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WHITHER UNIFIED KOREA?

EAST, WEST OR CENTER?

by

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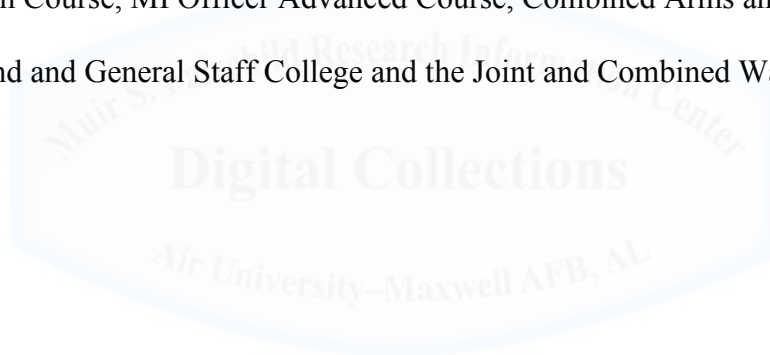
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Biography

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Abstract

Since the end of the Korean War, the balance of power in Northeast Asia has been significantly shaped by an enduring Republic of Korea (ROK)-US alliance. Despite the constant threat of a resumption of hostilities between the two Koreas, the current structure maintains a status quo that assures the balance of power in Northeast Asia. However, if hostilities or a collapse of the Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK) lead to a unified Korea; its choice of alignment could disrupt the balance of power imposed on the region since 1953.

A unified Korea's profound and strategic decision of alignment will not come easy and will not be black or white. It will however have the potential to shift the regional balance of power—a decision influenced by Korean history, culture, nationalism and the interests of the regional stakeholders.

A unified Korea has three broadly defined alignment options—tilt West towards the United States and Japan, tilt East towards the People's Republic of China (PRC), or pursue neutrality/nonalignment, each with their own advantages, disadvantages, and nuanced variations.

Given the range of strategic alignment options and its tumultuous history, culture and existing security dilemma, Korea will likely opt for neutrality/nonalignment as the best option to advance its national interests and promote peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Neutrality/nonalignment, although the most viable option, is not a forgone conclusion; how Korea unifies, what nations support it during unification, and the state of geostrategic environment could alter Korea's calculus and result in a different outcome. Given the strategic implications of a unified Korea's alignment, the United States should consider expanding its efforts to shape and influence the strategic environment towards a favorable outcome, encouraging Korea towards the West or at least a position of favorable neutrality.

I. Introduction

Since the end of the Korean War, the balance of power in Northeast Asia has been significantly shaped by an enduring Republic of Korea (ROK)-US alliance. Despite the constant threat of a resumption of hostilities between the two Koreas, the current structure maintains a status quo that assures the balance of power in Northeast Asia. However, if hostilities or a collapse of the Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK) lead to a unified Korea; its choice of alignment could disrupt the relative balance of power imposed on the region since 1953 and lead to a host of potential security crises for the United States.

A unified Korea has three broadly defined alignment options—tilt West towards the United States and Japan, tilt East towards the People’s Republic of China (PRC), or pursue neutrality/nonalignment; each with their own advantages, disadvantages, and nuanced variations. Scholars espouse a wide range of views on these options. Rear Adm Michael McDevitt, US Navy (Ret), a senior fellow with the Center for Naval Analysis Strategic Studies, identifies the options of alignment with the United States, alignment with the PRC, “strategic independence” and neutrality.¹ In “strategic independence,” he sees a unified Korea as neutral, possessing amicable ties with regional neighbors while deterring regional aggression through military strength.² In neutrality, although similar to “strategic independence”, McDevitt describes a unified Korea adhering to “strict neutrality” with its “security underwritten by all the regional powers . . . ,” however it would be vulnerable to external meddling.³ The Former National Security Council Director of Asian Affairs, Victor Cha, views the options as alignment with the PRC, “armed neutrality” (the Switzerland option), and alignment with western powers.⁴ In his alignment with the PRC, a unified Korea, independent of US influence, gravitates towards the PRC due to economics, culture and history, and trends towards nationalism—straining relations

with Japan.⁵ Cha provides an alternative and nuanced view of alignment with the western powers, where despite the continued alliance, a strong and unified Korea is “less reliant on the U.S.,” and possesses closer ties to Japan.⁶ Scholar Chae-Jin Lee focuses on the pros and cons of alignment with the United States and nonalignment—providing a compelling argument for nonalignment.⁷

