

Japan's Role and Position on Korean Unification

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Korean Unification and the Strategic Environment in East Asia from Japan's Point of View

I define Korean unification as a *de facto* agreement between the two Koreas, contingent on the imminent collapse of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea(DPRK) and the readiness and resolve of the Republic of Korea(ROK) to shoulder the task of unification. Also I assume that the DPRK's external commitments will be nullified and the ROK's external commitments will continue intact and extend to the former DPRK territories. This is an extreme scenario of Korean unification. The major reason to use this definition is that an extreme scenario can reveal many unlikely effects and consequences that would not be generated under more ordinary scenarios. The adoption of this definition does not bias my description and analysis of what follows.

I examine those influences that Korean unification may have on the strategic environment of each country: the United States, China, the Russian Federation and Japan, in that order.

The United States

- (1) Korean unification will move the ROK's border right up adjacent to China.

Presumably the ROK and the U.S. will keep their bilateral alliance intact after unification is realized. Hence the U.S. military forces in Korea will face China's military forces. American soldiers and Chinese soldiers will stand face to face for the first time since the withdrawal of Chinese troops from North Korea shortly after the armistice agreement between the United Nations forces and the North Korean forces.

- (2) Korean unification will mean the elimination of one of the two nuclear-capable rogue states, Iran and North Korea. The United States will be interested in whether North Korean nuclear capabilities and facilities are inherited by South Korea or destroyed by the U.S. Marine Corps stationed at the Futenma Marine Corps Air Field. Will the United States allow South Korea to inherit North Korea's nuclear capabilities and facilities? Will a unified ROK declare a non-nuclear position? My guess is that even if the nuclear weapons and facilities are destroyed by the U.S. Marine Corps, unified Korea might take a somewhat ambiguous strategy. Depending on the way in which U.S. acceptance might be secured, for instance, as in the India-U.S. nuclear cooperation agreement, a unified Korea might try to go nuclear.
- (3) Korean unification will mean a direct encounter between Korea's vibrant capitalism and China's no-less-vibrant capitalism. What mixture of conflict and cooperation will emerge between the two brands of capitalism is unknown. Korean unification will have an effect on China's perception of its strategic environment similar to the Japanese colonization of Korea in 1911. After 1911, Japan built industrial infrastructure and heavy industries along a beltway linking Chonjin, Pyongyang and Shinuiju, paving the way for Japan to further colonize Manchuria and parts of coastal northern China thereafter. Now the Rason and Hwangkumpyong special economic zones are being planned between North Korea and China.
- (4) Korean unification will invigorate the activities of Human Rights Watch and other non-governmental organizations beyond the Yalu (Amnok) River into China

and especially in the Yanbian region where approximately two million ethnic Koreans reside. China would hardly welcome the addition of two more problematic minorities – ethnic Koreans in Northeast China and ethnic Mongolians in Inner Mongolia – to Tibetans in Tibet and Qinghai and Uighurs in Xinjiang-Uighur.

China

- (1) Ethnic Korean minorities in Northeast China might be agitated by Korean unification. China might face problems from its ethnic Korean minorities as Turkey does with its ethnic Armenian minorities. During World War I and thereafter, a newly independent, republican Turkey massacred many Armenians and others to leave Turkey along with Armenians residing in communities annexed by Turkey .
- (2) South Korean capitalism will permeate China deeply, potentially causing trouble. Being resource-hungry, both Korea and China will intensify their competition in resource-rich areas including Central Asia, where competition is already very fierce.
- (3) China's hungry search for energy resources in the Bohai Bay and the East China Sea may collide with Korea's no less hungry search on these maritime fronts. It must be noted that China's sea-patrolling ships have never fought against heavily armed South Korean Maritime Safety Agency ships in the East China Sea.
- (4) China's nightmare would be a united, nuclear-armed Korea sitting so close to Beijing and other important industrial, naval and military facilities.
- (5) China is apprehensive about the possibility of a reunified Korea metamorphosing into a "pawn" in the U.S.-led strategy of China-encircling "congame" (strategic containment or constraint and economic engagement) like India.

