South Korea’s institutions, and more internationally contested than Germany’s experience. North Korea is much worse off than was the German Democratic Republic (GDR), while South Korea is less wealthy and, more importantly, less politically capable of handling unification than the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was. And the regional balance of forces is more punishing this time through as well. The GDR’s patron, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was collapsing in the late 1980s, while the People’s Republic of China (PRC), North Korea’s patron, is rising today. Conversely the American patron of West Germany was rising to its postwar power peak in the late 1980s, while today the United States is widely perceived as declining.⁹ Nor is there any local dynamic of anti-communist revolution or supportive neighbors in East Asia to spur the process along, as there existed in Europe in 1989/90. North Korea has no neighbors whose own revolutions might catalyze and normatively situate a North Korea collapse, while Japan is less reconciled to a South Korean-led unification than the FRG’s neighbors were to German unification.

In short, the balance of local forces favors a harder slog to build a unified Republic of Korea, with the PRC particularly likely to push its preferences hard. China will almost certainly demand constraints on U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) in a unified ROK, such as no USFK north of the current demilitarized zone (DMZ)—just as the USSR sought to keep NATO forces out of the former GDR—or perhaps even the removal of USFK altogether from a unified ROK. The latter possibility, a “Finlandization” of a unified ROK, represents a painful choice ROK elites have sought to avoid for decades: regionally demanded neutralization in exchange for unity.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section argues that the leadership transition represents a unique historical-institutional juncture for the DPRK that may in fact bring the much-prophesied collapse, so justifying the most-similar counterfactual comparison developed in the paper. The second section sketches the internal parallels between the DRPK and GDR, and between the ROK and FRG, as well as the similarities in the external geopolitical environment. This is often presented anecdotally in the media as a point of reference, but this paper tries to expand upon this hitherto vaguely drawn comparison.¹⁰ The third section maps the differences, both internal and external, focusing particularly on the differences between the PRC and USSR, and between the United States then and now. This broaches the concluding remarks on the growing likelihood of the Finlandization choice presented by the trilemma of waning U.S.

power, waxing Chinese power, and the continuing Korean desire for national unity. ROK policymakers would do well to debate this issue intensively now, rather than springing it on the Korean public once the chaotic and hugely emotional process of unification has started.

North Korea's Troubled Transition

Divining North Korea's future is kremlinology on par with the classic form of that art, yet arguably harder. North Korea is notoriously unpredictable and opaque, and to be sure, North Korea always seems on the verge of collapse. Indeed, North Korea astonishes for its ability to withstand extraordinary turmoil, yet somehow muddle through.¹¹ The DPRK has survived: its decisive delegitimation as a meaningful Korean political alternative by South Korea by the 1980s, the end of the Cold War and the elimination of Soviet subsidies, the death of Kim Il Sung, the "Arduous March" of the 1990s famines, its inclusion in George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil," the recent end of the "Sunshine Policy" by South Korea, and the DPRK's current extreme isolation and near universal disdain under the United Nations (UN) sanction regime for its nuclear program. Indeed history is littered with predictions that North Korea is on its last legs.¹²

Yet this time may be different.¹³ The regime is more vulnerable to collapse than at any point since the conclusion of the Cold War. A leadership transition to an untested, scarcely known youngster (by North Korea's Confucian, militarist, and gerontocratic standards) opens a unique window of extreme vulnerability for a hyper-patrimonial, hyper-centralized system,¹⁴ and this dangerous exposure is yet worsened by a lengthening list of unmet structural challenges to the regime. In short, the likelihood of implosion will be higher than usual in the coming years.