On 24 September 2014, “citing the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago, President Park Geun-hye of the Republic of Korea . . . used her address to the annual high-level meeting of the [United Nations] General Assembly . . . to call on the United Nations to spearhead efforts to tear down the world’s last remaining ‘wall of division’ and reunite the Korean peninsula.”⁸ She proclaimed, “just as the unification of Germany laid the grounds for a new Europe by integrating Europe, a unified Korea will set in motion a new Northeast Asia.”⁹ With unification the decision on strategic alignment will transform the regional and international order as we now know it. The decision will likely be influenced by history, culture, and nationalism and informed by the ROK’s security dilemma—its economic (inter)dependence on a rising and increasingly powerful PRC and its strategic alliance with the United States,¹⁰ and, to a lesser extent, Japan. Assessing these variables, Korea will likely see its best option to advance its national interests and promote peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia as neutrality/nonalignment.

II. Geostrategic Significance of a Unified Korea

The assumptions that underpin the potential geostrategic significance of a unified Korea merit characterization. Whether the catalyst for unification is a second Korean War, implosion of the DPRK or even peaceful reintegration, unification will likely involve the eventual absorption of the North by the South. Therefore, a unified Korea will resemble a democratic state formed around ROK democratic institutions. It will have a combined population of roughly

74 million people,¹¹ strategically situated between Japan and Korea, and sharing an international border with the PRC and Russia. It will be a nonnuclear power of its own choosing and at the insistence of the PRC, the United States, Japan, and Russia. Current military force levels for the ROK and the DPRK are 655,000 and 1,190,000 respectively excluding reserve forces.¹² A unified Korea would conservatively be expected to maintain an active military strength of approximately 740,000 personnel based on “the traditional ratio of military forces at 1 percent of the population”.¹³ Assessing the nature of the future economy is more challenging. What is known is that the ROK’s GDP is 1.26 trillion dollars and its GDP per capita is \$25,051.¹⁴ According to the World Bank, the ROK’s GDP is ranked 14th in the world.¹⁵ Given a unified Korea’s potential population and the ROK’s current GDP alone, a unified Korea’s GDP per capita would still be competitive at approximately \$17,101.00 and would rank in the top 35%. Despite having to overcome significant challenges with regards to social, economic, political and military integration, infrastructure redevelopment, education, nuclear disarmament, humanitarian crisis, and high unification costs, a unified Korea would hold profound social, economic, political and military potential.

III. The Current Strategic Environment

The existing strategic environment will undoubtedly influence the alignment of a unified Korea. Seoul will have to confront and reconcile the regional negative and positive effects of economic, security, and political polarity vis-à-vis Korea.

The ROK’s number one trading partner is the PRC, followed by the United States and Japan.¹⁶ The 2013 trade volume between the ROK and the PRC exceeded the combined value between the ROK and the United States, Japan and Russia. The ROK is the 7th largest exporter

and the 9th largest importer in the world.¹⁷ Northeast Asia represents profound economic power; ROK, Japan and the PRC account for ~18.5% of world exports and ~17.4% of world imports.¹⁸

From 2002 to 2012, with the exception of 2009, the PRC was the largest recipient of ROK Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), followed by the United States, respectively representing 19.8% and

Table 1. Republic of Korea Exports & Imports (Millions of US dollars)		
	Exports	Imports
PRC	\$145,869.5	\$83,051.4
US	\$62,326.9	\$41,762.2
Japan	\$34,666.2	\$60,029.2
Russia	\$11,149.1	\$11,495
<i>Data derived from WTO International Trade and market Access Data, http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/statis_e.htm¹⁹</i>		

18.2% of total the ROK outward FDI in 2012.²⁰ ROK FDI into Japan decreased by 100% in 2012 and increased from .3% to 2.4% into Russia.²¹ Japan (37%) and the United States (19.3%) were the largest of contributors of FDI into the ROK.²² PRC and Russian FDI contributions were minimal at 2.2 % and .07%.²³

