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## The Potential Unification of Korea and a Unified Korean Armed Forces

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**AIR UNIVERSITY**



# **The Potential Unification of Korea and a Unified Korean Armed Forces**

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## **Foreword**

The Kenney Papers series from Air University Press, in collaboration with the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers, provides a forum for topics related to the Indo-Pacific region, which covers everything from the western shores of the Americas to the eastern coast of Africa and from Antarctica to the Arctic. Named for General George Churchill Kenney, Allied air commander in the Southwest Pacific during World War II and subsequently commander of Strategic Air Command and then Air University, this series seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the region, the geopolitics and geoeconomics that shape the theater, and the roles played by the US military in providing for a free and open Indo-Pacific.



DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL  
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## **About the Author**

Colonel Edmonston is a 2000 graduate of the USAF Academy and has a PhD in Military Strategy from Air University. He has served as a B-1 and MQ-1 pilot as well as a Northeast Asia Foreign Area Officer. He is currently the Commander of the Air Force Element at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

## Abstract

This paper examines the prospect of Korean Unification and the possibility of a future unified Korean Armed Forces. I make arguments for the likelihood of unification and the possible means by which it might unfold, both from the perspective of regional players and that of the two Koreas. These two perspectives are “independent variables” for the purpose of this analysis. I assess that, while regional actors would likely favor only unification under conditions of denuclearization, peaceful inter-Korean dialogue, and a gradual political process, the current obstacles to such conditions—expressed in this paper in terms of competing Korean identities, values, national security preferences, and unification strategies—suggest that unification is more likely to occur following a resumed Korean War and/or a North Korean collapse. Furthermore, while the status quo is somewhat stable, I assess that time is not on North Korea’s side. From these assertions, I examine how international and domestic factors affect two “dependent variables” in the potential military outcomes of unification: The fate of North Korea’s People’s Army (KPA), and the character of a unified Korean armed forces, which I break down further into four aspects: *operational culture*, *sociology*, *professionalism*, and *technology*. From analysis of the first dependent variable, I assert that, regardless of the means by which unification occurs, the KPA is unlikely to be integrated on a large scale into a single Korean military. However, there are benefits to post-unification stability in retaining a percentage of the KPA’s junior forces, finding positions of influence for certain members of North Korea’s military elite, and retaining select North Korean military hardware for purposes of intelligence or integration of forces from the North and the South. From analysis of the second dependent variable, I speculate that a unified Korean armed forces will be oriented primarily toward territorial defense; take on roles of national security, domestic assistance, and nation-building; and constitute a smaller percentage of the population than in either Korea today. I recommend that any KPA incorporated into a unified military should serve voluntarily and undergo a thorough assimilation process, and I predict that a high degree of professionalism will continue to mark a unified Korean armed forces if certain conditions for post-unification transition are met. This paper finishes with lessons from historical unification cases that may help ensure Korean unification and its military outcome are peaceful and stable, if not in the short term, then at least in the long term.

## Introduction

This paper analyzes the potential future unification of Korea and its military outcome, with the intent to answer three primary questions. First, how do external and intra-Korean factors compete in shaping how Korean unification might occur? Second, what are the possible outcomes for North Korean and South Korean armed forces if the two countries should unify? Third, what can historical cases of national unification teach about how to shape that outcome peacefully, both within Korea and for the Northeast Asian region?

Korea is a useful choice to write about for three reasons. First, the desires of South and North Korea suggest that unification, while unfeasible at this moment, is likely at some point in the future. In the words of the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding Korea: “Eventually, peoples do tend to unify, one way or another. It just must be managed closely and carefully to avoid armed conflict.”<sup>1</sup> Second, and following from the Chairman’s comments, how to ensure peaceful unification in Korea is a looming strategic question. The dynamics of inter-Korean relations and the somewhat vague position of China regarding unification suggest that the manner of the event’s unfolding is far from decided. Depending on the course of Korea’s unification, there are lessons historical unification cases can offer regarding the military outcome—both what is most likely and what should happen—despite the odds—to maintain peace and stability on the peninsula and in the region. Third, American commitment to stability on the Korean Peninsula demands that it take some responsibility for what happens to the militaries of both sides if Korea unifies. Consequently, recommendations for American foreign and military policy follow speculation on the possible military outcomes of a Korean unification.

The **first section** of this paper provides the political and military background and context to today’s divided Korean Peninsula. The **second section** examines the perspectives of four external powers on the prospect of Korean unification: the United States, China, Russia, and Japan. While national interests vary greatly among these powers, the section asserts each player would value the stability of a unified Korea under certain conditions that are not entirely exclusive of each other.

The **third section** explores the domestic influences on the prospect of Korean unification and the potential integration of North and South Korean military forces through four lenses: national identities, national values, national preferences for security, and national strategies for unifica-

tion. Each of the four discussions offers a North Korean and South Korean perspective, followed by the impacts of these perspectives on the prospects for unification. The discussion on *identities* suggests that a common bond among Koreans approaching nationalism has not been the norm in the history of the peninsula. However, this paper suggests two historical precedents for unification that Koreans can draw from. The discussion on *values* explains how principles and standards have diverged between the governments and societies of the two Koreas since political division, concluding with the challenges of reforming the values of North Koreans under a South Korean–dominated unification process. Comparing the perspectives for *national security* gives the most detailed glimpse so far into the differences between the armed forces of the two Koreas, besides describing the edifices that will need to be broken down before unification can take place. Finally, the discussion on *national strategies* for unification concludes with three possible scenarios: gradualism, North Korean collapse, and resumed war. Generally speaking, gradualism offers the most peaceful prospects for unification, but unification from the collapse of North Korea or the resumption of war between the two sides appears more likely. The **fourth section** addresses these prospects, as well as the likelihood of the political status quo to continue.

From the assertions in the first four sections, the paper analyzes the military outcome of Korean unification in terms of two variables: the fate of the North Korean military (the Korean People’s Army, or KPA), and the character of a unified Korean armed forces. The first variable is the subject of the **fifth section**, beginning with the impact of each unification scenario on the likelihood of the KPA’s integration into a unified Korean armed forces. The section follows with a look at the KPA’s expected contribution to the unification process, regardless of whether its members continue to serve in the long term.

In speculating on the second variable of the military outcome—the character of a unified Korean armed forces—**sixth section** uses four aspects, or lenses: operational culture, military sociology, military professionalism, and technology. For each lens, I speculate on the expected security environment on the peninsula following unification, and I make recommendations for South Korean policy, US policy, or both.

The **seventh section** looks at lessons that can be taken from past cases of national unification for the military outcome of Korean unification. German reunification provides the most practical lessons for gradualism or collapse, while Vietnamese unification offers some lessons for the possibility of

resumed Korean War leading to unification. Finally, the **eighth section** culls lessons from five other historical cases that can be called “national unification” for the purposes of this paper and applies them to the Korean case. These cases are Imperial German unification, Polish independence, Yemeni unification, Austrian independence, and the assimilation of Hong Kong into China. Sections seven and eight attempt to follow a fine line between ignoring history in speculation about the future and hindering “later decision-making by providing an analogy that will be applied too quickly, easily, [or] widely.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they include careful analysis of the differences as well as the similarities between past unification cases and the potential case of Korea.

This paper uses “unification” rather than “reunification” for Korea, arguing that it has not existed as a single modern state in its history. It is more like Yemen or Vietnam in that powers have historically consolidated control within it, but they have been dynasties with somewhat ill-defined borders. This is the case for Korea’s Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910), which claimed to rule all Korea but actually possessed marginal control in the north of the peninsula and (as this paper will later discuss) intentionally created two separate societal orders between North and South. “Unification” in the Korea case is also helpful in distinguishing it from more obvious reunifications, such as that of Austria, the Federal German Republic, and even Poland.

This paper also uses “military” and “army” somewhat interchangeably. The reasons are twofold. First, ground forces are by far the largest of the military service branches that would be involved in unification. Second and similarly, the fate of the North Korean military and the character of a unified Korean military—the two dependent variables in this paper’s analysis of military outcome—mostly concern ground forces. Therefore, using the Korean People’s Army (or KPA) to refer to the North Korean military as a whole is justified. However, I generally refer to the existing South Korean military as the ROK Armed Forces or the South Korean Defense Forces (SKDF), and I refer to a unified Korean military often as the Korean Defense Forces (KDF).

**Table 1. A comparison of North and South Korea today**

	South Korea	North Korea
government	presidential democracy	post-totalitarian communist dictatorship <sup>3</sup>
economic system	capitalism	command economy
origin of separation	The United States occupied the area below 38th parallel, and the Soviet Union occupied the area above it; the two powers could not agree on a common government, and separate leaders emerged to govern each side.	
population	51, 275, 662 (2020)	25, 795, 480 (2020)
area	38,230 sq mi	46,540 sq mi
GDP	\$1.64 trillion (2019) *\$28,600 per capita	\$18 billion (2019) *\$1,700 per capita
active-duty military forces (all services)	580,000 (2020) *7th largest in the world by percentage of population	1.3 million (2020) *4th largest in the world by percentage of population

Sources: Population data comes from Worldometer (<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>), Land area data comes from *National Geographic Family Reference Atlas of the World*. GDP data is from Trading Economics (<https://tradingeconomics.com>), except for North Korean GDP per capita, which is from Investopedia ([www.investopedia.com](http://www.investopedia.com)). Active-duty force statistics are from Global Firepower (<https://www.globalfirepower.com/>).

## Section 1 The Background and Context of Korean Division

Table 1 above provides a baseline comparison of the two Koreas, revealing that they are poles apart in several respects. The stark differences are largely the result of the two sides' divergence over seven decades of separation. This separation originated with the rather hastily devised line of division at the 38th parallel by the Soviets and Americans for purposes of occupation following their defeat of Japan at the end of World War II. Korea had been part of the Japanese Empire since 1910, but the 1943 Cairo Declaration signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Chiang Kai-Shek expressed that Korea should become "free and independent."<sup>4</sup>

Japan's surrender and initial Soviet-American agreement about Korea's independence appeared to signal a return to precolonial status, but the realities of the Cold War extinguished such hopes. The Soviets manipulated Koreans' impatience to become independent by setting up a communist government in the North, but the United States preferred either nationwide elections or partition to a Soviet-dominated state. After the Soviet Union defied a United Nations (UN) resolution to allow these elec-

tions, the United States hosted elections in the South in 1948. The Republic of Korea (ROK) was established in May 1948 with Syngman Rhee as president, and the Soviet Union announced the creation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) four months later, with Kim Il-sung as premier.<sup>5</sup>

A situation unfolded quickly in which each side claimed to be the true Korea. In 1949, the United States withdrew its forces from the ROK, and after numerous refusals by Stalin and Mao, Kim Il-sung obtained their nod in 1950 to achieve unification of the peninsula by force. Contrary to what the Soviet and Chinese leaders had thought, America and the United Nations proved willing to intervene. Although the fledgling North Korean military initially beat back UN forces to a small perimeter around the coastal city of Pusan, these forces rallied thanks to a surprise amphibious assault led by US General Douglas MacArthur at the port of Inchon. The momentum of victory carried forces all the way to the Yalu River on the Chinese border before Mao's Red Army entered the conflict out of concern for national security. Together with North Korean forces, the Red Army then pushed UN forces back to the 38th parallel. After nearly two years of diplomatic negotiations interspersed with periodic combat, the parallel became an armistice line with a demilitarized zone (DMZ) on either side.

