

PROSPECTS

FOR KOREAN UNIFICATION



Brandenburg Gate. November 1989.

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By Kongdan (Katy) Oh

At one minute past midnight on October 3, 1990, Germany was officially reunified, ending forty-five years of national division. On that night I was standing in the middle of seventy thousand spectators at Deutsches Eck (the “corner of Germany”) in the city of Koblenz, at the confluence of the Mosel and Rhine rivers. This historic location, a symbol of German nationalism since the thirteenth century, was to be one of the principal sites for the national unification celebration. Yet I could not discern any particular mood among the assembled Germans. It was as if they had gathered simply because they thought they might be missing something if they didn’t. At midnight, the mayor of Koblenz solemnly intoned the names of the five East German states: “I call Sachsen for unity, I call Brandenburg for unity” and so forth. There was no cheering. Just people engaged in conversation, while in the background boats on the river sounded their horns and church bells rang.

I seemed to be the only Korean in a sea of Germans, and the occurrence made me excited and sad. I thought of the millions of dispersed family members in Korea, including my own. My father, the youngest of eleven children, visited his family in Pyongwon County, north of Pyongyang, when he returned to Korea from Beijing after the Japanese surrender in 1945. He then

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left for Seoul to take up a position in education. He managed to go north to visit his family twice in the next few years, as the communists tightened their grip on the northern half of the country, but after 1948 he could no longer risk the trip. He died, just five months after German reunification, without ever seeing or hearing from his family again. My visit to Koblenz on that historic night was in part a tribute to my father, who even at that moment was hoping for a chance to take me to the north to look for his family.

In the months after unification, I asked my German friends what they thought about the event. The younger ones complained about the higher tax burden imposed to rescue the economy of east Germany, but the older ones accepted unification as an unavoidable political fate for all Germans. A typical expression was “Wir müssen” (we must). I visited towns and cities in the eastern half of the country and saw everywhere signs of economic and social decay. The unification burden on west Germany was, and continues to be, heavy, but the Germans have shouldered it with a spirit of “must do” and “can do.”

My German friends asked me, “Will Korea be next?” At the time I was full of optimism that what my colleague at the RAND Corporation, Francis Fukuyama, would famously call “the end of history” was at hand, and that the North Korean communists would be unable to resist the tide that was sweeping away communist governments in Europe. I was wrong about that, and no longer make predictions about when Korean unification will come, although it will surely come some day.

TWO UNIFICATION POLICIES

For the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), the guiding philosophy of Korean unification can be summed up in three words: “self-reliance, peace, and democracy.” “Self-reliance” means that unification must be achieved under the initiative of the two Koreas, not imposed or shaped by foreigners. “Peace” means that unification must be achieved without conflict, with neither side overpowering the other by subversion or force of arms. “Democracy” means that a unified Korea must be democratic.

When he came to office in 1998, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung envisioned a three-stage unification process. First is the period of reconciliation and cooperation. This is the stage the two Koreas are now slowly entering. The second is confederation or commonwealth, guided by joint institutions such as a decision-making summit council and a joint parliament with equal representation from the South (population 47 million) and the North (population 22 million). The new constitution drafted

during this stage would provide for democratic elections throughout Korea.

During his tenure, President Kim devoted the greater part of his attention to achieving the first stage of unification. He and his trusted advisor Lim Dong-won created a policy of engagement toward North Korea dubbed the “sunshine policy,” after the Aesop fable in which the sun is more successful than the wind in making a traveler shed his coat. The most remarkable achievement of this policy was the first-ever summit meeting between the leaders of the two Koreas, held in June 2000. Unfortunately, the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, failed to make a promised reciprocal visit to President Kim in Seoul. North Korea’s consistent and vigorous reaffirmation of the principles of one-party socialism suggests that the sun may have less luck with Comrade Kim than it had with the warmly-clothed traveler. President Kim urged South Koreans to be patient with his engagement policy, which he firmly believes is the best way to avoid inter-Korean conflict, but he readily acknowledged that unification will not be achieved until long after his presidency ended in February 2003.