And signs are growing that at least ROK decision-makers believe that North Korea may collapse soon.¹⁵ North Korea's economy is widely derided as a basket case; 2009's botched currency reform led to a previously unheard of outbreak of rioting and civil protest.¹⁶ The recent UN sanctions in response to nuclear weapons development have bitten deeply, as has the Lee administration's shut-off of aid and assistance. North Korea is once again begging for food aid, and famine is once again a distinct possibility this year.¹⁷ The end of the Six-Party Talks and increasing inability of the North Korea to play Japan, the United States and South Korea off against each other for gain in that context mean the DRPK is increasingly reliant solely on China for its very survival.¹⁸ This is raising the debate in Beijing on whether to cut off North Korea at some point. The drive for nuclear weapons has further deepened the North's pariah status, and the "Arab Spring" is depriving North Korea of clients for nuclear transfers, as well as the autocratic "friends" who provide it with normative cover in global public opinion. North Korea's erratic behavior in 2010—the sinking of the *Cheonan*, the dramatic revelation of an advanced uranium program, and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island—have driven South Korea yet further away: dissuading South Korean public opinion from any return to the Sunshine Policy era's generosity, spurring a major Southern defense build-up that North Korea can ill-afford to match, and aiding South Korean anti-communist conservatives to once again take the South Korean presidency in 2012.¹⁹

These structural pressures only worsen the growing tension of the imminent succes-

sion. Kim Jong Un is a choice of desperation, an especially weak pick for a system so centered on one “sun king”-style ruler.²⁰ Kim Jong Un does not have the regime connections of his father, Kim Jong Il, nor the charisma of his grandfather, Kim Il Sung. As a young man with little experience in North Korea’s central institutions—the army (the Korean People’s Army, KPA) and communist party (Korean Worker’s Party, KWP)—Kim Jong Un’s promotion violates both traditional Confucian-Korean norms of authority (of age and competence),²¹ as well as Stalinist systems’ usual “rules” (of powerful insiders jockeying for position).²² Like most late Stalinist systems (such as China in the 1970s or the USSR in the late 70s and early 80s), North Korea is badly factionalized, with the extended Kim family papering over the cracks with a web of fraternal relationships. It seems unlikely that the central players of this rickety system will easily acquiesce to a little-known young man with few relationships and no military record. Kim Jong Il was groomed for decades by Kim Il Sung to hold the wobbly regime together, yet even Kim Jong Il has had to placate powerful factions in the system, because he could not rule as uncontestedly as did his father.

Particularly, Kim Jong Il has felt it necessary to lead the KPA directly, probably to forestall a coup.²³ Kim Jong Il has ruled neither as a civilian president (a position eternally granted to Kim Il Sung), nor as a party-man from the KWP. Instead, he implicitly governs through his chairmanship of the National Defense Commission, in order to directly oversee the military. And Kim Jong Il has attempted to buy off the KPA with the *son-gun* constitutional revisions and continuing generous access to the badly constrained NK budget.²⁴ Any fig leaf of Marxist ideology or *juche* has been dropped, and indeed, many observers believe that NK is already a military dictatorship in all but name.²⁵

In this environment of factionalization and hyper-militarization, and because Kim Jong Un must be rushed through the grooming process, given his father’s ailing health, a post-Kim Jong Il power struggle seems likely. Elsewhere the author has argued²⁶ that Kim Jong Un is likely to emerge as a familial figurehead as the KPA, the KWP, and Kim family insiders jockey for power and regency. Indeed, this is a likely explanation for the bad behavior of 2010: insiders have already begun competing for position and influence in the anticipated *nouveau regime*.²⁷ Should the coming power struggle tear North Korea’s shallow institutions apart, North Korea will likely collapse into South Korea’s lap in pieces, as did the GDR into the FRG’s. Given the North Korean elite’s antipathy to reunification with South Korea, reunification will almost certainly follow the below-outlined German model—rapid unification forced on the South by an unforeseen communist-half implosion—rather than a European Union or PRC-Taiwan model of gradualism.²⁸