Despite multiple changes in leadership by both North and South Korea since the end of the Korean War and the end of the Cold War, the armistice remains in place and the border between the two sides is one of the most heavily defended in the world. Besides artillery batteries on both sides along the length of the border, hundreds of thousands of North and South Korean troops are deployed at the edges of the DMZ.<sup>6</sup> In addition, approximately 28,500 US military forces remain stationed in South Korea, supported by American bases in Japan.

Inter-Korean relations have fluctuated several times over the previous few decades, ranging from the threat of war across their shared border to economic agreements and summit meetings seeking to recognize common interests. Due to Korea's history, geography, and the exchange of threats increasingly couched in nuclear terms by the DPRK, these fluctuations garner the attention of both regional and great powers. For this reason, any discussion on the potential of unification merits a look at their perspectives first.

## **Section 2**

### **The Influence of External Powers on a Potential Korean Unification**

As one Asian scholar has noted, “four major powers in the region, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia, continue to hold the key to the political future of the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>7</sup> Each of these states has exerted significant influence on the peninsula in the past and will likely attempt to shape a unified Korea, including future armed forces. As with unifications in other places, the current relationships among the external powers will affect how they approach these issues. A collective regional security structure like NATO in which to frame regional discussions about Korean unification is absent in Asia. As a result, players are more likely to put strict national interests and demands of reparations for past offenses above mutual goals or cooperative concessions in forming policies about the future of a unified Korea. These constraints are also likely to prevent agreement on any resolution related to Korean unification on the UN Security Council, of which the United States, Russia, and China are members with veto power.<sup>8</sup> The question therefore remains whether regional cooperation could ever become robust enough to unite regional players in agreement on the Korean issue. So far, one of the few agreements among the four powers is that a united Korea should not have nuclear weapons.

#### **The United States**

The United States would likely support Korean unification as long as it is a means for strengthening regional stability and global security. From a US point of view, unification can best achieve these outcomes under two conditions. First, a unitary Korea would need to uphold “the current US–South Korea security alliance, or at least remain under the U.S. security umbrella as opposed to aligning itself with China.”<sup>9</sup> Second, denuclearization should precede unification. A corollary to both conditions is that South Korea should approach the dismantling of the KPA in a manner that preserves stability on the peninsula and prevents the proliferation of nuclear materials.

In accordance with the first condition, the ROK alliance should be the springboard from which the United States supports unification. The December 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS) states that its “alliance and friendship with South Korea, forged by the trials of history, is stronger than ever.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, since 2002 the United States and South Korea

have promoted their alliance as a vehicle to improve stability in the region, not just on the peninsula.<sup>11</sup> As part of this framework, the two allies may see a continued US military presence “as a stabilizing factor to preempt the need for Japan to re-militarize, and a wedge to offset both China and Russia from bullying Korea on political issues.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the United States would likely build upon existing US–ROK military ties to maximize regional stability in any unification scenario.

For the United States, the other condition—denuclearization—is a global rather than just a regional issue. Per the NSS, the United States views North Korea’s continued pursuit of “nuclear and ballistic missile programs” over the previous three decades as a “global threat that requires a global response.”<sup>13</sup> Other than obtaining support for international sanctions against the regime and a limited number of Six-Party Talks in the 2000s, the United States has relied mostly on the strength of its relationship with South Korea and its own diplomatic efforts to persuade the DPRK to reverse its course in these programs. These efforts began in 1991, five years after US satellite photos first produced evidence North Korea had been detonating nuclear material in a pattern commensurate with weapons development.<sup>14</sup> However, despite willingness on several occasions to cease nuclear testing or destroy nuclear facilities as a demonstration of trustworthiness, North Korea has continued to develop its nuclear program. It claims to have developed and tested a thermonuclear bomb in 2017, and in the previous decade it has made giant strides toward being able to launch an ICBM.<sup>15</sup> This possibility puts the West Coast of the United States within reach, accentuating the need in the minds of American leaders for a global approach to denuclearization of the peninsula.

Because the US nuclear umbrella serves as the ROK’s protection from attack, the ROK can prioritize other inter-Korean issues of concern such as unification. As a result, the United States and the ROK view the relationship between denuclearization and unification differently. Since denuclearization of the peninsula is a global issue for the United States, it is a goal unto itself, independent of Korean unification. For South Korea, denuclearization is “a process to advance inter-Korean relations.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the ends and means are somewhat reversed, with two related impacts on US policy for the region.

First, although inter-Korean dialogue in the last few years has helped to spur two US–DPRK summits focused on denuclearization, the United States has approached denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula similar to efforts elsewhere on the globe that have little to do with inter-Korean relations. This

approach appears to be a mental outgrowth of the Cold War and the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, which established the “security order on the Korean Peninsula” largely independent of Korean domestic concerns.<sup>17</sup> Considering this paradigm, US–DPRK efforts and ROK–DPRK efforts toward denuclearization and unification may remain somewhat bifurcated without closer US–ROK coordination on the two issues.

Second, the idea that political unification could take place prior to complete denuclearization is likely less acceptable to the United States than to South Korea. Currently, the United States is not willing to declare an end of the Korean War before “crafting a stable policy on the Korean Peninsula” that includes denuclearization.<sup>18</sup> The prospect of a still nuclear-armed North Korea during unification would greatly increase the threat of nuclear proliferation—particularly if unification were not entirely peaceful—due to the greater potential for North Korea to lose control of existing nuclear facilities, weapons, and materials during the process. Furthermore, only the United States has the specially trained forces to properly secure and dispose of nuclear material. If that material is unguarded there is a high likelihood US ground forces would need to enter the DPRK during unification.

In view of current US commitments, these possibilities are not unthinkable and have been considered in operational planning. Moreover, the strength of the US–ROK alliance and the enduring presence of thousands of US forces in South Korea suggest the United States would fight side by side with ROK forces during unification, including crossing the border and securing nuclear sites. The two allies have had nearly seven decades to fine-tune and update combined military plans for addressing potential conflict on the peninsula. Semiannual exercises continue to rehearse these plans despite vacillating relations among the United States, the ROK, and the DPRK.<sup>19</sup>

Continuing to invest in such plans is wise, since even in a unification scenario preceded by mutual North–South political agreement, stabilizing North Korea may still pose hazards that require military solutions. Along with the unguarded military facilities and weapons already mentioned, these hazards include disempowered North Korean military elites, thousands of armed KPA soldiers, and thousands or millions of refugees streaming across the South Korean and Chinese borders. The last concern will likely attract global attention because of the potential for a humanitarian catastrophe, especially considering that the average North Korean already lives in dire poverty by most international standards. If the United States becomes involved in the unification process but does not intervene to minimize the suffering of North Koreans, it will quickly lose the moral high

ground. Moreover, South Korea will lose control of the narrative for unification. Of course, any US strategy for supporting Korean unification must also consider the interests of other regional players.

## China

China's current policy toward the peninsula is threefold and includes "peace and stability . . . denuclearization . . . and resolution of issues through dialogue and negotiation."<sup>20</sup> So far, the threat of migration by North Koreans across the Chinese border, episodic brinksmanship between the United States and the DPRK, and the tenuous nature of inter-Korean relations indicate unification cannot be accomplished in a way that upholds this policy. Furthermore, China values its influence over North Korea as a bargaining chip in its relationship with the United States, and the state provides a security buffer between Chinese and US military forces that has peripheral benefits.<sup>21</sup> As one report emphasizes, "the [1.3] million North Korean men under arms represent a similar number of Chinese troops that do not have to be maintained to ensure security" and that can be used instead toward China's "most obvious goal, reintegration with Taiwan."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, even though Beijing "officially supports a peaceful and independent union of the Korean Peninsula," it prefers the status quo.<sup>23</sup>

China first prefers that the Koreans do not proceed down the path of unification because of the instability the process would unleash. As Fei-ling Wang observes about potential unification, "the expected waves of refugees from North Korea would pose a high and immediate cost to China's northeast region," particularly if North Korea were to collapse.<sup>24</sup> China currently attempts to discourage border crossings by classifying refugees as "illegal economic migrants" and returning them to North Korea.<sup>25</sup> These actions often result in their capture and internment in concentration camps by the DPRK internal security apparatus. Washington has sometimes exerted diplomatic pressure for the Chinese to desist from returning North Korean refugees, but the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) refuses out of fear that instability in the region will hurt its domestic image and threaten its control. Only in exceptional, high-profile cases has China allowed captured refugees to go free.<sup>26</sup> In fact, during periods when there has been a threat of migration into China, Beijing has deployed up to 150,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops to the North Korean border.<sup>27</sup> One can expect a much larger and more comprehensive military response to the instability that is likely to accompany any unification effort.

Beijing likely weighs this potential for instability against the geopolitical instability caused by North Korea's bravado toward the United States, but it

tolerates the latter because China has experienced “unprecedented economic growth” in spite of it.<sup>28</sup> A “large-scale influx of North Koreans . . . might provide the spark for more widespread ethnic unrest within China” and put international pressure on the state to resolve the Taiwan issue in a way that is unfavorable to the CCP.<sup>29</sup> The unpredictable social, economic, and political effects of Korean unification on either of these issues makes it unlikely China will give more than diplomatic lip service to the idea.

Nevertheless, there are long-term benefits of Korean unification to China. First, a unified Korea may be a more effective counterweight to Japan, with whom China often spars over territorial rights in the East China Sea and still harbors ill will over Japan’s foreign aggressions and atrocities during the 1930s and World War II.<sup>30</sup> Korea shares similar sentiments toward Japan for practices during its colonization of the peninsula, and it has historically leaned more toward China than Japan in its politics, social connections, and economic pursuits. Today, China is still North Korea’s biggest trade partner and the largest recipient of South Korea’s exports. South Korea is also China’s fourth-largest trading partner.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, a trade agreement between China and a unified Korea is an enticing benefit in the long run assuming China can see past the short-term losses to its economy and national prestige from a defunct North Korea.