North Korea’s unification principles sound much like South Korea’s, but their meaning is dramatically different. In 1980, Kim Il-sung, the founder and “president for life” of North Korea offered a unification plan under the title of the “Democratic Confederate Republic of Koryŏ” or “DCRK,” a striking resemblance to the official name of North Korea, “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” or “DPRK”. North Korea’s three principles of unification are “independence,” “peace,” and “great national unity.” “Independence” means that the two Koreas must achieve unification without foreign interference; specifically, security ties between South Korea and the United States must be severed and all foreign troops must leave the country before it can be unified. The North Koreans emphasize that “peace” means that the South Korean military should end its cooperation with American military forces and stop calling North Korea its “main enemy.” “Great national unity” means that the South Korean government should end its suppression of communist party activities in South Korea, and permit South Koreans of all political persuasions to engage in unification dialogue with the North, thus playing into North Korea’s “united front strategy,” whereby South Korea would be represented by communist and non-communist parties in its dealings with one unified North Korean party, the communist Korean Worker’s Party.

North Korea’s “three charters” for unification include not only the three principles of unification, but also Kim Il-sung’s



Photo illustration: Willa Davis

Ten Point Guideline for All-Korean Unity. Announced a year before President Kim's death in 1994, the Guideline encompasses many of the points of the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation signed by the two Koreas in 1992 but never implemented. Interestingly, the last of the ten points calls for "reverence toward those who have contributed to national unity," presumably meant as an insurance policy to protect the North Korean leaders from persecution after unification. The third leg of the three charters is Kim's confederation proposal, which the North Koreans briefly describe as "one nation, one state, two systems, and two governments." Since the impoverished and backward North currently has little hope of prevailing over the South, such an arrangement would protect the North from absorption by the South, and give the North Koreans an equal say in matters of national importance such as defense and foreign policy. According to the North Koreans, such a bifurcated state would satisfy the definition of unification and enable the two Koreas to work together.

As they typically do when making a proposal, the North Koreans present their confederation as an eminently "scientific" solution to the problem of Korean division, refusing to acknowledge any serious flaws in their proposal. One might ask how the dramatic differences in the ideology (democracy versus communism) and economic systems (command socialism versus capitalism) of the two Koreas would be bridged. Kim Il-sung said that these problems could be taken care of by future generations.

KOREAN SENTIMENTS TOWARD UNIFICATION

In South Korea, although it is possible to measure public opinion toward unification, it is difficult to get a definitive assessment of unification attitudes because nobody knows what a reunified Korea would look like or how it would work. However, it is probably safe to say the following. South Koreans fear taking on the economic burden that unification would entail (estimated at anywhere from 65 billion to over 3 trillion dollars), especially in the aftermath of the South Korean financial crisis of 1997, whose effects have lingered for years.¹ This fear does not, however, pre-



"President for life," Kim Il-sung, and his son Kim Jong-il in 1985.

Image source: Official Web site of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, <http://www.korea-dpr.com/photjong3.htm>

vent most South Koreans from desiring unification as an abstract national goal—and for many separated families, desiring it as a very personal goal as well. Finally, most Koreans, who are strongly nationalistic, believe that a divided Korea can never be a strong Korea. With China on one side and Japan on the other, Koreans need unification for national strength. Even after North Korea admitted to pursuing a clandestine enriched uranium program and withdrew from the International Atomic Energy Agency's Non-Proliferation Treaty, thereby violating non-nuclear pacts made with South Korea and the United States, the majority of South Koreans still wanted unification, and were reluctant to condemn the North

Koreans.² This was especially true for generations below the age of forty, for whom the Korean War is a distant memory. In short, for the majority of South Koreans, the answer to the question, "Do you want reunification?" is an unqualified "yes," but a qualified "in due time."

What the North Korean people think about unification is difficult to tell. Their government has no need to tap public sentiment on this issue since, as the North Korean press constantly reminds the people, Comrade Kim has already solved all problems of "revolution and construction," and the people's sacred duty is to carry out the orders of Kim and the Korean Worker's Party with unquestioning enthusiasm.

From years of reading North Korean propaganda and meeting North Korean delegations traveling abroad, I hazard the following guesses about North Korean unification sentiment. Ordinary North Koreans probably give little thought to the process or ramifications of reunification. The attention of most citizens is likely focused on daily survival in an economic and social environment of almost unimaginable harshness. They may even accept the simplistic view, offered by government propaganda, that if only the United States and the traitors in power in South Korea would stop blocking unification, it could be achieved speedily, and all of Korea's problems would be solved.