Russia

- (1) The loss of a former Russian satellite-client state that has more recently become one of the world's most troublesome countries will probably be something Russia can face calmly. In fact, Russia may start envisaging unified Korea as a market similar to India. That is, Russia may consider Korea as a good customer for Russian resources and weapons (two things it has in abundance).
- (2) The inheritance of nuclear weapons status by unified Korea may not be welcome to Russia. At the same time, technological and scientific cooperation between the two countries may be enhanced in competition against the United States and in their efforts to restrain China.
- (3) Russia may welcome unified Korea as another customer of Russia's natural gas resources along with Japan and China, which might prompt Russia to consider building gas-supplying pipelines connecting Ulan-Ude, Vladivostok, Rason, Seoul and Busan.
- (4) Russia may not welcome the prospect of the Sea of Japan (the East Sea) being more deeply controlled by the U.S. Navy. In addition to Sasebo and Yokosuka, Chongjin and Rajin may become key naval ports for the U.S. Navy in Northeast Asia. Both ports are too close to Vladivostok and Nakhodka for Russia's comfort.

Japan

- (1) A unified Korea as a nuclear-weapons state may not be welcome to Japan. The relationship between nuclear-capable Korea and non-nuclear Japan might not remain stable for long. The asymmetry might prompt Japan to go nuclear. Since the United States would not welcome Japan as a nuclear-weapons state, there may be no need to worry on this point. But such asymmetry would be neither healthy nor stable.

- (2) A unified Korea would pose a challenge to Japan in terms of market evolution. South Korea, resource-hungry and not relying on its tiny domestic market demand, has been innovative and aggressive in foreign markets while catching up with and replacing Japan in many manufacturing areas. Absorbing North Korea as a market would not change this South Korean strategy much. Rather, their innovative and aggressive strategies would be accelerated. The northern market would remain tiny and would not expand Korea's domestic demand as much as the unified population size, estimated at about 70~80 million, might suggest. Furthermore the gap between northerners and southerners may cause further trouble for the Korean government, already struggling with a large rich-poor gap in the South. Unified Korea's intensified scientific and technological surge might pose a threat to Japan.
- (3) The aggravation of the income-gap after unification might intensify Koreans' anti-Japanese instinct, as some will prefer to chant about the past rather than jointly envisioning the future with Japan. As Korea's capitalist economy is becoming far more globalized, a surge of nationalism following unification might lead to trouble with neighbors like Japan and China.
- (4) Assuming that the Korea-U.S. alliance commitments are kept intact, some Japanese may be apprehensive that unified Korea could replace Japan as the key U.S. ally in East Asia. Whereas peace-loving and inward-looking Japanese may be happy about being liberated from the status of the key U.S. ally in East Asia, other Japanese would prefer to keep that status, since Korea does not enjoy strategic depth like Israel.

Japan's Interest in and Perception of Korean Unification

While the earlier section dealt with the influences that Korean unification may have on the strategic environment, this section will provide an empirical, descriptive summary of Japan's interest in and perception of Korean unification.

Japanese are generally positive about Korea and Japanese-Korean relations these days. In a 2010 survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of the Japanese Government, 61.8% of respondents answered that they feel positively (*shitashimi*) about Korea. Also, 59.9% responded positively when asked about Japanese-Korean relations. In another survey conducted by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 2010, in response to the question, "In which area should Japan and Korea deepen cooperation?" respondents selected from a set of choices as follows: the economy (26%), security (21%), tourism (9%), culture (12%), sports (5%), the environment (14%), and local government interaction (8%). In the same survey, respondents in both Japan and Korea were asked to choose two out of six priorities for handling North Korea. Respondents answered as follows:

	Japan	Korea
① Termination of nuclear development	47%	58%
② Termination of missile development and experiment	22%	29%
③ Resolution of the abducted Japanese citizens issue	61%	4%
④ Normalization of diplomatic relationship with North Korea (Korean unification)	9%	23%
⑤ Economic cooperation with North Korea	5%	32%
⑥ Promotion of Six Party Talks	35%	37%
⑦ Others	0%	0%
⑧ None	1%	2%
⑨ No answer	2%	3%

Japanese interest in Korean unification among the public is not particularly high. Given that the Japanese tend to have a predominantly inward-looking orientation, Korean unification does not interest them very much. Korean unification itself is not an easy subject to ponder. Occasional attention is given to Korean things such as Korean film stars, Korean songs, Korean food, very competitive university entrance exams, Samsung, etc. Abducted Japanese citizens, nuclear development, and the Six-Party Talks are three political issues which interest many Japanese. But Korean unification is

not such a target of interest. Even to those few Japanese citizens who have some interest, it just seems like an event which might take place sometime in the nebulous future.