Second, unification is an opportunity for China to wield its influence in helping to create a more stable future for the region. The resumption of the Six-Party Talks in which China played a powerful negotiating role in the past is more likely in a unification scenario. Chinese president Xi Jinping’s visit to Pyongyang in June 2019 on the heels of the second US–DPRK summit—the first for a Chinese leader since 2005 and the fifth summit between Xi and Kim since March 2018—suggests Beijing is intent on retaining commensurate political influence to that of the United States during times of dynamic change on the peninsula.<sup>32</sup>

There are at least three conditions that may cause the pendulum to swing toward Chinese support of Korean unification. The first is sufficient coordination among China and Korea (South, North, or both, depending on the means of unification) for sufficient security along the China border to prevent a mass influx of North Koreans across it. A second, related condition is the security of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and facilities—a common interest with the United States. A third condition is likely a promise from the United States that its military forces will remain out of North Korea during the process or at least outside of an agreed exclusion zone near the Chinese border. The second and third conditions may cause friction with the United States if the latter

pushes for its own military forces to reach North Korean nuclear weapons sites before the PLA does. As much as China currently hesitates to discuss with the United States coordination of military activities in the event of unification, it is a necessary matter to resolve ahead of time if peace is to be preserved during the process.

In addition to these conditions, China will likely have an interest in the future of North Korea's military forces. One reason is that a headless North Korean military body with weapons (both nuclear and conventional) could spill instability into China even easier than a mass influx of civilians.<sup>33</sup> Another reason is that the decision of whether to incorporate any of those forces into a unified Korean military can impact foreign relations. It is likely China would prefer a plan for a unified Korea to assimilate at least some members of the KPA. Doing so would reinforce a neutral Korea or even one that leans toward China rather than one that pivots toward the United States. As with other outcomes to unification that may benefit China, this one may help Beijing see beyond the expected instability of the unification process. However, China's continued rise in power the last few decades may lead it to believe time is on its side in delaying such a scenario.<sup>34</sup>

## **Russia**

There are differing opinions on Russia's position relative to Korean unification, but the roots of the disagreement may be a focus on short-term versus long-term interests. Similar to China, Russia is averse to the regional instability that would result in the short term. For that reason, Russia has sought a relationship with both North and South Korea "while supporting the unification process and any attendant dialogue."<sup>35</sup> Like China and the United States, Russia also favors denuclearization in the DPRK, but it has been laxer than the United States or even China in enforcing UN sanctions on the regime. The apparent reasons are that Russia benefits from the import of North Korean labor and fossil fuels, and it may still see future potential for conventional weapons sales to the country. North Korea's lingering financial debt to Russia from Soviet-era loans may also play a factor in making unification an unfavorable prospect.<sup>36</sup>

However, history demonstrates that, on average, Russia's economic and political relationship with North Korea has weakened since the country's founding, making such factors less pronounced in the long term. As previously mentioned, the Soviet Union exploited its unique opportunity as a victor in World War II to craft an ideological ally out of North Korea. As such, North Korea provided the Soviet Union with an ice-free port on the Pacific. In re-

turn, the Soviets provided the country with military equipment and industrial goods at well below market prices.<sup>37</sup> Influence was never dominant, however, particularly after the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s.<sup>38</sup> With the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, the export of goods plummeted, and ideology gave way to domestic economic reforms that required the DPRK to pay full prices for what was available. This situation contributed along with environmental catastrophes in the 1990s to widespread suffering in the country. Relations with Russia recovered somewhat in 2000, when the two countries signed the Russia–North Korea Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and Vladimir Putin made his first foreign visit to the DPRK.<sup>39</sup> However, Putin did not have his first summit with Kim Jong-un until April 2019—eight years into Kim's reign—and there were no significant outcomes. Rather, the summit provided Putin “the opportunity to emphasize Russia's relevance in Korean peace and denuclearization negotiations, which have so far been dominated by the United States and South Korea.”<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, Russia's relationship with South Korea has improved and grown since the thawing of the Cold War. Its recognition of the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1990 proved to be symbolic beginnings to more substantive developments afterward.<sup>41</sup> Since 1995, Russia has been engaging “in active economic and even military cooperation with Seoul . . . including sales of substantial military hardware to the ROK army.”<sup>42</sup> Numerous economic forums have sprung up between Russia and South Korea since 2000, growing out of diplomatic policy decisions by both countries that have benefited bilateral trade. In 2018, that trade amounted to \$24 billion, dwarfing the \$34 million in trade between Russia and North Korea the same year.<sup>43</sup>

Given the assumption that South Korea would dominate unification in most scenarios, this interdependence sets a secure foundation for Russia to benefit from the process. The possibility of connecting the Trans-Siberian Railroad to a Korean rail line and jointly developing a pipeline that routes Russian natural gas to the peninsula and the Pacific are a couple of examples of Russia's commercial prospects after Korean unification. The event might also provide Russia a new opportunity in its historic hope for more warm-water ports.<sup>44</sup>

There are also two potential geopolitical benefits to Russia if Korea unifies. First, a unified Korea would help Russia balance against Japan in the region, given that a rearmed Japan is a perennial threat, as it is to China. Furthermore, the unification process is a potential means for Russia to exert regional

influence, especially if the Six-Party Talks resume or a similar discussion framework emerges in which Russia can participate.

For unification to be acceptable to Russia, the political and economic benefits would need to eclipse the regional instability that results and the loss of North Korea as a military client and trading partner.

## **Japan**

Japan is “between a rock and a hard place” regarding the unification of Korea.<sup>45</sup> On one hand, “the historical relationship between [Japan and South Korea] and the potential economic and military power of a united Korea” create a strong preference in Japan for the current division of the country.<sup>46</sup> Ongoing disputes between Japan and South Korea over islands in the sea between them and the potential for a united Korea to lean more closely toward China make Japan very sensitive to security developments on the peninsula. Before unification were to take place, Japan would also prefer to resolve with North Korea the issue of the abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents from 1977 to 1983.<sup>47</sup> These open debates suggest that, if Korea were to unify, Japan would prefer a lengthy process that allows space for their resolution rather than a quick process, such as what might emerge from North Korea’s collapse.

On the other hand, North Korea’s nuclear testing and increasingly successful missile launches trouble Japan. These developments are a more direct and immediate security threat to the Japanese than they are to the United States, and Japan has sought to enhance its missile defense and intelligence-gathering capabilities in response. If North Korea’s collapse is imminent, Japan will likely seek the security and disposal of weapons of mass destruction as a first priority. Its next preference will likely be stability on the peninsula to prevent the spillover of refugees to Japan.<sup>48</sup>

Both preferences point to Japan’s desire for a continued US presence in the region if Korea is to unify. As previously mentioned, US military forces are best equipped to diffuse the threat from uncontrolled nuclear weapons—a likelihood at least temporarily in a unification scenario. A US naval presence will also be helpful in patrolling the sea between Korea and Japan should instability break out on the Korean Peninsula.

Continued US military presence will also help preserve the existing balance of power, which has allowed Japan to become an economic powerhouse and maintain only a small defense force. Japan fears that “Korea would . . . be on the Chinese side in any possible future Sino-Japanese conflict.”<sup>49</sup> A durable US presence would mitigate the deleterious effects of that conflict to Japan. In

this way, there is a potential for friction between Japan and China regarding the future of US influence on the peninsula. A possible compromise might restrict US military presence in Korea to current locations south of the 38th parallel, with the possible exception of any US forces required to secure nuclear weapons and facilities during the initial phases of unification.

Japan would also likely prefer that any integration of KPA members into unified Korean ranks be very limited. The first reason is that Japan would view a large unified Korean military as a security threat. The second reason is Japan's preference for a Korean military that remains under the influence of the United States. Any unification solution that grants equal status to the KPA and the existing ROK Armed Forces is more likely to open the doors to increased Chinese influence on the peninsula. This is particularly true if there are no more nuclear weapons in the possession of residual DPRK leadership personnel to prevent China from lending its full support. How to accommodate these personnel in unification will be primarily a domestic problem for Korea, however.

### **Cumulative Assessment**

Considering the history, geopolitics, and policies of the United States, China, Russia, and Japan toward the Koreas, there are four conditions under which all of them are most likely to support unification. These conditions are denuclearization; peaceful dialogue between the Koreas; a gradual, phased political process; and the continuance of a limited but assertive US military presence in South Korea. Dialogue among the four external players regarding their own intentions for the unification process—or at least between China and the United States—will also be important. Meeting all these conditions at once may be akin to aligning the planets, so a scenario that begins violently and eventually resolves in the direction of unification is more likely. For such resolution to be legitimate and ultimately peaceful, UN intervention may be necessary, both militarily and diplomatically. This paper, in the context of counterfactual lessons from the Vietnam War, will explore this possibility. However, the next section will first address the various factors dividing the two Koreas that will have to be overcome before peaceful unification is attainable.

### **Section 3**

## **The Influence of Domestic Factors on a Potential Korean Unification**

This section explores the inter-Korean factors that have contributed to the division on the peninsula and that must be overcome if the peninsula is to unify—peacefully or not. Because the two Koreas exist in a condition of suspended civil war, this section borrows and adapts four terms coined by the author Stathis Kalyvas to describe the impact of civil wars upon states. Kalyvas writes that civil wars, as a “transformative phenomenon,” are highly “endogenous” in that they shape and reshape “collective and individual preferences, strategies, values, and identities.”<sup>50</sup> For Korea, I modify these terms only slightly, calling them “national preferences for security,” “national strategies for unification,” “national values,” and “national identities.” I’ve also reversed the order of discussion, since values and identities—two ideas around which national culture coalesces—help drive security preferences and unification strategies. In each discussion, I identify obstacles that must be overcome for unification and integrating the military forces of North and South Korea.

In applying these terms to the Koreas, a comparison and contrast with Vietnam—a case of unification emerging from a civil war—is helpful. As in Vietnam, the end of active combat in Korea generally brought an end to the “shaping and reshaping” of preferences, strategies, values, and identities that Kalyvas identifies. In both states, these terms compose a national narrative. The first relevant difference between the two conflicts is that, in Korea, the unresolved nature of the war fixes in place not one but two sets of terms and narratives. The second relevant difference is that, in the unification of Vietnam, the North won the battle between competing narratives, whereas the national narrative of North Korea has almost no appeal whatsoever in the ROK. The distinction is due not only to sociopolitical conditions since the Korean War but also to conditions that stretch much further back in time. The discussion on identities will identify those conditions.

### **National Identities**

More than simply outward political allegiance, national identity in this paper refers to the idea of a “limited” and “sovereign . . . imagined community,” to use the words of Benedict Anderson.<sup>51</sup> Based on this definition, the strongest coidentity between the southern and northern halves of the peninsula existed during relatively brief periods under certain Korean dynasties and later under Japanese occupation (1910–1945). Apart from these periods, po-

litical and economic factors have served to divide more than unite the peninsula. Any efforts at unification will need to overcome or reconcile these factors, and decisions on the fate of the KPA in unified Korea will also need to consider them if violence is to be avoided.