The ROK continues to pursue bilateral and multilateral trade agreements with multiple countries. The United States and the ROK entered into a free trade agreement on 15 March 2012 that has thus far expanded the US trade deficit with the ROK and failed to open, as expected, ROK markets to US automobile imports.²⁴ On 10 November 2014, PRC and ROK presidents signed a free trade agreement, expected to eliminate tariffs on 90% of bilaterally traded goods and allow ROK firms to operate as domestic companies in the PRC—thereby providing the ROK with an unprecedented advantage over other countries competing for access to PRC markets.²⁵ The ROK, Japan and the PRC continue to work towards a trilateral free trade agreement despite recurring and intermittent tension emanating from Japan's insensitivities over wartime atrocities, territorial disputes and efforts by Japan to redefine its defense posture.²⁶ A free trade agreement between the PRC, Japan, and the ROK, could have significant implications—further integrating their economies (representing 20% of the world GDP and 17.5% of global trade)²⁷ and

enhancing trust, cooperation and dialogue. The facts are clear: profound economic (inter)dependence exists between the ROK and the PRC, a condition that will transcend unification and unquestionably influence Korea's strategic alignment.

Northeast Asia has been immune to the dramatic changes brought about by the end of the Cold War; remaining in a status quo, it has yet to fully adjust to the post-cold War order.²⁸ The region is divided with the PRC increasingly reluctant to support the DPRK while the United States, Japan and the ROK are largely cooperating to confront the common DPRK threat. Despite "the conflicting geo-strategic interests . . . toward the Korean Peninsula . . . inhibit[ing] the institutionalization of regional structures,"²⁹ the United States, the ROK, Japan, the PRC and Russia, share a common desire to prevent nuclear proliferation and for the denuclearization of the Peninsula.³⁰ US forward presence and its bilateral arrangements with Japan and the ROK, coupled with the PRC's support to the DPRK, enables regional stability and assures stable relations between Japan and the ROK, despite latent grievances and animosities.³¹ Assuming, the PRC seeks regional hegemony, US continued forward presence and the region's preoccupation with the DPRK and nuclear proliferation arguably softens the effects of the PRC's rise and delays the inevitable great power competition between the United States and the PRC.³² Unification, however, could further expose, accelerate, and intensify competition; as the United States and the PRC vie for influence over Korea.

The ROK and the United States share common values and interests, and are bound together by a strong and enduring military alliance. Despite the latent polarizing, historical and cultural animosities between the ROK and Japan, those two countries, with the help of the United States, have tempered their differences in the face of a common threat. Political and economic relations between the ROK and the PRC are the best they ever been since the two

countries normalized in 1992.³³ “While [the PRC] continues to expand its economic influence with [the DPRK, it recognizes] that the most important strategic decisions on the Korean Peninsula will likely be made in Seoul rather than Pyongyang and has attempted to strengthen the Sino-ROK . . . relationship.”³⁴ With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia ceased being the DPRK’s benefactor and has all but diverted its attention away from Northeast Asia, relegating its regional involvement to the “Six Party Talks” and the limited pursuit of energy and transportation interests.³⁵ The PRC remains the DPRK’s primary source of political, security and economic support. Meanwhile the DPRK’s self-imposed political and economic isolation is exacerbated by the economic sanctions imposed on it for pursuing, acquiring, and maintaining a nuclear weapons capability. With these conditions “given that [the PRC] can apparently support [the DPRK] indefinitely, unification will not happen without [the PRC’s] assent, and that assent will not be forthcoming while the U.S. role in Korea remains as it is.”³⁶

“[The DPRK] in many ways is an issue that unites the major regional powers who are often at odds with each other, including Japan, [the ROK, the PRC, the United States], and Russia.”³⁷ “The orientation of the Korean Peninsula remains a critical security interest of major powers, especially [the PRC] and Japan, which have historically viewed a friendly Korean Peninsula as a crucial factor affecting their own security.”³⁸ Unification under the shadow of a rising PRC will pose multiple security dilemmas for Northeast Asia.³⁹ Unification would remove the DPRK threat, to include its nuclear weapons, but could also exacerbate latent tensions and territorial disputes, and lead to increased competition over the Peninsula. “Given Korea’s strategic location... Seoul’s choice of alignment among the great powers competing could potentially tilt the balance of power in the region in favor of one side or another.”⁴⁰ The ROK’s desired outcome for Korean unification is the formation of a “democratic” and

“internationalist” nation.⁴¹ A unified Korea, geo-strategically located, where competing great power interests converge, will ultimately determine and define the balance of power in Northeast Asia.⁴² Confronted with these stark regional realities; Seoul will have no choice but to consider, reconcile and balance to its own benefit the national interests of stakeholder nations.