Korean elites often anticipate a gradual reunification, along the lines of China and Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.²⁹ Yet, as sketched below, North Korea is so economically dysfunctional and politically illegitimate, that implosions like those of communist Eastern Europe seem far more likely than evolution. The contemporary Arab Spring revolts remind us again just how extreme popular unrest can become after the “lid comes off” highly repressive regimes. North Korea’s “lesson” from the revolts will likely be to repress yet further (and retain its nuclear and missile programs),³⁰ but this will worsen, not alleviate, the middle-term systemic crisis discussed above. At some point, the system will give out, if only from sheer exhaustion, as in the Arab Spring autocracies, and unification will appear a natural, emotionally compelling alternative to Northern chaos. This is what happened in East Germany too. Once the

regime depleted Soviet support, the GDR fell apart almost overnight, and a head-long, emotional rush to unification began. Given that North Korea is governed even worse than the GDR, the same is likely to happen on the Korean peninsula.

Similarities between the German and Korean Divisions

For the intuitive reasons enlarged upon below, Germany is an attractive model for Korean unification planning.³¹

Domestic Parallels

Both nations—Germany and Korea—are divided artificially by the Cold War.³² Both sides believe the “two states, one people” outcome is temporary.³³ All four states face a permanent constitutional legitimacy crisis because of the obvious question why these separated states exist at all.³⁴ As such, all states divided by the Cold War were intensely competitive with the other.³⁵ Outracing each other economically, militarily, even at the Olympics, became central to proving which was the “real” Korea, Germany, Vietnam, China, Yemen, and so on. North Korea even bombed a South Korean airliner in 1987 to try to “convince” Seoul not to host the 1988 Olympics. Mutual coexistence is nearly impossible given the broad popular belief in the artificiality of national division. Hence each has a limited time window to race the other into international legitimacy. As one or the other pulls away in global opinion—as it becomes “the” Korea or “the” Germany in banal, everyday places like airports, hotels, popular movies, or cable news—it will become ever harder to justify maintaining the division.

North Korea and East Germany are both communist, with all the attendant problems of 20th century “real existing socialism.”³⁶ They are domestically illegitimate outside their own elites. Those elites are a corrupted “red bourgeoisie” for whom regime ideology became window dressing for oligarchy and luxury.³⁷ Neither can produce anything close to the quality and quantity of goods necessary to keep their populations happy—populations further disenchanted by what they see on the other side of the fence. Both have a brutal secret police (for which the East German *Stasi* became a model for Kim Il Sung). They are both noticeably poorer than the Westernized competitor, and this creates unending pressure on the government to change.³⁸ All these factors create a disconsolate citizenry that would push out the regime if given the chance. Hence, any manner of internal democratization or liberalization would end the regime as we know it. In the end, both communist half-states must seal off their borders to prevent exodus; they are de facto national prisons.

Underperformance vis-à-vis the Westernized competitor slowly takes its toll internationally. The competition leads to hyper-militarization in the communist half, which only worsens the performance gap. Perhaps the best marker of the communist economic failure after a few decades was that West Germany simply became “Germany” and South Korea just “Korea.” To indicate the communist half in everyday speech, one had to affix the directional adjective “East” or “North,” the implication being that East Germany and North Korea were somehow dead-ends of history. By the 1980s, both North Korea and East Germany had effectively lost the race discussed above.

By contrast, the Westernized, “Free World” half of the nation is a wealthy, functioning

democracy that has otherwise joined the world's technologies, markets, and institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization [WTO], globalization, and so forth). This makes the communist half look even more like a basket case. Gradual but sustained wealth and demographic accumulation have dramatically altered the balance against the communist half. The free half also regularly receives communist refugees voting with their feet.