**Historical Perspective.** An examination of ancient Korean history suggests that common identity across the peninsula was not necessarily the norm. Those who justify a unified Korea point back to dynasties such as the Koguryo (37 BCE to 668 CE), Unified Silla (668–918), the Koryo (918–1392) from which Korea gets its name, and the Chosun (1392–1910).<sup>52</sup> However, with the exception of the Chosun Dynasty, sovereign control did not comprise the combined territories of today’s North and South Korea. Furthermore, the span of time during which these dynasties existed includes periods of internecine conflict and Chinese or Mongol suzerainty that divided rather than unified the population. Jacques Fuqua suggests the early Koryo period is really the best example of unified national identity, while Victor Cha claims both Koreas look more to the Koguryo Dynasty as the “primary precursor of the modern Korean nation” even though half of it was in modern day Manchuria.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the DPRK has claimed to be the inheritor of both the Koguryo and Chosun dynasties, despite the capital of the latter being located at the site of present-day Seoul (perhaps one more reason for the North’s interest in unification).<sup>54</sup> However, the Chosun Dynasty is not the best model for either modern state to use to promote a national Korean identity.

The problem with tracing a national identity to the Chosun Dynasty is that almost from its start, there was a sociocultural divide between north and south. A ruling class grew up in Seoul, composed mostly of the gentry and scholars. These groups protected their status largely by excluding the lowest classes from political, social, and economic benefits. The ruling class also forced members of the unwanted classes to migrate to the northern reaches of the dynasty with the intention of using them to defend against foreigners. Because of this “bifurcation policy,” “no one from the two provinces of P’yongan and Hamgyong [in northern Korea] . . . served in a high bureaucratic office” for three centuries.<sup>55</sup> In this way, the policy set a historical foundation for social and regional prejudice in Korea.

The Chosun Dynasty is responsible for at least one notable unifying element that has persisted through the centuries to the present day: the Hangul script. The invention of the script by King Sejong and his scholars in the late fifteenth century helped cement a separate cultural identity for the Korean people and “opened up communication between social classes.”<sup>56</sup> Despite some divergence of Hangul since today’s division of the peninsula and alleged

claims from the North Korean regime today that the Kim family is responsible for inventing Hangul, there is perhaps hope for leveraging the common Korean history of this intangible cultural asset to promote peaceful unification.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, common lingual heritage was far from enough to overcome the class and regional divisions that began to break up the Chosun Dynasty by the end of the nineteenth century.

Ironically, the internal weakening of the Chosun Dynasty coincided with the emergence of first China and then Japan as Korean enemies, helping to promote a Korean nationalism that eclipsed the north-south divide. Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and in 1910 it officially became a Japanese colony. As such, Korea became an industrial hub of Japan's expanding empire, but it also suffered misfortune as the colonial government sought to make the society Japanese by forbidding Korean religious customs and forcing Koreans to take Japanese names. This oppression, to which Koreans were subject regardless of social class, became for all of them "a point around which to rally."<sup>58</sup> The result was that "for the first time since the onset of the Chosun period, Korea existed as a single and unified polity, both de facto and de jure, sans any internally imposed arbitrary political or social divisions."<sup>59</sup> Thus, Japanese occupation serves as the singular modern period in which Koreans seem to have shared a common national identity. Unfortunately, the formal political division of the peninsula after World War II obscured this identity.

**Modern Identity Formation: North Korea.** Beginning in 1946, the new North Korean regime politically affirmed the sociocultural divisions of the Chosun Dynasty, except that the ruling class set itself up in Pyongyang instead of Seoul. One's national identity as a North Korean citizen therefore also includes a fixed constituent status, or *songbun*. Formalized in 1958, *songbun* subdivides "the population of the country into 51 categories or ranks of trustworthiness and loyalty to the Kim family and the North Korean state."<sup>60</sup> Creating a stratified social consciousness that permeates both society and the military, *songbun* is perhaps even more rigid than any preexisting class system under the Chosun Dynasty. Its ubiquity has also discouraged the provision of aid to those in North Korea who need it most and contributes to their poor treatment generally.<sup>61</sup>

By outward appearance, these social class distinctions do not appear to have detracted from loyalty to the North Korean state. There is likely a mixture of forced and voluntary allegiance, the former made easier by the relative absence of information about the outside world. Though many Koreans simply wound up on the wrong side of the 38th parallel in 1945, others whose

families had historically been neglected by the government in Seoul were more easily won over by the one in Pyongyang. Regardless, neither group had a choice in the matter once the Soviets had firmly installed their chosen leader. Drawing upon communist ideology, Confucianism, and a blend of history and fiction, Kim Il-sung built an identity for the North Korean state as the only true Korea, with himself (and later his son and grandson) as its rightful leaders. The enduring success of propaganda painting the regime's rulers as divine benefactors is evident in the unremitting loyalty of some defectors from the regime. These individuals refuse to blame "The Great Leader" for the economic misfortunes that motivated their defections.<sup>62</sup> Their attitude indicates that national identity in North Korea may depend very little on the economic welfare of its citizens. If it had, the state would have likely collapsed long ago, considering that the majority live in poverty by the standards of developed nations. Furthermore, the last seven decades also demonstrate strong national identity in North Korea does not depend on the approval of the international community.

**Modern Identity Formation: South Korea.** By sharp contrast, South Korea today finds much of its national identity in international cooperation and economic prosperity. These two sources are increasingly framed by a democratic, capitalistic worldview. Although the military had once been a "powerful force in ROK politics" and "was largely responsible for crafting the country's defense and foreign policies," democratization in the 1980s cut back its influence and shifted how South Korea sought to present itself to the world.<sup>63</sup> The ROK's efforts to advertise itself as a friendly place for foreign investment and its willingness to abide by the International Monetary Fund's conditions following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis testify to South Korea's desire for a new image following decades of dependence upon foreign aid. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development has recognized its efforts and reinforced its identity by admitting South Korea as a member in 1996. The International Olympic Committee similarly promoted Korea's identity by awarding it the 1988 and 2018 Olympic Games.<sup>64</sup> The North Korean attempt to reverse the Olympic Committee's decision on the 1988 games and its negative reaction once the games began proves the event was an identity crisis for the DPRK. At least to the outside world, it was losing the fight to portray itself as the one true Korea.<sup>65</sup>

**Prospects for Unification.** In view of both ancient and modern history, creating a new national identity in a unified Korea will be extremely challenging. South Korea, presumed to quickly become the dominant state in unification, will need to make a concerted effort across all branches of government

to shift North Koreans' sense of identity from the Kim regime—essentially the monastic rulers of a renewed dynasty—to one that embraces a common sociocultural history. To do so, the South Korean government will need to dispel myths the Kim family has propagated for decades about its own origins and the origins of cultural assets such as Hangul that predate North Korea. This endeavor may take a couple of generations to see results.

A unified Korea will also need to consider how to reconcile national identity with current geopolitics. Creating a common Korean enemy in Japan to recreate conditions of unity from the colonial period is neither possible nor wise. A better solution is to open former North Korean citizens up to the world around them so they can better define themselves in relation to it. Information has likely been leaking into the North Korean population gradually through campaigns launched by both nongovernmental organizations and the South Korean government, and its effect will only likely become fully known once North Korean citizens are free from the shackles of the current regime.

Of course, South Koreans will also need to adopt a national identity that permits the assimilation of uneducated, unskilled (by Western standards), and largely poverty-stricken North Koreans into its framework. Drawing from the challenges of South Korean government-sponsored assimilation programs for North Korean defectors, Jacques Fuqua suggests that South Koreans will generally be hard-pressed to accept millions of them if unification occurs.<sup>66</sup> For acceptance to happen, there will need to be an empathetic view toward the distinct values that have developed over time on the other half of the peninsula, followed by a commitment to inculcate in former North Koreans new values that will enable them to contribute to society in a unified and presumably capitalist, democratic state.

### **National Values**

A national value is a “principle, standard, or quality considered worthwhile or desirable” by the government or society.<sup>67</sup> The difference in national values affecting the relationship between North and South Korea has evolved hand-in-hand with the diverse paths to national identity that each state has pursued. Therefore, while some values are rooted in ancient Korean history, political imposition upon their interpretation has varied between the two modern Korean states. This analysis does not presume that government influence through policy has transformed individual values, but over time it has surely shaped them. This subsection will briefly examine that influence in terms of opposing values: the North Korean idea of *Juche*, or self-reliance, and the principles of democratic freedom and interdependence that the majority

of South Koreans more readily identify with. That both nations have adapted traditional Confucian thought to become acceptable to their respective values is also germane.

**North Korea.** *Juche*, meaning “self-reliance,” is arguably an entire philosophy. It owes its origins to several factors: a society rooted in Confucianism, a political system with Marxist origins, a belief that North Korea is the inheritor of Korea’s Koguryo and Chosun dynasties, and the emerging personality cult of the ruling Kim family.<sup>68</sup> Officially adopted in the 1950s under Kim Il-sung and written into the DPRK’s 1972 constitution, *Juche* has been the tool of choice for the government to harness the loyalty of its populace, and it has been increasingly necessary in recent decades with the demise of the North Korean economy.<sup>69</sup> Ironically, *Juche* may be largely responsible for this demise, considering that North Korea has reportedly preferred “superhuman zeal” over trade to accomplish its economic goals.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, North Korea has accepted assistance of various types from other countries, particularly China and Russia. Such assistance may appear antithetical to the DPRK’s philosophy, but according to author Victor Cha, *Juche* would “justify the apparent contradiction by stating that such dependence was still *Juche* because it was doing what was good for Korea.”<sup>71</sup> With this view in mind, one would think North Korea could also accept aid and assistance from the United States, arguably the most prosperous country in the world. The definition of what is “good” for Korea, however, ceases to fit here. Not only is acceptance of most aid from the United States dependent on changes in North Korean behavior that its military and the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) believes would be harmful to its security generally, but it would present an ideological dilemma to a country that has demonized the United States to its citizens for generations.

