



CHINA'S INTEREST IN KOREAN UNIFICATION*

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This article is drawn from a keynote address delivered on November 13, 2015 at the "Preparing for a Peaceful Unification of Korea" Conference hosted by the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation and the Ministry of Unification, and organized by the East Asia Institute.

A key factor in Korean unification is how China thinks unification would affect its own interests. What kind of calculus is China actually making about unification of the Korean Peninsula, and what role is it expected to play? Although we often speak of "China's thinking," no unified consensus seems to exist among the experts on China's North Korea policy directly concerning unification. Their views seem to diverge into several schools of thought with separate ramifications:

The first is that China has to render unconditional assistance to its blood ally of North Korea and safeguard its security. The second is to maintain the present policy of shielding North Korea on the one hand and of recommending cooperative relations with other countries including Japan, South Korea, and the United States, on the other. The PRC wants to make the Pyongyang regime undertake reforms and refrain from provocations with a view toward preventing military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula. The third view is to exercise stronger pressure on North Korea, partake in international sanctions, and abandon the defense of Pyongyang if necessary.

Among these three alternatives, the PRC government's current North Korea policy may be seen as the second, i.e. to encourage reforms, opening, and restraint from provocations while supporting the preservation of the DPRK and its regime survival.

China's North Korea policy, however, seems to have begun moving little by little toward the third alternative—a policy of mounting pressure on North Korea. This movement is likely due to China's calculation of interests in Korean unification and its perception of North Korea's nuclear threat.

* This article was written in 2015. China's self-perceived interest and calculus might have undergone some changes or evolution during the past two years as the case may be. Nevertheless, its basic interest in Korean unification as described in this article is likely to remain germane despite vicissitudes in Sino-U.S. and China-South Korea relations.



China thinks it would get the following short-term benefits should the Korean Peninsula be unified under the South Korean auspices:

First, if the peninsula is unified, China will be relieved from the burden of economic aid and military assistance for North Korea that has so far been greatly onerous.

Second, being relieved from hostilities and confrontations on the peninsula between North and South Korea, the PRC will become free from the danger of military clashes and war that it considers to be against its own interest.

Third, when unification under South Korea's initiative is premised, China will not only further expand and vitalize its already vibrant economic relations with the South but seize opportunities to secure its economic interests in the North Korean region in a stable manner.

In the longer-term, Beijing may hope for the following benefits from Korean unification:

First, a major source of trouble and insecurity will have been removed.

Second, a unified Korea will not merely offer a greater economic opportunity for China but contribute to regional integration as well.

Third, a unified Korea will obviate the rationale and necessity for an external power's military presence (meaning the U.S. forces) regardless of developments in Sino-American relations. At the same time, the rationale for a ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral alliance to contain and encircle China will be weakened.

Despite such positive short- and long-term implications, China also has apprehensions over negative consequences and impacts from unification of the Korean Peninsula.

In a short-term, China's concerns are as follows:

First, should the peninsula destabilize in the vortex of unification, innumerable refugees will flow from North Korea into China. While crossing the Yalu River and entering the border zones of China's two Northeastern (Jilin and Heilungkiang) provinces, North Korean refugees will flow along the sea lanes to land on the Liaoning, Tianjin, and Shandong coasts. The massive influx of refugees will not only impose a tremendous financial burden on China but constitute threats to regional security. The refugee problem will also be a thorny issue in relations with a unified Korea.



Second, unification of the Korean Peninsula will cause a short-term negative impact on economic relations between China's three Northeast Provinces which account for 70 percent of China–North Korea trade.

In medium- and long-terms, China has the following concerns over the consequences of unification:

First, China will lose the presence of North Korea which can serve as a “buffer” to the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia.

Second, China's economic foothold in North Korea may shrink and weaken in the short-term as South Korea will replace it. Although China–North Korea trade (approximately \$6.5 billion in 2013) does not constitute a big share of China's annual external trade since it corresponds to an extremely miniscule portion (0.155% or 1/600) out of its total trade volume (\$4.2 trillion), Korean unification would deal a sizeable blow to Liaoning and Jilin Provinces, in which Dandong and Yanji would suffer more severely.

Third, there are uncertainties over such issues as the ROK-U.S. alliance relationship and the presence of foreign troops in a unified Korea.

I have discussed China's positive as well as negative incentives regarding the unification of the Korean Peninsula. Let me now further elaborate on the issues I mentioned earlier regarding Chinese views on the ROK–U.S. alliance and the U.S. forces stationed in Korea.

Originally, until the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, China had maintained a positive, or at least tolerant, position to consider as a “necessary evil” not only the ROK–U.S. alliance but also the U.S.–Japan alliance. The reason was that the U.S.–Japan alliance not merely had an effect of restraining Japan's rearmament (and nuclear armament, in particular) but played a role as well in checking the military power of the Soviet Union, which China considered a regional rival. China also recognized the value of the ROK–U.S. alliance playing a role in deterring North Korea's provocations on the Korean Peninsula.

As the Cold War ended and the Soviet threat largely died down, Beijing began to disparage the U.S. alliance system in Northeast Asia as a Cold War relic while judging that the ROK–U.S. and U.S.–Japan alliances targeted China.

China also stays vigilant against the possibility for such current bilateral arrangements as the ROK–U.S. and U.S.–Japan alliances, with the United States as their hub, to develop into a NATO-type multilateral alliance.



China retains an opposing position and shows sensitive responses to the U.S. provision of extended deterrence (“nuclear umbrella”) to Japan or South Korea. China obviously thinks that the United States, by providing its nuclear deterrent to Japan and Korea, offsets or weakens China’s own nuclear deterrent capability.