International Parallels

South Korea and West Germany are clearly supported by the United States and its wealthy democratic allies. Both belong to the American/democratic alliance system and enjoy the widespread moral legitimacy emanating from that.³⁹ They are net contributors to their own defense, clearly outclassing the communist half strategically. It is widely assumed that an unaided communist half would lose an “intra-national” conflict.⁴⁰

Conversely, North Korea and East Germany grew increasingly dependent on their respective external patrons, becoming practically client states of a communist behemoth. The DPRK has drifted back and forth between the USSR and PRC, but it has always required a subsidizing patron.⁴¹ The patron of both finds them troublesome and expensive.⁴² Both field a military based around obsolete WWII assumptions of massed infantry and armor formations. Yet given that neither can likely win a conflict with the other half, the strategically obsolete military establishment is really targeted at its own people, for regime maintenance. Given such chronic internal unhappiness and global illegitimacy, the external patron regularly debates the merits of cutting the client loose for the sake of larger geopolitical goals (the “Sinatra Doctrine”).⁴³

Beyond the patrons, the local neighborhood has accustomed itself to the division and may actually prefer it (especially Japan⁴⁴ and France,⁴⁵ although few will say that publicly). There is little impetus from outsiders to end the split. Japan will be hesitant, and Russia, under a Putinist anti-Western foreign policy, may read Korean unification on Southern terms as a “Western” victory to be forestalled or obfuscated as much as possible.⁴⁶ Eventually, French and British public opinion came around on German unification as euphoric pictures of Germans hammering on the Berlin Wall spread round the world. Similar feelings will likely grip Northeast Asian publics sympathetic to the goal of nationalist communal unity⁴⁷—once they see emotionally charged family reunions and tearful Koreans tearing down the barbwire fences of the DMZ. But until then, Asian regional players will likely offer little more than the pro forma, pro-unification diplomatic boilerplate they have given for years, as did Western European governments in the German case.

Differences between the German and Korean Divisions

The analysis so far supports the general, intuitive analogy between the Germans and the Koreans. North Korea particularly shares many structural characteristics which suggest that the costs of unification will be *at least* as high per capita as Germany's. However, the differences sketched below are just as striking and forebode a much more expensive per capita unification cost, a serious risk of institutional overload in the post-unification ROK, and a less forgiving international environment that will constrain Korean unification choices more than Germany's.

Domestic Differences

East Germany was much wealthier than North Korea is now. It was the “leading” economic performer of the East Bloc. The USSR realized how central the German competition was to the overall Cold War competition, so East Germany was heavily subsidized.⁴⁸ West Berlin’s location in the heart of East Germany was used by the West German government for propaganda purposes. Huge billboards, skyscrapers, and bright, flashing neon signs advertised the fun and openness of Western lifestyle, and the USSR was forced to compete with heavy support to modernize East Germany as a direct and obvious global comparison case. In contrast, North Korea was never as important to the Soviet bloc.⁴⁹ The Cold War contest in Asia was less stark than in Europe and heavily overlain with post-colonial, nationalist, and Sino-Soviet competitive elements.⁵⁰ Because the Asian Cold War contest was never so sharp, and hermit-kingdom North Korea never as exposed as the GDR (due to West Berlin’s uniquely provocative location), North Korea never received such big handouts. Its relationships with its patrons have always been more fractious than the USSR-GDR one. As a result, North Korea is much weaker than East Germany was in 1989. North Korea’s GDP per capita today is \$1,800 (in 2010 US dollars);⁵¹ East Germany’s in 1989 was \$10,000 (in 1989 US dollars).⁵² Adjusted for inflation,⁵³ East Germany’s 2010 GDP per capita would approximate \$18,000, a staggering order of magnitude greater than the median North Korean’s current annual income (less than \$5 a day). East Germany never endured such poverty nor the affiliated and increasingly regular famines of North Korea.