*Juche* does not only affect North Korea’s outlook toward economic development and diplomacy. Its blend of traditional Confucian loyalties and communist glorification of the state excludes private religious practice, restricts education, and leads to abuse of human rights. All three of these effects are linked. Confucianism by itself does not denigrate divine authority, but the Confucian ruler has traditionally “justified his position as the carrying out of the mandate of Heaven.”<sup>72</sup> By this reasoning, any perspective that suggests there is disagreement between an earthly ruler and God is perceived as a threat to government. This interpretation in Korea during the Chosun Dynasty discouraged Western learning—and specifically Catholic teaching—for nearly a century until 1886.<sup>73</sup> The imposition of communism and Marxist principles after 1948 (somewhat selectively, since *songbun* precludes the Marxist ideal of a classless society) further narrowed the possibility for private religious practice by reducing moral-

ity to whatever behavior promotes progress in socialism.<sup>74</sup> Since one key principle of Confucianism is that “moral behavior is the source of power and authority,” Marxism then becomes the justification for placing that power in the person of the socialist leader. Philosophy guides policy, so it is not surprising that the North has officially forbade religion since the country’s founding and made possession of religious books such as the Bible a crime. Moreover, the ruling family has effectively stepped into the place reserved in most religious-liberty abiding states for God.<sup>75</sup>

In such a place, education is also strictly channeled. The state-run system promotes the idolization of the Kim family, who are the models of *Juche* for youth. In step with Marxism, *Juche* also teaches the populace that violent behavior is justified against those who oppose socialist progress, even if their opposition is nonviolent.<sup>76</sup> Under Kim Jong-il, that notion became more militarized, with some debate emerging among observers as to whether “revolutionary and martial spirit” is separate from or a part of *Juche*. However, the falling from favor of *Juche*’s chief architect in 1997 after he openly opposed war with the ROK suggests that the ideas are at least closely linked in the minds of North Korean leadership.<sup>77</sup>

Since human rights in *Juche* are nonexistent save in service to the state, there is no accountability for the wanton imprisonment of political opponents or the abuses practiced in North Korea’s prison camps. These abuses often end in the death of the prisoners, either deliberately via execution or through neglect. While perhaps a stretch to say that *Juche* is responsible for these deaths, ideas have far-reaching consequences. North Korean leadership must know that if it were to abandon *Juche* and become reliant on outside help to resolve its internal problems, it would have to divulge the wrongs it has imposed on generations of its citizens. Therefore, *Juche* has also become a survival strategy for the regime.

**South Korea.** Because South Korea comprises an open, democratic society, there is no single guiding principle or philosophy in the vein of *Juche*. Freedom of expression, together with the ROK’s reliance on free trade and cooperation with outside powers to promote its economy and the welfare of its citizens, stands in direct contrast to North Korea’s self-reliance and isolation. On the other hand, South Korea’s society is still ethnically and culturally homogenous, and it has only been open to the outside world for about 135 years. It is therefore an interesting study in the merging of Korean and foreign values, or more generally Eastern and Western values. A useful means for interpreting this merge is to contrast it with the one that took place in North Korea. There, Confucianism was reformed into a communist, atheistic mold. In

South Korea, it was reformed into a mixed mold of democratic freedom and interdependence.

Although South Korea did not begin as a democracy, democratic freedoms introduced through Western philosophy ultimately took root partly because South Korean society was able to reconcile them with traditional Confucian values. The reconciliation that took place was largely between the West's belief in individual rights and Confucianism's emphasis on duty and national authority. As essayist Ahn Wae-soon writes, "Korea's early enlightenment scholars"—those open to Western political thought—"saw that one could pursue individual interests by working for national ones and that the provision of political rights would impress a sense of duty, thus further promoting national interests."<sup>78</sup> In this way, political participation through public demonstration became consonant with duty. Ahn further writes "the Confucian idea of political participation and the resistance of the people had the potential to develop into the idea of rights of political participation and rights of resistance, given the right impetus."<sup>79</sup>

In South Korean politics, this impetus proved to be the "worldwide trend in the mid-1980s, in which the United States played a supporting role, toward democratization of authoritarian, military-backed regimes."<sup>80</sup> The government of Chun Doo-hwan was arguably one such regime, having cemented its authority in 1980 when it used the military to violently suppress citizen protests in the city of Kwangju. The event later became a rallying cry for democracy, and unlike the massacre in China's Tiananmen Square during the same decade, led to meaningful reform in the South Korean government. The nation elected its first civilian president in 1992.<sup>81</sup>

Public expression in South Korea not only covers the right of resistance, but also of religious practice—another stark difference with North Korea that will impact the nature of unification if it takes place. Historically, this right precedes democracy and even the political division of the peninsula, so it is more factual to say that the DPRK reversed or at least forced underground a growing religious trend than to say that religious freedom originated with the ROK. A brief history is telling. The Chosun Dynasty first guaranteed freedom of religion for Koreans in an 1886 treaty with France, whose Catholic missionaries had previously endured a century of persecution.<sup>82</sup> By that time, however, many Korean scholars of the *Sirhak* ("practical learning") movement had adopted Catholicism, breaking away from neo-Confucianism, which was the Chosun Dynasty's official ideology.<sup>83</sup> Protestantism entered Korea in the 1880s through American missionaries, though it did not grow significantly among the Korean population until the Japanese occupation.<sup>84</sup>

Today, 44 percent of Koreans identify with a religion, and of those, 45 percent are Protestants, 35 percent are Buddhists, and 18 percent are Catholics.<sup>85</sup> Along with secular cultural connections that have arisen through trade, political ties, and globalism generally, these statistics help explain another source of many South Koreans' shared values—and hence interdependence—with those outside the peninsula.

Although the discussion on national identity touched on South Korea's desire to be seen as a constructive international player, interdependence on the modern world stage is similar to democratic freedom in that it is a value shaped by the intermingling of East and West. Underlying the value are two seemingly contradictory facets that any developing state confronting globalization must balance: acceptance of foreign technology and practices on one hand and strengthening of the nation on the other. Korean scholar Park Eun-sik, a neo-Confucianist, believed it was possible to “assimilate the West's superior technology” while eschewing its materialism.<sup>86</sup> Author Song Baeyoung further states that in adapting Confucian ethics to a modern interdependent community, one must also subjugate “private interests” to “study and introspection led by a member of the elite one hand, and concern for those in one's community on the other.”<sup>87</sup>

To some degree, this balance is what South Korean President Park Chung-hee sought to achieve in the 1960s with the Korean version of the developmental state economic model. The model generally promotes five concepts: “stable rule by a political-bureaucratic elite,” “collaboration between the government and private industries,” heavy investment in “universal basic education,” “policies to distribute wealth equitably across the population,” and enhancement of economic growth via “monetary and financial instruments.”<sup>88</sup> Together, these concepts coupled national development and community benefit more deliberately than free-market capitalism by leveraging entrepreneurship and skills within certain industries for both purposes. For South Korea's growing interdependence, they also “ensured that the largest companies were linked to the state and to international markets.”<sup>89</sup> The developmental state model is partly responsible for an average GNP growth rate of 8.5 percent between 1962 and 1980 and an increase in GDP per capita of 963 percent between 1950 and 1980.<sup>90</sup> Although the model is much less pronounced in South Korea today, it set a precedent for the Korean work culture, which is generally characterized by ardor, diligence, and appreciation for high academic achievement.<sup>91</sup> These qualities have helped make South Korea one of the most prominent players in the world economy.

**Prospects for Unification.** Sharp differences in values between the two Koreas create a wide gulf between them that will likely take much longer to bridge than reaching a formal political agreement for unification. Assuming a South Korean–dominated process, assimilation will “necessitate the ‘un-learning’ of undesired behaviors” and the values behind them, followed by “basic socialization” into the values and behaviors that will enable former North Koreans to contribute productively to South Korea’s more democratic, interdependent society.<sup>92</sup> This two-step process will be easier for younger North Koreans than for older ones, both because of education and the greater resistance to change that comes with age. Those who have been educated their whole lives in socialist values, and who are taught moreover to depend entirely on the government and distrust the outside world, will find adjustment to the competitive, democratic education system of South Korea very difficult.

Finding employment will be equally challenging. The privileged among the KWP from Pyongyang may be able to integrate into many South Korean government jobs, since bureaucracies tend to share certain organizational values across cultures. However, the majority of North Koreans will lack the requisite education level and skill to work alongside South Koreans in civil service or business—a prediction supported by employment statistics for North Korean defectors in the ROK. As of 2011, 43 percent of defectors worked as day laborers, compared to only 9 percent of South Koreans. The rest of former North Koreans worked in manufacturing, service jobs in lodging and restaurants, construction, or retail.<sup>93</sup> If a unified Korea is to raise a larger percentage of former North Koreans to equivalent skill levels with South Koreans in other sectors, it will need to exponentially increase the capacity of its *Hanawons*—the state’s “resettlement and training centers” for North Korean migrants.<sup>94</sup>

It is also likely that in a unification scenario, many North Koreans will experience immense disillusionment as they discover the values they built their lives upon do not serve them in the unified state. This realization may lead to depression, as it has for many defectors. Some of these have even tried to return to North Korea after experiencing life in the south.<sup>95</sup> Others may rejoice at their newfound freedoms, however. In the long run, the willingness of South Koreans to accept them into their schools, offices, churches, and temples will be deciding factors in whether they embrace South Korean values or not.

The military of a unified Korea will likewise need to confront the differences in internal values between KPA and South Korean armed forces members. On one hand, familiarity with privation will likely make KPA sol-

diers hardy and disciplined. On the other hand, inculcation with *Juche* will make them ill-prepared for functioning in the professional military of a democratic society. They will also need to overcome the mutual antagonism that has characterized the two states' distinct preferences for security the last several decades.

### National Preferences for Security

The suspended state of war between the two Koreas as a result of the 1953 armistice is perhaps the most obvious obstacle to unification, regardless of what form it were to take. If either side were to unify the peninsula by force of arms, that war resumes. If a mutual political agreement about a process to unification were to be reached instead—the preferred option for most Korean and international actors—the war must necessarily be resolved peacefully. Despite increased inter-Korean dialogue and agreements between Kim Jongun and former ROK president Moon Jae-in between 2017 and 2021, that outcome is still far from assured. As a result, both sides continue to prioritize national security against the other, and their shared border remains one of the most heavily defended in the world. Unlike in many conflicts, however, the face-off has not resulted in symmetry of approaches to security. The reason is that the distinct identities and values discussed above have produced very different preferences for national security.

**North Korea.** The DPRK's ideology and isolated geopolitical position dictate its preferences for national security, which for the leadership translates to the security of the regime. These preferences include a disproportionately large conventional military and an increasingly credible nuclear arsenal for deterrence, sabotage through cyber and physical attacks, limited provocations against South Korea, and coercive diplomacy and propaganda. Most recently, Kim Jong-un has latched his legacy to a concept called *byungjin* that “calls for the simultaneous development of North Korea's economy and its nuclear weapons.”<sup>96</sup> While this concept appears to be a break from his father's military-first doctrine, there are scant indications the conventional military has lost any of its prestige or that the regime is making effective reforms to the state's ailing economy.

Thus, while the North's nuclear arsenal now looms larger in any national security calculus, Pyongyang's massive commitment to uniformed manpower relative to the North Korean population is the traditional backbone of its deterrence. The KPA has been “the central unifying structure in the country and the source of power for the regime.”<sup>97</sup> Today, North Korea possesses the fourth-largest standing armed forces in the world, at

1.2 million active-duty personnel (a 6% Military-to-Population Ratio, or MPR), and 70 percent are stationed near the Demilitarized Zone.<sup>98</sup> To reinforce them, the regime can also call up more than six million reserve personnel.<sup>99</sup> It prioritizes the material welfare of those forces above the population, as demonstrated by the military's preeminence when disbursing scarce food in the country.<sup>100</sup> The preference has philosophical underpinnings and became enshrined as policy under Kim Jong-il, who "privileged the military above all as the key decision-making body."<sup>101</sup> That Kim Jong-un was made a four-star general of the KPA in 2010 despite no previous military experience proves the military's premier status within the government and that the ruling party is fixed for the foreseeable future.<sup>102</sup> In light of this prospect, the decision of how to dispose of the KPA will be front and center in any debate about unification, peaceful or not.