IV. The Regional Powers’ View

On 17 November 2011, before the Australian Parliament, President Obama announced the “Asia Rebalance” and made clear America’s intent to maintain a strong military presence in the Asia-Pacific to preserve the nation’s “unique ability to project power and deter threats,” and maintain its commitments with friends and allies, while emphasizing that US enduring interests would demand an enduring US presence.⁴³ On 24 April 2014 in Seoul, during a joint press conference with President Park, President Obama unequivocally conveyed US support for Korean unification—articulating his shared vision for a unified Korea—democratic and nonnuclear—where its citizens enjoy political and economic freedom.⁴⁴ The President echoed President Park’s characterization of the ROK-US alliance as “a linchpin of security in Asia.”⁴⁵ Taking stock of President Obama’s declaration of shared values and interests and the enduring value of the existing military alliance, one can conclude that the United States would unquestionably favor a free, democratic and nonnuclear unified Korea aligned with the United States and Japan as a keystone to the continued US military presence not only in Korea but throughout Asia.

The PRC on the other hand, favors stability on the Peninsula above all else. However, given unification, the PRC would prefer the US military alliance and presence in Korea be discontinued⁴⁶ and would seek amicable coexistence with Korea. Under ideal conditions, the PRC would favor a deferential Korea. The PRC privately views Korea within its sphere of

influence in the same manner the United States views Latin America, and Russia, Central Asia.⁴⁷ In the past, China pursued amicable relations with Korea by inducing it into a client state relationship until Japanese occupation in 1910.⁴⁸ Following World War II and the Korean War, the PRC's preeminent concern on the Peninsula has been stability,⁴⁹ reflected in its post-Korean policies aimed at maintaining stability at any cost through nonmilitary means.⁵⁰ This is congruent with the PRC's preference for unification to be realized through a "peaceful, reasonable, and rational" process and its opposition to "disturbances to the stability on the peninsula from any direction."⁵¹ Even if a ROK-US security agreement could be reached without garrisoning US forces in Korea, it would not settle well with the PRC.⁵² The PRC prefers maintaining status quo and delaying unification.⁵³ With the passage of time, the PRC believes economic interdependence will only increase between it and both Koreas and thus its influence over the eventual process of unification.⁵⁴ In the end, if they cannot preclude unification, the PRC desires a process of unification that leads to a deferential Korea without a US military presence.

Japan desires a unified and democratic Korea that is nonnuclear, politically and economically transparent, allied with the west, and permits some semblance of continued US presence.⁵⁵ Alignment outside this construct will likely invoke concern and the perception that that a united Korea represents at best a political and economic rival, susceptible to PRC influence or worse, a strategic threat.^{56,57} A unified Korea's alignment is of vital interest to Japan as it will fundamentally influence "Japan's relations with the other major powers whose interests intersect on the Korean Peninsula."⁵⁸ Hence Japan favors a continued US alliance and presence in Korea which would stabilize and promote favorable relations between it and Korea.⁵⁹ On the other hand, a unified Korea tilting towards the PRC or "even equidistant between [the PRC] and Japan

would complicate Japan's future strategic position . . . In some respects, this gives Japan an incentive to improve its relations with Russia, which may have a similar interest in diluting [the PRC's] role in a unified Korea.”⁶⁰

Russia, despite its diminished influence on the Korean Peninsula, “welcomes progress toward inter-Korean reconciliation and possible unification.”⁶¹ In the event of unification, Russia would prefer a nonaligned and nonnuclear Korea as opposed to one tilting towards the West, as that “would represent another American victory.”⁶² For Russia, a stable united Korea, ideally nonaligned, represents the best opportunity for Russia to pursue its long term economic interests, energy and transportation, in Northeast Asia.

V. Points of Polarity & Things to Consider

When deciding on how best to align, Korea will invariably have to consider, reconcile and balance history, culture and nationalism against its existing problematic economic/security dilemma⁶³ between the PRC and the United States.