Korean unification is perceived as a remote possibility. For 20 years or more, it has intermittently been said that North Korea's collapse is imminent. Even when torrential floods killed thousands of people or starvation was said to claim millions of lives, there were no reports of large-scale demonstrations, collective protests, palace coup d'états or assassination attempts. Some old Japanese may remember that during the colonial period there were very few collective actions in colonized Korea. Perhaps military oppression makes protests unlikely. The DPRK lives on as a state, and slogans such as "military-first politics" and "the strong and prosperous great state" keep being pumped out. Why? People wonder about this in Japan as well. Perhaps military oppression and the elites' clever but brutal survival strategy, combined with the basic status quo orientation of all the neighboring countries (China, Russia, Japan, the U.S., and probably both the DPRK and the ROK as well) might explain the longevity of the DPRK. Only once the DPRK and the ROK have maintained peaceful co-existence, peaceful interactions and harmonious relations for many years can we come to believe in the possibility of peaceful unification. Conditions are not ripe for peaceful unification at present. The only scenario which has most recently been highlighted as a possibility for opening the DPRK is the Libyan model.

An agreement between Libya and the West was concluded in 2003 to denuclearize Libya and in return to open Libya for free trade and investment of a sort. In 2011 a rebellion broke out, and when Libyan government forces began killing rebels and civilians alike, NATO forces intervened militarily to protect the people by denying the government forces use of Libyan air space. NATO's humanitarian intervention helped the rebel forces to take over the capital and oust the Libyan government. The DPRK denounced NATO's intervention and declared that it would never denuclearize itself, whatever incentives the West might offer it.

Japan's Role and the Japan-Korea Strategic Cooperation for Korean Unification

Japan's Preferences

Despite all the afore-mentioned obstacles, there are things Japan and Korea can do together to make Korean unification more peaceful and less costly.

«Nuclear-Free Declaration»

The DPRK has tenaciously upheld its philosophy of self-reliance (*juche*). They abhor any degree of national humiliation. To be proud of their country without being militarily jeopardized and economically marginalized, they feel they must possess nuclear weapons and generate electric power from nuclear power stations. Hence the slogans "military-first" and "strong and prosperous nation." The DPRK has been successful in generating nuclear power and developing nuclear weapons despite the Six Party Talks, where the initial deal was for the other five parties to provide nuclear power plants to the DPRK and for the DPRK to abandon the endeavor of producing nuclear weapons in return. The DPRK has been able to dupe the United States and the ROK in the process by its astute, adroit and agile diplomacy. Japan's demand in the process of Korean unification would be the denuclearization of the former DPRK and a joint declaration against nuclear weapons by unified Korea and Japan.

«Free Trade Agreements Extended to All Areas»

Japan's second priority would be a free trade agreement or some variation between unified Korea and Japan. A free trade agreement between the ROK and Japan has been at times close to conclusion, especially when Roh Moo-Hyun was president. Irrespective of whether or not a free trade agreement between the ROK and Japan is concluded prior to Korean unification, Japan's preference is to jointly enhance com-

petitiveness and resilience through a free trade agreement between unified Korea and Japan, which would signify the birth of an enormous domestic market with a combined population of 200 million at a very high per capita income level. Right now Japan's manufacturing sector is having difficulties exporting products abroad. But with Japan directly investing in South Korea, jointly producing manufactured goods with a high technology and skill level and exporting them to Korea's FTA partners the European Union and the United States, both South Korea and Japan can be satisfied. With a free trade agreement between unified Korea and Japan, the mutual benefits would be much greater.

«Historical Issues»

The ROK and Japan have issued joint communiqués and declarations a number of times in the past, either officially or semi-officially, related to historical issues. Three points have been pledged by both parties: reflecting on the past history of war and colonialism, building up cooperation between the two nations, and envisioning a cooperative and prosperous future. After Korean unification, unified Korea and Japan should continue moving in that direction.

«Investigations into Abductions»

At the time of Korean unification, unified Korea and Japan should declare jointly that the abduction of citizens, whether of Japan or of the ROK, should not have taken place and that thorough investigation and reporting by both unified Korea and Japan is necessary in order to uphold the principles of human rights.