However, in the past few decades, the DPRK has strengthened and diversified its application of the military instrument of power. The most alarming shift has been its reliance for deterrence upon increasingly powerful missiles and the country's accompanying nuclear weapons program. Although begun under Kim's grandfather and further developed by his father, nuclear testing has spiked since 2010 under Kim Jong-un. That the regime has conducted 151 missile tests under Kim Jong-un compared with only 16 under Kim Jong-il suggests strategic deterrence is quickly becoming the backstop to conventional deterrence.<sup>103</sup> Unless North Korea agrees to relinquish all nuclear materials, weapons, and facilities, they will together present the greatest obstacle to political unification and become part of any political bargaining taking place pursuant to it.

Compared to 20 years ago, the regime also relies more heavily today upon special operations forces (estimated at over 120,000 personnel) and submarines to insert teams into enemy territory in case of a renewed civil war.<sup>104</sup> The shift suggests the DPRK would likely supplement any conventional ground and air attack into Seoul with an irregular warfare front and indirect attacks on South Korean coasts. Even if the ROK can quickly defeat KPA regular forces if full armed conflict resumes, lingering guerilla operations could threaten to undermine any subsequent political efforts at unification.

Furthermore, North Korea has pursued cyber capabilities as an additional deterrent to military attack as well as a means of financial gain. Although its grasp of computer networking is reportedly basic, the regime is widely believed to be responsible for several distributed denial of service attacks as well as the hacking of Sony Pictures, the South Korean military cyber command, and several foreign banks.<sup>105</sup> Hired groups operating outside North Korean

borders accomplish these attacks. If they are any trend, North Korea will seek to infiltrate the cyber networks of South Korea and its allies—particularly those used by their governments—if there are any attempts at unification that do not have the full support of the DPRK government.

North Korea has also not shied from planning physical attacks against individuals that are considered a threat to the regime. These include bold military-led assassination attempts such as the 1968 attack by North Korean commandos against South Korean President Park Chung-hee at his official residence in Seoul, and the 1983 attempt against Park's successor Chun Doo-hwan on an official visit to Burma.<sup>106</sup> However, the regime has also hired foreigners to do its dirty work, as in the 2017 poisoning of Kim Jong-un's older brother by two women from Vietnam and Indonesia, respectively. These attacks are intended to send messages that no one who stands in the way of the regime is safe outside the country. That the 2017 attack was successful and its perpetrators largely escaped justice suggests North Korea will employ similar tactics in the future to improve its security.<sup>107</sup>

Periodic provocations against South Korea round out the DPRK's preferences for national security. The majority of these have taken place in and around the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or the Northern Limit Line—the disputed maritime demarcation line between the two states in the West Sea. In the last decade or so, the most notable of these provocations include the sinking of the ROK corvette Cheonan and associated loss of 46 South Korean sailors in 2010; the shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island the same year, resulting in four deaths; and the placing of three landmines on the south side of the DMZ in 2015, resulting in serious injury to two ROK soldiers.<sup>108</sup> Such incidents are often interspersed with brazen rhetoric from the DPRK regime.

However, apart from continued missile test launches, such “deterrence posturing” has become less frequent in the last five years.<sup>109</sup> It is unknown whether the regime has since determined the provocations are not having the intended effects or whether Kim Jong-un is pausing them for the sake of improved relations with the ROK. Perhaps both postulates carry truth. Regardless, deterrence posturing and coercive diplomacy are likely to resume if the current state of relations deteriorates again.

**South Korea.** In contrast to North Korea, the ROK's preferences for national security are much broader, extending beyond its military forces and hardware to its economic, diplomatic, and soft informational power. It can pursue these means of security with considerable success because unlike North Korea, it is able to shift much of the responsibility for military protec-

tion to the United States. Extended deterrence provided by the US nuclear umbrella has obviated the need for South Korea to expend money and effort on an organic nuclear program and allowed it to focus instead on economic growth—an agenda that has helped pay off with a national economy that is currently the 14th largest in the world by GDP.<sup>110</sup> South Korea supplements its economy with assertive diplomacy around the globe and soft power projected through Korean pop culture. While immediately indicative of and geared toward greater material prosperity, there is a security aspect to these achievements such that in a unification scenario they are more likely to galvanize international support for South Korea in the process. This prospect stands in contrast to North Korea, which endures harsh international sanctions, depends almost singularly upon China for trade, and is as much the “Hermit Kingdom” today as the Chosun Dynasty was a century and a half ago.

Besides America’s extended deterrence, its alliance commitments to the ROK also guarantee assistance should deterrence fail, preventing the need for the ROK to maintain an active-duty force on par with North Korea’s. Currently, that force stands at 555,000 active-duty (1.1 percent MPR) and 500,000 reservists.<sup>111</sup> The forecast of an aging population suggests the ROK will further draw down its military size, and popular pressure has led the government to gradually reduce the mandatory conscription period for males, currently at 18 months. After conscription expires, most young men continue their education or pursue jobs in business—opportunities that fewer North Koreans have in a command economy. That is not to say South Korea does not have a professional military today. Citizens who become officers and make the military a career are “fairly paid compared to other public servants” and are “highly educated in order to perform more specialized jobs.”<sup>112</sup> Since the election of Kim Young Sam in 1991, they have also been excluded from “directing political order and guiding national development.”<sup>113</sup> This separation has promoted corporateness and operational expertise within the officer corps.

The emphasis on quality over quantity is evident not only in the ROK’s personnel under arms, but also in its weapons systems. For example, military balance data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies shows that despite smaller numbers of combat aircraft, they are much more capable (and the pilots much better trained) to conduct operations against targets in urban areas and in mountainous terrain, as well as in various weather conditions. South Korea also possesses fewer numbers of most other types of weapons systems and military vessels, but they are generally much more modern than their North Korean equivalents, most of which were bought from the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>114</sup>

Since the ROK's focus is primarily on defense rather than offense, it also does not need the same numbers of equipment and weapons systems as the DPRK. In response to the increasing threat from North Korea's missile tests, what is more important is the guarantee provided by a comprehensive air defense network. Accordingly, the ROK's air defense strategy builds on a foundation of "detection and preemptive strike doctrine," known otherwise as "Kill Chain," as well as the concept of "Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation."<sup>115</sup> Together, these ideas depend on the integration of various precision-guided munitions "in tandem with the emerging Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) architecture, which seeks to protect military assets and minimize South Korean casualties."<sup>116</sup> The US-designed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, a "transportable system that intercepts ballistic missiles inside or outside the atmosphere during their final, or terminal, phase of flight," is the latest addition to this architecture, adding to the effect of deterrence by denial against a North Korean attack.

**Prospects for Unification.** Based upon the current security preferences of North and South Korea, unification does not appear likely in the near future. If war does occur, the balance of security reaffirms the assumption of this paper that South Korea will prevail, though not without significant losses from an onslaught by the KPA along with missile and artillery attacks against the population. The threat of nuclear attack will also always loom large, particularly if ROK or US forces cross into North Korean territory.

Regardless, the decades-long face-off has almost made a taboo of the type of confrontation that took place during the Korean War. Although the combination of entrenched conventional and nuclear means of deterrence by both sides creates a high degree of tension, it also preserves a level of stability that is likely to keep military conflict below the threshold of conventional war between its armed forces. Pressure from China toward North Korea and the United States upon the ROK reinforce this threshold.

Optimistically, if this threshold is maintained or even lowered in the future and North Korea demonstrates enough willingness to compromise on its missile and nuclear weapon ambitions, there may be a path to peaceful unification discussions. First, progress in these areas over a long enough period may provide the environment to restart past joint Korean efforts or embark on new ones. Past such efforts include the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Kumgang Mountain tourist resort on the northern side of the ROK-DPRK border, both products of South Korea's "Sunshine Policy" between 1998 and 2008. The Kaesong complex "provided South Korean companies with cheaper labor costs, while providing North Korea with critical hard currency."<sup>117</sup> The

South Korean government closed it in 2016 as a means of pressuring Pyongyang to discontinue its missile and nuclear testing. The mountain resort was a symbolic international venture that closed in 2008 after a North Korean soldier shot and killed a South Korean tourist who ventured into a prohibited area. “Stalled negotiations over Pyongyang’s nuclear and ballistic missile” programs are the primary reason the resort has not reopened.<sup>118</sup> If circumstances permit the two facilities to reopen, opportunities may also arise to begin others, such as ROK-financed rail lines, highways, and ports in North Korea, long planned during the Sunshine Policy but never constructed.<sup>119</sup> Such cooperative ventures may open the doors to unification discussions if security tensions relax.

Second, in view of the symbolic efforts between the two Koreas in international sporting events, the question arises whether friendly competition between Korean armed forces would also be possible, spurring unity discussions in the security arena. Successes on past athletic fields include most notably the 2018 Winter Olympics, in which North and South Koreans attended the opening ceremony under a single flag and competed on the same female hockey team. The 2006 Winter Olympics in Italy and 1991 World Table Tennis Championships also featured the display of a Korean unification flag.<sup>120</sup> These events set models for the two countries’ armed forces, which could compete either in athletics or military skill. To prevent such competitions from becoming politicized, they would need to be organized under international oversight with strict rules. Participation in events alongside other countries’ military forces would also help reduce the stigma arising from decades of confrontation. While not a panacea for all the obstacles to unification, such an event holds the potential to thaw intermilitary as well as inter-Korean political relations.

Understandably, any progress in unification—peaceful or following conflict—will require “securing the means of security” on each side of the border to prevent them from getting into the wrong hands. Securing nuclear weapons, facilities, and materials will likely require international assistance. The sheer quantity of North Korean conventional weapons and equipment will also pose a threat to stability, requiring a large contingent of the South Korean military to dismantle, dispose, or repurpose them. In fact, they may need the assistance of KPA personnel for these tasks, since South Korea’s military will only be familiar with such weapons and equipment from an adversarial perspective.

The need of KPA personnel following unification leads to the second question of this article: What are the possible outcomes for North and South Korean armed forces if Korea should unify? The answer hinges on the conclu-

sions of the previous three subsections on identity, value, and security preferences, as well as one more: resolving the distinct strategies for unification between the two Koreas.