From an objective perspective, however, neither the U.S. extended deterrence nor the ROK–U.S. alliance is always disadvantageous to China. This is likely to remain true both at present and even after Korean unification. The nuclear deterrence and the ROK–U.S. alliance, along with the U.S.–Japan alliance, will have an effect of continuing to bind Japan as a nonnuclear state. They will tend to obviate the need for arms expansion by evoking a reunified Korea’s confidence in its security, and even arms reduction can be expected. Furthermore, they will also enable the United States to play a peacemaker’s part between its allies, Japan and Korea, even after the Korean unification (let alone now). At the same time, Korea will be able to assume a useful role as a constructive mediator for cooperation between the United States and China by maintaining close relationships with both great powers.

As far as the U.S. forces in Korea are concerned, China may expect that the justification or necessity for their continued presence in the Korean Peninsula could either diminish or disappear after unification. At a minimum, China may expect that the U.S. forces should not advance north of the present military demarcation line, even if the ROK–U.S. alliance is maintained and the U.S. troops continue to be stationed in Korea after unification. This may not be unacceptable to the ROK or the United States, although it is foreseen in the U.S. position that a certain level of direct U.S. military role is indispensable in the process of dismantling North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction, especially its nuclear arsenal and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

In consideration of long- and short-term interests as well as positive and negative reasons for China to be in favor of or against Korean unification, it may be worthwhile to keep in mind what China would consider as its “Red Lines.”

First, South Korea and the United States must agree that the U.S. troops would not advance north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Second, the United States must not install a new military base north of the DMZ.

Third, as the ROK Army’s activities in North Korea do not belong to a category of a war, they are beyond the scope of U.S. wartime operational control even before the wartime OPCON is transferred. China may also wish the ROK forces would avoid areas bordering China and retreat after disarming the North Korean army.



Fourth, China may demand that South Korea and the United States must share whatever “exclusive” information they can gather on North Korea after unification.

Fifth, when securing North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biochemical arms and their delivery systems), the ROK–U.S. allies must allow international organizations such as the United Nations and IAEA to take charge of the procedures.

Sixth, China would insist on a unified Korea honoring treaties and agreements made with it (particularly regarding territories) by North or South Korea before unification.

Finally, a unified Korea must pledge to be a nonnuclear weapon state.

China emphasizes that unification of the Korean Peninsula should take place peacefully and “autonomously.” When PRC President Xi Jinping visited South Korea in 2015, he stressed in his lecture at Seoul National University that he supports the “autonomous unification of the Korean Peninsula.” It means that China opposes unification by war or military force or regime change in North Korea through intervention of and/or initiated by a foreign country (i.e., the United States). At the same time, China generally seems to accept that unification under the Republic of (South) Korea’s leadership is inevitable and it may even be a desirable consequence.

As above, I attempted to review China’s interest calculation and roles in unification of the Korean Peninsula, but it may be viewed that there are meaningful changes in China’s attitude in three respects:

One is the fact that China has been conducting active research and calculations with keen interest in unification of the Korean Peninsula and a lot of internal discussions are underway about China’s interests and roles.

Second, it had until recently been regarded in the outside world that China would react negatively to a South Korea-led unification with a view to preserving North Korea as a buffer zone against the United States and South Korea. The truth, however, is that other variables and considerations have now been interposed. For example, how large a burden is North Korea to China in economic, diplomatic, and security terms? How large a political burden does the North Korean regime’s behavior levy on China? Are there not any aspects of unification of the Korean Peninsula which benefit China?

The third point is that China’s attitude and policy toward unification could vary depending on the input that South Korea and the United States can provide in accordance with the aforementioned circumstantial changes, namely on what guarantee they would offer and what kind of picture depicting a post-unification Korea they would show to China.



Just like the case of German unification, it can be said that the possibility to realize unification of the Korean Peninsula would so increase as South Korea attracts the United States to actively support unification while assuaging Japan's concerns and having China accept Korean unification as palatable.

On the other hand, China is worried about the possibility for unification of the Korean Peninsula to influence cross-Strait relations between the Mainland and Taiwan. The reasons, according to the Chinese calculation, are that the possibility for a unified Korea to join a China containment coalition front cannot be ruled out, and at the same time, Korean unification may as well pressure China's own unification schedule.

All in all, China seems to have greater concern about the journey to unification than the destination. The reasons include instability of the North Korean society, the problem of refugees from the North, the possibility of armed clashes, and U.S. forces advancing to the North, which may occur (and be entailed) in the process. It, therefore, will constitute a significant task for South Korea and the United States to assure China that the unification process would be peaceful, stable, and not disadvantageous to China.

It is necessary for the allies to dispel China's worries and satisfy its expected benefits as much as possible. For example, promising to honor the existing agreements (not only between South Korea and China but also between North Korea and China) would be an important measure to take.

When it comes to unification, not only China but also Japan, the United States, Russia, and so forth can calculate pluses and minuses to find both pros and cons for each of them. Focusing only on immediate interests, Russia probably has more reasons to welcome than to oppose Korean unification.

Nevertheless, as seen in the case of German unification, it would prove nearly impossible to convince China or Japan of the benefits without the active cooperation and support from the United States. In promoting unification, it is essential for South Korea to consult and coordinate quietly but proactively with its four neighboring major powers. In this effort, the most attractive selling point is that Korean unification under Southern auspices is the sure way of resolving the nuclear issue in the Korean Peninsula, a problem that vexes not only South Korea but all four major powers and the rest of the world. (January, 2017)





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