Korea, because of its geostrategic location, “suffered a long and extremely violent history of humiliating foreign invasions and occupations” by China, the Mongols, and Japan.⁶⁴ A victim of the “Cold War,” a divided Korea highlights its vulnerability to great power competition. The residual effects of Korea's volatile past persist today in the form of unresolved grievances and territorial disputes between Japan and Korea.⁶⁵ Although these grievances and animosities may serve as a convenient means of promoting cohesion (nationalism) “among the formerly split Korean people,” Japan will likely find this unsettling.⁶⁶ If left unaddressed and unresolved, relations between the two countries are liable to worsen once Korea is unified.⁶⁷

History has left an indelible mark on the Korean culture and character, specifically as it pertains to the concept of *hahn* and Confucianism. Subjected to centuries of adversity at the

hands of external powers, Korea developed a unique value called *hahn*—“a deep-seated feeling of shame, frustration, rancor and insecurity on the national psyche, resulting in a national sense of inferiority.”⁶⁸ In the aftermath Korean War, the ROK Government actually capitalized on the concept to mobilize the people to overcome adversity, redeem “national honor, save face for the republic, and give Koreans direction to seek power, economic success and security.”⁶⁹ Given this, one can expect *hahn* to play a decisive role to achieve ultimate redemption following unification.

Additionally Korea, like the PRC, is heavily influenced by Confucianism, especially with respect to the concepts of face and harmony. “In both Chinese and Korean cultures, causing another to lose face is both humiliating and can be seen as an ultimate discourtesy.”⁷⁰ The concepts of face and harmony are inextricably linked and likely influence Korea’s approach to conflict resolution.⁷¹ Harmony is an important element of Korean culture; adverse to conflict, Koreans tend to eschew or ameliorate direct conflict.⁷² Given this, we can expect a unified Korea to value international institutions and conduct itself in a multilateral approach in order to pursue regional harmony.

The emergence of Korean nationalism may be a natural byproduct of unification, especially as a mechanism to galvanize the people around a common identity. Even today, despite the division, and perhaps due to their common history, “both Koreas are immensely nationalistic and sensitive to outside interference.”⁷³ Post-unification nationalism could push Korea away from one country towards another as in the case of Japan and the PRC.⁷⁴ Post-unification Korean nationalism coupled with historical animosities and economic rivalry could lead to cantankerous relations with Japan, while economic interdependence, cultural and historical affinities move Korea closer to the PRC.⁷⁵ Conversely, despite the emphasis on

Korean animosity vis-à-vis Japan, nationalism could lead to estranged relations with the PRC as relations with Japan simultaneously improve in the wake of a diminished US presence in Asia.⁷⁶ Nationalism, possessing properties of polarity, has the distinct potential to heavily influence the strategic alignment of a unified Korea.

Since the end of the Korean War, the US forward presence in the ROK contributed to regional stability, not only with respect to the DPRK, but also by repressing latent hostilities between the PRC and Japan, the PRC vis-à-vis the ROK and Japan, and lastly between the ROK and Japan.⁷⁷ Unification, however, coupled with a rising PRC, could expose and aggravate regional animosities and Korea's security dilemma.⁷⁸ To manage this, Korea must first reconcile its existing economic/security dilemma⁷⁹ between the PRC and the United States. Korea will likely be under immense pressure to choose between maintaining its strategic alliance with the United States at the risk of spoiling its relationship with the PRC or turning away from the United States, in order to maintain harmonic and economic relations with the PRC. The latter would almost certainly result in the reduction, if not the withdrawal, of US forces from Korea. Second, Korea must contend with mounting Japanese and PRC competition for regional influence, historically kept in check by the US military presence in the ROK⁸⁰ and definitely prone to worsen in its absence. And finally, Korea must be cognizant of the risk that "unification will increase the potential for mutual suspicion between Japan and Korea."⁸¹

Korea's alignment, in the face of great power competition, has the profound potential to destabilize the region—especially "if there is no dominant force to keep stability."⁸² Korea is confronted with a classic "Catch 22" dilemma. If it elects to continue its alliance with the United States it risks souring its relationship with the PRC and increasing tension. If Korea acquiesces to pressure and tilts towards the PRC, it runs the risk of inciting tension between itself, Japan and

the United States. Once more, the profound and strategic decision of alignment will not come easy and it will not be black or white.