### National Strategies for Unification

B. H. Liddell Hart wrote that the problem for “grand strategy” is “the winning of the peace.”<sup>121</sup> For North and South Korea, unification is one way of winning the peace, but their national strategies for going about it are different because of the distinct identities, values, and preferences for national security belonging to each side. Nevertheless, there have been mutual agreements in the past pointing toward the possibility of a peaceful unification. Key instances of cooperation include the 1972 joint agreement between Pyongyang and Seoul “that reunification would occur peacefully without foreign interference” and the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula in which the two countries’ leaders committed to “bring a swift end to the Cold War relic of longstanding division and confrontation.”<sup>122</sup> The commitment includes willingness to hold meetings with the United States and China for establishing a peace agreement in place of an armistice agreement at the border between the Koreas. However, there are no timelines associated with this agreement, making it little more than a gesture of goodwill. For such agreements to gain traction, it will be necessary to resolve historically different strategies for unification.

**North Korea.** The DPRK model for unification, first advanced by Kim Il-sung, seeks to establish a central national government known as the Democratic Republic of Koryo that has “equal participation from both sides based on mutual tolerance of differences in ideologies and counterparts.”<sup>123</sup> The formula for reaching that model begins with a confederation of two governments that come together to direct political, diplomatic, and military affairs.

This plan sounds accommodating to South Korea, but Jacques Fuqua offers a different critique. He cites one of the principles of the model as an “overhaul of the South Korean government . . . to ensure its ‘full democratization.’”<sup>124</sup> This is clearly democratization in the socialist view, not the democratization that allows for citizens to elect a government and hold it accountable for its decisions. Consistent with this interpretation is the model’s requirement for South Korea to “abrogate its decades-long security relationship with the United States and fundamentally discard the democratic basis of its government.”<sup>125</sup> Beyond that, “the U.S. must be denounced, South Korea must expel anti-unification forces . . . and independence must be realized.”<sup>126</sup> In this

context, “independence” refers not to human dignity, but to a “socio-political life” under the “Supreme Leader” in accordance with Juche ideology.<sup>127</sup>

Fuqua also notes that the model offers no phases by which the confederation should form or a means by which it unifies into a single government. The model therefore appears to be a weak government similar to the US Articles of Confederation. If true, the interpretation begs the question how North Korea will accomplish its version of “democratization” and “independence.”

One should not dismiss the possibility of North Korea using military force to accomplish its political objectives. Although Young-ho Park believes “the North Korean view of national unification has been defensive” since the late 1980s and particularly in the wake of the reunification of Germany, the North Korea expert Joseph Bermudez points to the KPA to suggest otherwise.<sup>128</sup> He writes that the KPA has devised “a number of basic interrelated political and military conditions” that “underlie [its] offensive war strategy and belief that victory in a war of reunification is possible.”<sup>129</sup> These conditions stem from lessons learned in the Korean War and the KPA’s perception of the ROK and the United States. The lessons include a quick war that prevents outside assistance, military isolation of Seoul, and exploitation of America’s perceived intolerance for high combat losses.<sup>130</sup> The odds of the DPRK actually carrying out such an attack are slim in light of its military capabilities and realization that the ROK and the United States have trained together for 65 years to oppose it. However, the possibility should not be discounted, and Park cites periodic North Korean provocations as evidence.<sup>131</sup>

Park also considers that the DPRK could pursue unification by raising up South Korean antigovernment revolutionaries—a strategy consistent with socialist ideology from its beginnings.<sup>132</sup> The focus on special operations forces, submarines, and amphibious capabilities featured more prominently among the North’s national security preferences in recent years seems to support this possibility. According to such a strategy, irregular warfighting forces would help set the conditions for uprisings in various South Korean cities and reinforce conventional attacks closer to the border.

The question then arises how North Korea perceives the military in a unified (or confederated) Korea. Since the political leaders in the North’s Democratic Republic of Koryo unification model would come together to decide on military affairs, it is reasonable to conclude that even if there are two separate militaries, they would work together to combat external threats. Given that North Korean military leaders are also political elites—all the DPRK’s 1,200 or so generals are part of the KWP and the core (loyal) social class—it is difficult to see how they would accommodate South Korean military leadership

in strategic decision making.<sup>133</sup> What to do about North Korea's military elites will also be an issue for South Korea to solve in the more likely case that it is the dominating state in unification of the peninsula.

**South Korea.** The South Korean model for unification is more gradual than that of the DPRK, and it lays out a path to full political unity through normalization of inter-Korean relations over time. The strategy incorporates three basic steps: "reconciliation and cooperation between the ROK and the North," the "establishment of a Korean commonwealth," and "complete integration of Korea through a democratic election."<sup>134</sup>

Many of the political means of accomplishing these steps do not exist at the present time, so the ROK government has entrusted a longer-term, more subtle strategy to its Ministry of Unification.<sup>135</sup> This ministry aims to break down the psychological barrier between the two sides, partly through trust building. Denuclearization and fostering relevant dialogue between the United States and North Korea are part of trust building, and the previous ROK administration counted the US–DPRK summits in Singapore and Hanoi as among its successes in the drive toward unification. Projects and practical measures carried out by the Ministry of Unification are incredibly diverse, spanning "inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation," "humanitarian cooperation," "inter-Korean dialogue," "settlement support for North Korean defectors," and "unification education."<sup>136</sup> The holistic approach reflects South Korea's identity as a liberal, democratic state, the cultural value it puts on interdependence and cooperation, and its broad approach to national security.

The commonwealth—step two of the South Korean model—is different from North Korea's Democratic Republic of Koryo in that there are two states rather than one, each with "respective rights to . . . diplomacy, economy, and security."<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the concept promotes a unified stance in "non-political areas" such as those covered by the Ministry of Unification's ongoing tasks and practical measures.<sup>138</sup> Through these tasks and measures, the commonwealth will gradually reach the conditions in which democratic elections take place and a fully unified Korean government is in place.

Also, unlike the North Korean unification model, the South Korean model allows for two separate national security policies and therefore distinct policies for the employment of military forces—at least up until the election of a unitary government. At that time, it will be necessary to decide upon the fate of the KPA and the future of North Korea's national defense architecture. Needless to say, the ROK's strategy for unification does not include an option to attack the North or absorb it into South Korea by force.<sup>139</sup> However, the

possibility that the North Korean government or regime collapses before the ROK strategy can take effect should not be dismissed.

**Prospects for Unification.** Despite differences in models, unification according to either state's strategy would proceed through political negotiations over time. Ideally, joint dialogues, exchanges, and training exercises would be valuable catalysts for progress in such negotiations, as well as vehicles for the gradual integration of values between the two countries. This integration would also apply to government institutions such as the two national militaries in preparation for the possibility of physical integration later.

Of course, there have been hundreds of inter-Korean relations meetings since 1971 with little substantial progress to show. Admittedly, personnel exchanges have picked up immensely in the last few years, with South Korean visitors to North Korea increasing from 52 to 6,689 between 2017 and 2018 alone.<sup>140</sup> This shift is due largely to changes in South Korean policy since Moon Jae-in's transition to power and the noticeable decrease in North Korean provocations and missile tests since 2017. However, reciprocation from the North is tepid, with only 841 visitors to the South in 2018.<sup>141</sup> This lack of reciprocation is understandable considering the North Korean model focuses on the political means of unification rather than the sociocultural aspects. Moreover, "quantitative increase in personnel and material exchange" has so far failed to "bring any qualitative change in inter-Korean relations."<sup>142</sup>

Unification will also need to reconcile other imbalances between the two countries. The North Korean model overlooks the vast differences in the two countries' "populations, economies, per capita income, and other metrics."<sup>143</sup> This oversight is significant, considering that the GDP of South Korea is on average about 44 times that of the North, and its population is about twice as large.<sup>144</sup> Inherent in the South Korean model is an economic reform in the DPRK similar to what China has undertaken since the late 1970s. However, there is no evidence Kim Jong-un would pursue such reforms or even be successful at them. In fact, his ability to stay in power can be attributed in large part to his ability to hold most of the population in economic dependency on the government. Furthermore, to make reforms work he would likely have to dispose of *Juche*, the military-first policy, and *byungjin*, all of which are pillars of his power.<sup>145</sup>

For such reasons, while gradual, peaceful unification may be the most favorable outcome, it also appears the least likely at the present time. Considering this prognosis, the next section will look at the possibility of three other scenarios.

## Section 4

### Other Possible Scenarios for the Unification of Korea

Although there are many models of projection for the future of North Korea, they can be simplified into four distinct scenarios.<sup>146</sup> One of these is *gradualism*, which would presumably follow one of the strategies for unification just outlined. The other three scenarios are continuation of the *status quo*, *war*, and *collapse*. This section will address each of these three briefly in turn.

#### Status Quo

According to the status quo scenario, North Korea continues to survive indefinitely through a combination of rent-seeking, pursuit of nuclear weapons under the military-first policy, regional brinkmanship, and inducement of concessions from the West.<sup>147</sup> The regime's resilience over the last few decades in overcoming domestic catastrophes and its "intransigence and vituperative behavior" in the face of external pressures suggest the status quo scenario is the most likely one.<sup>148</sup>

The one factor that seems to suggest the status quo cannot continue forever is that it has never really worked in North Korea's favor and appears unlikely to do so in the future. As Michael Cohen states: "Pyongyang has lived with an unfavorable status quo for sixty years."<sup>149</sup> Its best response to change existing conditions since developing nuclear weapons is what is termed "nuclear compellence"—"threats to respond with retaliation to the continuation of the status quo."<sup>150</sup> However, in their treatise on nuclear compellence (also called "nuclear coercion"), Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann argue from historical cases that "threats to use nuclear weapons for coercion usually lack credibility," and even the possession of nuclear weapons do not significantly increase the chances that compellence of any type will be successful.<sup>151</sup> Although the authors fail to distinguish in their analysis between nuclear compellence and conventional compellence by nuclear states, it is likely that Kim Jong-un believes both are in his favor as he continues to grow his nuclear arsenal.

The question then becomes whether further expansion of nuclear capabilities will cause him to issue more provocative threats. Sechser and Fuhrmann would contend they do not, but other predictions suggest North Korea's economic and geopolitical position will become more desperate with time under existing sanctions, possibly leading to even more escalatory threats.<sup>152</sup> These predictions include the continuing contraction of the North's economy relative to the ROK's, the further obsolescence of its weapons systems, and the increasing difficulty of preventing information about the outside world from

reaching the population.<sup>153</sup> These trends paired with North Korean possession of a nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the United States could make Kim Jong-un more willing to take risks in brinkmanship. If the United States or the ROK is unable to persuade Kim that any actions the US–ROK alliance takes in response to North Korean provocations are purely defensive, or else either power purposefully undertakes offensive action to force him to back down, another war on the peninsula becomes more likely.