In the absence of reasoned and informed consideration of unification issues, the majority of North Korean people seem to respond in a largely emotional manner. In 1989, during the Thir-

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teenth Festival of Youth and Students, a socialist celebration hosted that year by Pyongyang, Lim Su-kyung, a leading South Korean student activist, defied her government's ban on travel to North Korea and attended the festival (reaching North Korea by way of Germany). Hailed by millions of North Koreans as the "flower of unification," Ms. Lim appeared to personify the hope and beauty of national unity. The emotions of the North Korean people were real and strong, even though these emotions were whipped up by an extensive propaganda campaign.³

OBSTACLES TO UNIFICATION

Given that the majority of Koreans in South and North desire unification, if it were easily achieved, Korea would long since have been unified. In fact, the obstacles to unification are formidable. Although a number of able people have served as heads of South Korea's Ministry of Unification, and President Kim Dae-jung was able to do more to achieve unification than any Korean president to date, the sunshine policy has encountered multiple difficulties. It is unclear whether it will continue to be supported as strongly by the succeeding Roh Moo-hyun administration, although as president-elect, Mr. Roh pledged to continue the policy.

South Koreans see at least five obstacles to unification, the first being economic cost. A second obstacle is the attitude and actions of the North Korean regime, which, acting either from principle or with the explicit intent to block unification, almost routinely discourages and alienates many South Koreans by perpetrating hostilities (for example, spy submarines and boats landing on South Korean beaches, North Korean ships violating waters claimed by South Korea, soldiers trespassing into the demilitarized zone), broadcasting vituperative anti-South Korean propaganda, and postponing or canceling unification meetings. For the South Korean public, the bloom has gone off the rose of unification since their hopes were raised by the inter-Korean summit of June 2000.

A third obstacle to unification is the North Korean government's attempt, by a variety of provocative means, to gain diplomatic recognition and security guarantees from the United States. The most notable provocations occurred in 1993, 1994, and in the period beginning in late 2002, when the North admitted to having the capability to manufacture and reprocess the kind of nuclear material that could be made into weapons (although the Kim government, somewhat implausibly, denied having any intention to make such weapons). At such times, Korean reunification issues get lost in a volley of threats and counter-threats ricocheting between Washington and Pyongyang.

A fourth obstacle on the South Korean side is the fact that,

thanks to the North Korean government's policy of secrecy and dissimulation—and to a lesser extent the South Korean government's restrictions on travel to the North—the divided people have relatively little contact with each other, thus reducing their motivation and ability to push unification forward. With a combined population of almost seventy million, only forty thousand South Koreans have visited the North since the opening of limited travel opportunities in 1989 (the majority traveling on business), and only 2,500 North Koreans have visited the South (again, mostly on government or business visits). These figures do not include approximately 500,000 South Koreans who have taken the tour to North Korea's scenic Kumgang Mountain, where visitors are isolated from the local population.⁴

Related to these travel restrictions, a fifth obstacle is that a large segment of political conservatives and members of the older generations in South Korea are genuinely concerned that removing barriers separating the two Koreas would invite political subversion or even military invasion from the North, which has never renounced its goal of communizing the South.

On the North Korean side, the obstacles to unification begin with the North Korean leaders, who may fear that their political positions and their very lives would be endangered by democracy and capitalism. The group that is probably most reluctant to permit an open society and political competition is Kim Jong-il and the leading party cadres, numbering several thousand. For Kim in particular, a cautionary example is the fate of the late Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, a good friend of Kim's father, who was executed as soon as his government fell. The two or three million members of the (North) Korean Workers' Party, who lead a relatively privileged life, might also be counted on to resist any unification plan that would introduce democracy into the political system. The officers' corps of the Korean People's Army may also be reluctant to embrace unification. In a unified Korean army, many would lose their jobs, and those secret police and prison guards who have killed or mistreated prisoners in their charge may fear legal retribution.