VI. Unified Korea's Alignment Choices

As noted, Korea has three basic alignment options broadly defined as tilt West, tilt East, or pursue neutrality/nonalignment, each with distinct advantages, disadvantages, and nuanced variations. The imperative is for Korea to determine which choice best advances its national interests, promotes regional peace and prosperity, and accounts for and reconciles the influence history, culture and nationalism.

Korea's initial tendency will be to continue the enduring ROK-US military alliance that presently enables regional peace and stability. Korea tilting towards the West, under the blanket of US security, would contribute to promoting harmony between Japan and Korea, preventing latent historical grievances and animosity from becoming drivers of instability. Assuming the PRC exercises tolerance, tilting toward the West would allow Korea to hedge against the PRC's increasing military power while benefiting from the PRC's continued economic growth. This is consistent with the current "trend among [the PRC's] neighbors to tread softly around [the PRC] while also hedging their bets by drawing themselves more closely to the United States."⁸³ It is, however, unlikely that the PRC will accept a continuation of the existing ROK-US military alliance post-unification for any extended period.⁸⁴ The PRC has "been quite clear in unofficial dialogue that while they can understand a [ROK-US] alliance today," given unification, "they would oppose as a matter principle a continuation of the alliance and of a U.S. military presence in Korea."⁸⁵ A continuation of the existing security alliance would certainly antagonize the PRC and place Korea in an undesirable and untenable position—caught in middle of great power competition between the United States and the PRC and Japan and the PRC.⁸⁶ "Even if a unified

Korea was unwilling to cut military ties with the U.S., it's unlikely that [it] would make any moves that overtly threaten [the PRC], such as allowing U.S. troops to be stationed above the 38th parallel. . . . [Furthermore the ROK's] economic ties with [the PRC] are hugely important. The [ROK] simply cannot afford to antagonize [the PRC], and would likely consult . . . [the PRC] to ensure Korean unification happened on terms Beijing could accept.”⁸⁷ In spite of this and ultimately problematic, the PRC may be persuaded to accept a ROK-US military alliance with a reduced US presence or one that all together forgoes it, contingent upon the state of relations between the United States and the PRC.^{88,89}

Korea may be induced to tilt towards the PRC considering the profound economic interdependence between the two countries. Assuming the PRC continues to rise, “an increasingly powerful Chinese military power will render U.S. security guarantees in the region less credible. Despite the so-called ‘pivot,’ the fact is that Chinese military power will grow relative to U.S. military power in the region. Given the Korean Peninsula’s importance to [the PRC’s] security, Beijing may push Seoul to distance itself from Washington or even to align with it.”⁹⁰ Should Korea perceive the ROK-US alliance to be of less value post-unification, assessing it to be more trouble than it’s worth, it may be inclined to walk away from alliance and tilt towards the PRC, especially if the PRC were to play critical role in post-unification development and reconstruction.⁹¹ Although aligning with the PRC would promote harmonious relations between the two nations, it may increase tension between Korea and Japan and the PRC and Japan—accentuated by latent animosities, grievances and unresolved territorial disputes. On the other hand, Korea tilting towards East or “even equidistant between China and Japan would complicate Japan’s future strategic position” and may induce Japan to compensate by improving relations with Russia.⁹² Furthermore, a Korea aligning with the PRC may be “more nationalistic

and perhaps more prone to anti-Americanism.”⁹³ Despite the benefits of aligning with the PRC, Korea would in effect be submitting itself to the PRC’s influence, if not dominance,⁹⁴ an uncomfortable position given its history, not to mention the destabilizing effects it could have on the region.