What Role Can Japan Play in Korean Unification?

«Diplomatic support»

Japan should be the first to congratulate Korea on its unification. Just as the ROK's rescue teams were the first to reach Japan when the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear

disaster unfolded beginning on March 11, 2011, upon the event of Korean unification Japan should extend full diplomatic support to unified Korea.

«Setting Up a Unification Fund»

A unification fund should be set up for funding the myriad tasks of unification. Given the enormous gap between the DPRK and the ROK in terms of infrastructure, industrial base, technological level, household economy, and governance structure, unifying the two will require untold financial resources, professional manpower resources, and good ideas. In order to amplify the positive benefits of Korean unification and mitigate the problematic aspects, a unification fund must be set up in a globalized manner. The Six Parties, including Japan, should make an initial large provision to this fund.

«Migration Control»

We cannot predict the form and process of Korean unification. But if it comes through the collapse of the DPRK regime, we can expect a mass exodus of residents of the former DPRK which will need to be controlled. For that to happen effectively, all the five parties must cooperate.

How Can Japan Strategically Cooperate with Korea for Korean unification?

«Vis-à-vis China, Korea and Japan Should Tone Down the Significance of the U.S.-Allied Territory Adjoining China.»

The advent of a unified Korea next door to China's capital and its northeast territory will constitute a direct military threat to China. It would be a replay of a scenario China has experienced twice before – with the 1911 Japanese colonization of Korea and the 1951 landing of U.S. armed forces at Inchon and their advance toward the Amnok River, both of which posed direct threats to China. What is important for Japan and Korea, which need peaceful relations with China in all areas, is to convince China that unification will not be a replay of 1911 or 1951. A tremendous amount of effort and in-

genuity will be necessary to convince China. Since China has stiffened its posture against what may be called a unified “congagement” strategy by the U.S., the ROK, and Japan, it is absolutely necessary for those three allies to clarify that they have no intention of threatening China.

«Vis-à-vis the U.S., Japan and Korea Should Jointly Declare a Nuclear Weapons-Free Position while Remaining Fully Allied with the United States.»

While the U.S. will solidify its strategic position up to the Amnok river through Korean unification, Korea might well be tempted to inherit the former DPRK’s nuclear weapons and facilities. When the DPRK bombarded what the ROK claims as its own territorial land and sea, some voices in the ROK argued that it should develop nuclear weapons in order to retaliate. After Korean unification, Korea’s nuclear programs would be targeted against China. Also the idea of constructing a missile launch site on Jeju Island after Korean unification may be interpreted as having an anti-Chinese purpose. Both Korea and Japan should remain within the confines of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. If either Korea or Japan were to break out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the “Nuclear Five” powers, especially the U.S., would no longer regard that country as a solid ally and the entire strategic environment would dramatically change. The likely consequence would be a militarily strong Korea or Japan bereft of a solid alliance with the United States.

«Vis-à-vis Russia, Korea and Japan»

Vis-à-vis Russia, the current issue the DPRK faces is the planned installation of a natural gas pipeline via Ulan-Ude and Vladivostok. This would prevent China from accessing to the Sea of Japan directly. For that, Rason port must be opened to the adjoining Jilin Province. An agreement has been reached between the DPRK and China to the effect that Rason in North Hamgyong Province and Hwangkumpyong in South Pyongan Province are to be made into special economic zones. This issue may come up again once Korean unification is achieved. The soft “congagement” strategy must be

handled adeptly.

Conclusion

In discussing Japan's position and role in Korean unification, I have first defined Korean unification as the result of the collapse of the DPRK and the readiness and resolve of the ROK to absorb the former DPRK. Needless to say, this definition is not the only definition, nor is it a particularly likely scenario. Yet this scenario helps us to think about the otherwise unthinkable. Another somewhat extreme scenario would be the gradual step-by-step development of a confederation of the former DPRK and the ROK in the event that the former almost collapses but the latter does not resolve to shoulder the responsibilities of nation-building. A variant of this scenario would be the continuation of the two sovereign states with the DPRK metamorphosing, perhaps inadvertently, into a formally failed state. Both the ROK and the PRC would help a failed DPRK, by investing heavily until portions of the failed DPRK are semi-colonized by the two countries. It is important to note that Japan seeks to play a respectable role in all of this.