Beyond the massive economic disparity, North Korea is more than just a “run of the mill” dictatorship, like Batista’s Cuba or contemporary Burma. It is an Orwellian dystopia, more Stalinist than even the Soviet Union, Maoist China, or Albania ever were—matched perhaps only by Pol Pot’s Cambodia.⁵⁴ East Germany too was a police state⁵⁵ but never plumbed the depths of repression North Korea has. Northern defectors in the South suffer from extreme psychological trauma from life in North Korea and often require psychiatric counseling beyond the expected acclimatization needs.⁵⁶ Fixing North Korea will not simply cost huge sums—that is well known. It will also require something akin to nationwide psychiatric care for millions of mentally brutalized “Winston Smiths,” the main character from Orwell’s *1984*. This will be an event unheard of in the annals of mental health.⁵⁷

On just about every other benchmark conceivable, Orwellian North Korea is worse off than East Germany: environmental management, infrastructure, labor productivity, health care, education, technology, transportation, agriculture, social trust, and so on. The per person cost of Korean unification is likely to be vastly higher, because North Korea is so much further behind in almost every way than East Germany was and North Koreans are so much poorer. Estimates of Korean unification could begin with these figures: West Germany has transferred 1.2 trillion euros to the roughly 16 million people of East Germany between unification and 2003 and has transferred two trillion euros up to 2009.⁵⁸ Yet North Korea has more people (23 million) than East Germany had, and those people are significantly poorer per person too (\$1,800 vs \$18,000 [2010 USD] per capita). So the 2 trillion euros figure is likely *too low* for the North Korean case. Furthermore, West Germany had around 60 million people in 1989; South Korea has 49 million today. West Germany’s 1989 GDP per capita was \$25,000 (1989 USD);⁵⁹ in South Korea today, it is around \$20,000 (2010 USD).⁶⁰

The comparative arithmetic of the costs of North Korea, and the ability of the South to carry those costs, is punishing.

Worse still, the GDR and the USSR broadly deceived the world on East Germany's modernity and advanced economy. This is one reason why the West German government granted 1:1 currency convertibility to the GDR mark: almost everyone thought East Germany would have some reasonably competitive industries and sectors.⁶¹ Yet when West German authorities finally entered the former GDR—when the West finally “pulled the lid off”—almost everything was badly behind or unusable: the phone system had to be completely replaced, inefficient, high-polluting East German cars (Trabants) were pulled from the streets, laborers had no idea how to use computers or even basic office devices like photocopiers, infrastructure around the country still had World War II battle damage, and so on.⁶² It is therefore likely that North Korea is far worse than we think it is. As the GDR did, the DPRK is probably hiding much worse than we know now from the limited reports of defectors and visitors.

Finally, South Korea is less politically prepared to carry the enormous stresses of unification—and not just the financial burden. The South Korean political system is softer and less mature than was West Germany's. Corruption is more regular; South Korean parties are shallow, personalized, and change names quickly; elitist political unresponsiveness drives a street-protest culture and brawling in the National Assembly.⁶³ For a state that emerged from dictatorship less than a generation ago, South Korea's democracy-institutionalization troubles are predictable and manageable within the current ROK framework. But South Korea clearly does not have the state capacity the FRG did in 1989,⁶⁴ while the South Korean government faces a comparatively greater unification burden. Indeed, this is the greatest threat to South Korea's still maturing democracy—the burdens of unification may simply overwhelm South Korea's weaker institutions⁶⁵ and leave North Korea in some kind of semi-annexed limbo like the West Bank.⁶⁶

International Differences

In 1989, the United States was at the peak of its postwar relative power. The USSR was in decline; China as great power was still far off. This was the era of the “unipolar moment” and the “end of history.”⁶⁷ Today the balance of forces is very different. The United States is much weaker, with huge financial imbalances and significant military overstretch. Many think the United States is in decline.⁶⁸ All this makes it harder for the United States to support South Korea in any contest with China or North Korea over unification, akin to the U.S./West German struggle with the USSR over East Germany.⁶⁹ It is likely that South Korea will have to do more of the work on its own, compared to the heavy intervention by the first Bush administration to support the West German position in 1989/90. The weakened American position also means it will be easier for China to dictate its terms for unification.⁷⁰

In 1989, the USSR was collapsing; today China is not. The GDR's patron was imploding. It could no longer afford the contest with the United States. The Soviet Union was trying to geopolitically retrench and to restart its moribund economy with *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The Soviets were increasingly desperate, and the East Bloc—subsidized as it was—had become an albatross.⁷¹ Gorbachev was fumbling to control all the forces unleashed.