Unification “will undoubtedly lead to increased competition for influence on the Peninsula between the [PRC] and the U.S. and [the PRC] and Japan.”⁹⁵ Caught in the midst of great power competition, a unified Korea may opt for neutrality/nonalignment as the best “method of conflict management and diplomatic compromise.”⁹⁶ With the absence of the DPRK threat, Korea may find the US military presence unnecessary, and elect to forgo their presence and assume an equidistance posture to avoid being drawn into the great power competition between the United States and the PRC.⁹⁷ In 1953, the Eisenhower administration actually advocated for Korean neutrality in NSC 170/1, *US Objectives and Courses of Action in Korea*.⁹⁸ The United States was willing to accept a unified and neutral Korea led by a freely elected government, unencumbered by foreign military presence or alliances, its sovereignty and territorial integrity assured, and capable of defending itself.⁹⁹ At that time, the State Department “argued that the neutralization of Korea would remove Korea as a political and military problem, favor the security of Japan [and] reduce the U.S. military and economic burden.”¹⁰⁰ Today, like in the past, there are many benefits to neutrality. First neutrality would “protect Korea’s political independence, territorial integrity, and [enable] diplomatic flexibility.”¹⁰¹ Second it would “reduce conflict among the Pacific powers over Korea and promote peace and stability in the region.”¹⁰² And thirdly, it could alleviate potential domestic divisions “among Korean leaders over foreign policy orientations . . . Above all, Korean leaders might see neutralization [congruent with Korean culture] as an expression of self-reliance.”¹⁰³ The PRC and Russia will

likely favor and support neutrality, since it limits US influence in the region and removes Korea as a potential flashpoint for instability.¹⁰⁴ Japan, on the other hand, would prefer Korea tilt towards the West, but would not oppose Korean neutrality provided “it prevents the ascendancy of [PRC] or Russian influence and maintains a peaceful and friendly Korean policy towards Japan.”¹⁰⁵ For the United States, Korean neutrality, although not desirable, would be the lesser of two evils—alignment with PRC.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to those who argue for neutrality, “[it] could . . . increase rather than decrease major power competition over Korea, and perturb what is likely to prove a complex, very difficult unification and national integration process.”¹⁰⁷ To mitigate the aforementioned risks, Korea must exercise diplomatic impartiality in order to avoid being perceived to favor one great power over another.

VI. Conclusion

The emergence of a unified Korea, a regional power in its own right, geo-strategically located, where great power competing interests converge, will ultimately define the balance of power in Northeast Asia.¹⁰⁸ Hence, how a unified Korea aligns itself will have profound implications for the region. Given the range of strategic alignment options and its tumultuous history, culture and existing security dilemma, Korea may prefer neutrality/nonalignment as the best option to advance its national interests and promote peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Tilting towards the East, despite promoting harmonious relations with the PRC, could polarize and destabilize the region. Similarly, tilting towards the West, despite promoting harmony between Japan and Korea and preventing latent historical grievances and animosities from becoming drivers of instability, is liable to polarize and destabilize the region. Nevertheless, neutrality/nonalignment, although the most likely option, is not a forgone

conclusion; how Korea unifies, what nations support it during unification, and the state of geostrategic environment could alter Korea's calculus and result in a different outcome.

Given the strategic implications of a unified Korea's alignment, the United States should consider expanding its efforts to shape and influence the strategic environment towards a favorable outcome, encouraging Korea towards the West or at least to a position of favorable neutrality. The denuclearization of the Peninsula is more likely to result from unification; therefore the US support for Korean unification should go well beyond passive and rhetorical support.¹⁰⁹ "Such a policy shift would achieve many U.S. goals and would strengthen our alliance with [the ROK] in the process."¹¹⁰ The United States should support President Park's efforts "to advance a Northeast Peace and Cooperation Initiative that is aimed at building an order of trust and cooperation in the region."¹¹¹ The United States should redefine the role of US forces in Korea beyond the defense of the ROK to include foreign humanitarian assistance, military engagement and security cooperation throughout Asia to assuage the PRC's suspicion and concern over a continued US military presence post-unification. The United States should promote positive "ROK-Japanese relations" to alleviate regional tension.¹¹² As President Park alludes to, a unified Korea will be "a new distribution hub linking the Pacific and Eurasia, it is bound to benefit the economies of East Asia and the rest of the world."¹¹³ Therefore, the United States should actively seek PRC participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership as a means to advance regional trust, cooperation and economic interdependence.

On 28 March 2014, during an address before students and faculty of the Dresden University of Technology in Germany, President Park proclaimed "just as German unification represented the inexorable tide of history . . . Korean unification is a matter of historical inevitability."¹¹⁴ Despite not knowing the date and method of unification, we do know, as

President Park states, it is inevitable. Just as German unification transformed the European regional and international order, so too will unification of Korea. Absent substantially changed conditions, Korea is likely to favor neutrality/nonalignment. Given the strategic implications of its alignment, the United States must act now to set the conditions for an outcome congruent with US national interests.



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