Another group in North Korea that may resist unification are members of the "revolutionary generation" who remember the golden age of the 1950s and 1960s, when North Korea's economy was growing and communism was a force to be reckoned with in the international community. These older people may hope for a return to those better days, counting on the citizens of former communist states to become disillusioned with capitalism and return their communist parties to power (as advocated by the North Korean press). At the very least, they may hope that North Korea, standing alone, will be able to make its economy work



again, and thus regain national strength in order to deal with South Korea as an equal in the unification process.

But arguably the greatest obstacle to unification in North Korea is the apathy and ignorance of the North Korean masses. Unlike the East Germans, who, when the opportunity arose, fled to a West Germany they knew through radio and television, North Koreans are like cave dwellers who have been made fearful of the outside world through a lifetime of propaganda. The North Korean masses are so used to following orders (and clandestinely transgressing these orders when they can) that they seem to be an inert political force. No matter how difficult the living conditions in the North, no reports of organized dissent have emerged.

And so, in the North, it comes down to what Kim Jong-il and the top military generals want. They are caught in a dilemma. If they keep their society closed to outside influences, and resist cooperation and reconciliation with South Korea, their economy and society will continue to deteriorate. But if they open their borders, they may no longer be able to control their 22 million people, who might opt for other leadership. For Kim Jong-il, the best alternative would be for a controlled opening such as the Chinese Communist Party leaders accomplished. But engineering such an opening, with a much more powerful South Korea just across the border, is always fraught with the danger of absorption. After all, how many Korean governments are needed on this relatively small peninsula?

PROSPECTS FOR UNIFICATION

The two Koreas are seemingly separated by irreconcilable differences. Both South and North unification plans call for a long “separate but equal” relationship, but it is hard to see how the weak North Korea can be equal to the much larger and stronger South. The German solution seemingly is the obvious and natural way to reconcile the two Koreas. But the German case also reminds us that unification must be supported by other nations. In Korea’s case, neither China, Japan, nor the United States has shown any eagerness to see the two Koreas unified.

The German case also reminds us that the final act of unification can come suddenly, as a surprise. The opening of the Hungarian border to Austria as a corridor for East Germans fleeing to West Germany, and then the demolition of the Berlin Wall, brought down the East German government in a matter of months, forcing West Germany, ready or not, to manage unification. In Korea’s case, China is no Hungary: it is not yet ready to welcome transient North Koreans, and it does not provide a land bridge to South Korea. Nor does North Korea’s separate exist-

tence depend on the support of a major power such as the former Soviet Union, although Chinese support helps Kim Jong-il control his people.

The two Koreas seem destined to live for many more years in an uneasy peace. South Korea’s greatest champion of unification, President Kim Dae-jung, estimated that unification might not be achieved for another twenty years. Whether in that period the two Koreas will gradually draw closer together, whether some event will force a sudden reunification, or whether over that period the two Koreas will learn to live apart, no one can be sure. ■

NOTES:

1. In a public opinion poll conducted in December 2002 by *The Korea Times* and Media Research, Inc.—five years after the financial crisis—45 percent of respondents named economic recovery as the first priority of the incoming administration; only 15 percent considered improvement in inter-Korean relations to be a priority.
2. South Korea’s largest daily newspaper, *Chosŏn Ilbo*, published the results of a survey on North Korea in its January 1, 2003, Web site edition (<http://www.chosun.com>). Written by Hong Yong-nim and entitled “64 Percent Believe North Korean Nuclear Development Would Be Directed at Another Country,” the article did not state the source of the survey. Only 27 percent of respondents thought that any nuclear weapons North Korea might produce would be directed at South Korea. Some 54 percent opposed taking military action against North Korea, even if that government went into full-scale production of nuclear weapons. Only 31 percent viewed the Korean War as “an unjust North Korean invasion of South Korea;” more popular views were that it was a proxy war between Cold War superpowers (44 percent) or agreed with the North Korean viewpoint that it was a war to liberate the South and unite the fatherland (11 percent). Only 20 percent favored immediate unification, compared to 65 percent who preferred unification to occur gradually over a period of ten years.
3. When Ms. Lim returned to South Korea, she was briefly jailed for violating the National Security Law, and after her release, married, attended an American university for two years, and returned to South Korea to continue her graduate studies.
4. Travel statistics current to the end of 2002. See *Chungang (Joongang) Ilbo* (internet version at <http://english.joins.com>), January 3, 2003.

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