China is the opposite. It is not overextended, but rather just beginning the

international expansion that flows from its rising strength. It is “feeling its oats” and increasing ready and able to challenge the U.S. position, in Asia at least.⁷² Tiananmen Square 1989 demonstrated a non-Gorbachevian willingness by the PRC to quash dissent to maintain the one-party state, and internal liberalization is lagging, in part because the Chinese population is being “bought off” with growth.⁷³ So China is much more capable of carrying the North Korean albatross and pushing its interests in its periphery, rather than a pull-out as per Gorbachev.⁷⁴

China’s interest is much higher in North Korea than the USSR’s was in East Germany. North Korea borders China; East Germany was two time-zones away from Moscow. China’s geopolitical interest in the terms of a final settlement is far more direct. By 1990, Gorbachev was basically trying to sell East Germany for desperately needed Western credit for the unraveling Soviet Union; for China, Korea is a more existential issue. North Korea is a “buffer” between democratic South Korea, Japan, and the United States.⁷⁵ Hence, China is much more likely to intrude into Korean unity talks and push for its own terms. Those desired terms will probably include a ban on U.S. forces north of the current DMZ, and possibly an exit of South Korea from the U.S. alliance altogether, in exchange for Chinese acquiescence on unification: Korean Finlandization (an outcome of which Japan might secretly approve).⁷⁶

Nor can South Korea “buy” unity from China as West Germany did from the USSR.⁷⁷ West Germany was an economic powerhouse by the late 1980s—the world’s third biggest economy. It could simply give a huge sum (55 billion 1990 deutschmarks) to Moscow, and the USSR was so desperate that it took the money and abandoned the GDR.⁷⁸ While South Korea is in the G-20 today, it is still listed that body and the WTO as a developing country. South Korea is unready for a similar, massive “buy-off” of opposition to unification and likely does not have the global credit to pay, say, 100 billion USD (the inflation- and dollar-adjusted figure that West Germany paid to the USSR in 1990). That would be 10% of South Korea’s entire GDP. Nor do the Chinese need the money as the Soviets did. Hence, China can play a much harder game than the USSR could 20 years ago.

Finally, Korean unification has no supportive environment of allies or local revolutions, like NATO and the Velvet Revolutions of 1989, which could add moral weight and momentum to unification. Beyond the United States, South Korea has no real allies.⁷⁹ Russia is an unpredictable semi-‘partner’ at best.⁸⁰ Because of their difficult history, Japan and Korea are distant. Taiwan is also a divided country, but it is in the North Korea/East Germany role as the smaller and weaker of the two. So there is nothing like a local NATO of friends to provide group moral cover for unification efforts. Nor can there be any regional momentum for North Korean change, as the other revolutions in Eastern Europe provided to the East Germans in 1989/90. For sheer geographic reasons, there are no nearby states similar to North Korea to catalyze North Korean change, unless one imagines Chinese democratization, which is a huge leap. As we see in the Middle East today and Eastern Europe in 1989, revolutions can synergize each other,⁸¹ but there is no analogous Northeast Asian region to provide a “wave” that might wash into North Korea. Koreans will have to do this themselves, making unification that much harder.

Conclusion: A Longer, Harder Slog

The foregoing analysis presents a vastly harder version of Korean unification than Germany's. To recap, domestically, there are more North Koreans than East Germans, and they are much poorer as well. There are fewer South Koreans than West Germans, and they are (albeit less so) less wealthy also. South Korea's state capacity is lower than West Germany's, while North Korea today is dismal by even the former East Germany's standards. In sum, fewer people with less wealth in a weaker system will support more people with less wealth from a worse system. That domestic calculation is punishing, on top of which the international balance of forces is worse now than in 1989 too.

Internationally, today's external patron (the United States) of the free Korean half is weakening, while the external patron of the communist half (China) is strengthening. The opposite was true of the United States and West Germany, and the USSR and East Germany, in 1989. Today's northern patron (China) is trying to push further into the continent (Asia), while yesterday's eastern patron (USSR) was looking for an exit (from central Europe). Nor is there is a regional encouragement, revolutionary wave, or democracy zeitgeist that might accelerate the process. The incentives for China to meddle (because of the greater importance of North Korea to China, than of East Germany to the USSR) and the greater ease of such meddling (because the United States and South Korea today are weaker than the United States and West Germany were then, while China is much stronger today than the USSR was then) mean Chinese intervention is likely. It will almost certainly seek to structure any final settlement. The major policy question emanant from this paper's analysis is therefore: Will South Korea forego the U.S. alliance if that is required to remove China from peninsular affairs? Will South Korea exchange neutralization for unity?

U.S. semi-abandonment⁸² behavior in Korea already hints that South Korea may accept this outcome.⁸³ USFK has shrunk dramatically since the Cold War to just 28,500 servicemen today. These forces are repositioning south of Seoul, the obvious North Korean target in any serious conflict. Effectively this shifts the land defense burden to the ROK and conveniently allows the United States to avoid immediate, early participation. This is traditionally rebutted with the assertion that U.S. air and naval power will remain committed to the fight, but clearly the move south to Pyeongtaek removes the United States from its hair-trigger position at the DMZ and reduces USFK's tripwire role. (U.S. ground forces could never stop a North Korean invasion alone, but their placement at the DMZ ensured immediate U.S. combat participation, which in turn would sway reluctant U.S. public opinion to support U.S. involvement in an otherwise unwanted conflict.⁸⁴) The loss of the USFK tripwire reduces the likelihood the United States will be "chain-ganged" into a Korean conflict.⁸⁵ While this is not full retrenchment from South Korea, it clearly represents "wiggle room."

Further, the United States remains committed to the reversion of wartime authority over ROK forces to the ROK government (the abolition of the Combined Forces Command).⁸⁶ While this has been delayed, it clearly provides further wiggle room. It is also increasingly clear that the U.S. fiscal crisis will entail major defense cuts; overseas bases, particularly in countries judged capable of defending themselves (Korea, Germany, Japan, plus unwanted commitments like Iraq and Afghanistan) are obvious targets for U.S. retrenchment.⁸⁷ Finally, as of 2008, only 41 percent of Americans want the United States to intervene in another Korean conflict.⁸⁸ A

“trilemma” of simultaneous waning U.S. power, waxing Chinese power, and a Korean desire for national unity may compel the ROK government to accede to Chinese (and Japanese?)-sought Finlandization.⁸⁹

The only alternative to this trilemma is a unification process that goes so badly “off the rails,” is so destructive, disorganized, and chaotic, that China would want to stay out from sheer concern to avoid a quagmire.⁹⁰ In other words, the more chaotic the end-game turns out to be, the more likely it will be a Korean-only affair. This is unfortunate; no one wants Korean unity to be an Iraq- or Hurricane Katrina-style national meltdown that requires dramatic Western and Japanese support (which might not even be available because of the accelerating sovereign debt crisis). But reunification chaos seems like the only way to keep the Chinese out, because the balance of forces sketched in this article are so much more demanding for Korea today than they were for Germany in 1989/90.

This is likely the reason for the endorsement by Park Geun-Hye (a major presidential candidate next year) of a “trustpolitik” building slowly toward unification.⁹¹ Rapid unification will be an incentive for Chinese meddling at a time of U.S. (and Japanese) weakness, and extremely rapid unification could overwhelm ROK institutions leaving North Korea as a “wild west” zone like postwar-Iraq or the West Bank. Yet the lesson of East Germany is that the peoples of a painfully divided nation, in which one half is governed atrociously, will careen headlong toward a highly emotional reunion if given the chance. South Korean policymakers would do well to plan for a chaotic, passionate, and turbulent reunification process and prepare their electorate for that.

Notes

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