## **War**

The most likely precipitating event in a war scenario of unification is a military attack against the South at an opportune moment in response to a “precipitative” or even an accidental event.<sup>154</sup> The North may launch the attack while its military is still strong and the United States is distracted with another conflict. In such an event, it is fairly certain that the ROK and its allies would prevail, but not without substantial casualties.<sup>155</sup>

War with North Korea would bring to bear the manpower, technology, and strategies described in the discussion on national security preferences. Beyond a certain threshold, the aim of each side is likely to be unification of the country. For the ROK and the United States, that threshold is best estimated to be the successful execution of the existing combined operational plan into its combat operations phase.<sup>156</sup> If the US–ROK alliance enters that phase, deterrence has failed, as have attempts at preventing escalation following expected North Korean provocations. Of course, the subjection of the operational plan to existing US foreign policy may lead to deviations.

For the DPRK, the threshold beyond which it will pursue unification can only be guessed at, but the likelihood of the conflict favoring a US–ROK victory once US assets begin flowing into the theater after the first few months of combat makes it doubtful the regime will cross it. The wildcard, of course, is the possibility of North Korea employing its nuclear weapons. The North is most likely to use nuclear weapons against an invading force on its own territory since such an invasion would pose the greatest threat to its existence, so it is to the benefit of the US–ROK alliance to take out any launch facilities at the start of the conflict, if possible. Taking out North Korean leadership will also be helpful for staving off a nuclear attack, since the nature of the regime would seem to favor an assertive nuclear command and control structure—one that places the authority for execution in the hands of a select few political leaders.<sup>157</sup>

If such a decapitation of the regime is possible and use of nuclear weapons is no longer a credible threat, the political questions for pursuing unification become what sort of power any remaining government officials must con-

tinue prosecuting the war. The military question likewise becomes what degree of cohesiveness exists in the North's remaining fielded forces. The answers to these questions are similar to those concerning the fourth possible scenario for North Korea's future: collapse.

## **Collapse**

There are two types of collapse that could take place in North Korea: collapse of the regime, and collapse of the entire government. Clearly, the ROK will be able to spur political unification much easier when both happen. However, interviews that Korea scholar Bruce Bennett conducted in 2016 with a dozen North Korean elites who defected to South Korea suggest the former is much more likely than the latter.<sup>158</sup> In his book *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Totalitarian Politics*, Patrick McEachern makes a similar conclusion following an investigation of changes in the DPRK's government over time. Drawing from a wealth of translated North Korean materials, McEachern states that, unlike the government under Kim Il-sung, the government under Kim Jong-il began to feature a more dispersed authority among individuals and institutions. As a result, Kim Jong-il had to play the cabinet, the military, and the workers' party against each other to maintain power.<sup>159</sup> While there is evidence Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power somewhat, it is likely that removal of Kim Jong-un—either from within or from outside the country—would unleash that intragovernment competition into the open in a bid for national leadership. Efforts at unification would have to confront this possibility.

Furthermore, even if ROK military forces can take over Pyongyang and prevent a replacement North Korean government from coming to power, there is a high likelihood of an insurgency in the countryside that will stymie stabilization efforts. Bennett argues that only the willingness of South Korea to offer safety, security, position, and wealth to North Korean military elites nationwide will remove this obstacle. However, doing so may be unpopular on both sides of the border because of the perception that those elites have exploited the population.<sup>160</sup> The section on the fate of the North Korean military will discuss this challenge further.

These difficulties are among several reasons that some scholars are not optimistic about the potential of a North Korean collapse scenario to result in unification. The eminent Korea scholar and Columbia University political scientist Samuel S. Kim states it is not realistic to expect that "South Korea has both the will and the capacity to absorb a collapsing North Korea politically, militarily, economically, socially, and culturally."<sup>161</sup> Jacques Fuqua writes further that absorption of North Korea following its collapse is not a shortcut "to a multifarious process as complex as unification, which at once comprises hu-

man emotion, ideology, national security and well-being, and feelings of nationalism.”<sup>162</sup> In fact, he suggests there are no shortcuts to unification at all.<sup>163</sup>

However, it is important to distinguish between political unification and the sense of imagined community that the scholar Benedict Anderson uses to define a state.<sup>164</sup> The latter definition is what makes unification so multifaceted. South Korea’s unification model attempts to create this imagined community between the two Koreas ahead of political unification, potentially extending the timeline for decades. A North Korean collapse holds potential for the order to be reversed, so that the building of a unified Korean nation in the minds of its citizens follows the formation of a single government. Accordingly, in an assessment of how Korean unification might unfold, a 2014 *Economist* article suggested “Korean unification is less likely to be gradual and peaceful than nasty, brutish, and quick.”<sup>165</sup>

In such a scenario, the fate of the KPA and the character of a unified Korean military will be at the forefront of Korean nation-building. These are the respective subjects of the next two sections.

## **Section 5** **The Fate of the Korean People’s Army**

First, regardless of how unification occurs, the KPA is unlikely to be integrated on a large scale into a single Korean military. Even if the political will exists to leverage the military as an institution for promoting national unity and identity, conditions following unification—short of an unforeseen external threat to the Korean Peninsula—will favor a large reduction in forces that discourages integration.

Second, however, the means of unification is still likely to determine the manner and degree of integration. Gradual unification under the South Korean model will provide the most favorable conditions for carefully managed, peaceful integration of any significant scope. These conditions are control of both the time and spatial elements of unification, which in turn are more likely to provide the opportunity to accommodate local North Korean political and military elites whose support will be needed for making integration succeed. This assertion is based both on scholarly analyses of the politics and sociology of the North Korean military and conclusions made from studies of other countries in which military integration has followed civil war.<sup>166</sup>

Collapse is the next most likely scenario to afford peaceful integration of the KPA on a significant scale. The ROK Armed Forces may have a valuable role to play in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and administration of

the KPA in the absence of DPRK leadership. Out of this mission will come the potential task of assimilating KPA members into a new unified Korean Defense Forces. However, there are at least two factors that cast doubt on the prospect. First, in such a scenario, unification is likely to be an intervening condition in the military outcome, which depends more on the past relationship between the two Koreas than on the collapse itself. This relationship is likely to be less amenable to the integration of the KPA than if it had grown under the South Korean model of gradual unification. Second, it is possible that collapse of the regime could end in either a military takeover or an internal power struggle—especially considering that a complete collapse of the state is unlikely. Considering these potential outcomes, a collapse of just the regime might be the grounds of renewed civil war rather than the result of it, should the ROK intervene.

A renewed Korean War scenario will likely prevent assimilation of most if not all the KPA into a unified military—at least in the short to medium term. The priority will be stabilizing and returning security to areas where fighting has taken place—a task that is likely to be too enormous for South Korea to take on alone. Therefore, international assistance will be crucial for stabilizing North Korea—and perhaps the entire peninsula—in the event's aftermath. Foreign powers intervening in North Korea during or following a war will likely seek a more influential voice in the fate of the KPA than during a collapse scenario, and the United States in particular will bring lessons from previous nation-building efforts to bear on the issue. Exactly what these lessons are may depend on the administration in power, but from experience in Iraq and Afghanistan the US government will likely recommend against letting KPA members fade back into society with their weapons.

This is a good lesson regardless of the unification scenario, and it points to another aspect of the KPA's fate in the short term. In the intervening period between active North Korean control of its means of national defense and the assertion of control by a new unified government, there are several missions the KPA can assist with. These include security details at northern military bases, disposal of certain weapons, border patrol, and humanitarian assistance—all missions that will help stabilize the state and lessen the burden on outside countries whose military forces would be less welcome in the former North Korea.<sup>167</sup> In particular, border patrol and humanitarian assistance may require ROK supervision considering reports of North Korean abuse against refugees in the past. Regardless, in view of the ROK's "projected demographic shortfalls," it is almost essential that the KPA assist with those missions. The KPA will also be

more familiar with its own facilities, weapons, and equipment than the ROK armed forces or military forces contributed by outside countries would be.

Employing the KPA in these missions will also provide the ROK opportunities to prepare North Korean military forces for assimilation in the long term—if not into the KDF, then into society. Since the North Korean army has traditionally assisted the population with planting and harvesting during critical times, funneling many of its junior members into such jobs on a more permanent basis may be an available alternative to assimilating them into the KDF.<sup>168</sup> Assuming it is possible to arrange for such workers to be paid for their tasks, the choice may also assist with stabilizing the North's economy, particularly in the event of a collapse.

For those in the KPA who are interested, deemed worthy, and able to be accommodated into the KDF, the stabilization period will be useful for assimilating them. First, the ROK armed forces will have to shake from the KPA's collective mentality an image of the South as a population to be liberated. Depending on the way unification unfolds, this task may be easy or hard. Regardless, it may take time to persuade the KPA of South Korea's peaceable intentions. Without regular access to media sources outside the country, mirror-imaging and government propaganda has likely shaped their perceptions of the ROK for decades.

Second, to make the KPA effective members of unified Korean military services, the ROK must imbue into them a spirit of cooperation with other countries and an attitude relatively free of social prejudice. While North Korea's military had worked secretly with other countries such as Syria and Iran to help them develop certain capabilities, the idea of collective security is foreign to the concept of *Juche*.<sup>169</sup> Norms for the equal treatment of military subordinates regardless of social background may also be absent in the KPA, so some degree of reeducation may be necessary for any to serve in the ROK armed forces.

Third, it will be necessary to disengage KPA members from the propagandized notions that the DPRK is the only true Korea and the Kim family is its rightful ruler. The dependence of three generations of Kims largely on maintaining a godlike image and possessing a strong military for power suggests that if a ROK-dominated unification scenario does unfold, the family will be out of the picture. Moreover, its legacy will likely be absent from the heritage of a unified Korean military.

## **Section 6**

### **The Character of a Unified Korean Armed Forces**

The character of a unified Korean Armed Forces will depend largely on three factors: *external threats*, *internal (inter-Korean) dynamics*, and the *nature of unification*. These factors play out somewhat differently through each of the four lenses of *operational culture*, *sociology*, *professionalism*, and *technology*. This section is largely speculative in examining each lens, but where appropriate it makes recommendations for ROK national and military policy, as well as US foreign and military policy on the Korean Peninsula during and after unification.

#### **Operational Culture**

“Operational culture” encompasses the national military’s ends, ways, and means for the management of violence: the type of warfare it trains to engage in, its motivation and means of fighting, its strategy for winning wars, and its objectives and definitions of victory in conflict. Although these things may vary considerably from conflict to conflict, it is still possible to make general conclusions about them for the time period of interest surrounding a potential Korean unification. This paper uses Forster, Edmunds, and Cottley’s military typologies based on orientation and role to simplify the category.<sup>170</sup> In their construct, today’s South Korean military (the South Korean Defense Forces—the SKDF) is oriented toward “territorial defense”—that is, it is “primarily oriented towards national defense but also capable of contributing in a limited way to multinational power projection operations.”<sup>171</sup> For national defense, the SKDF focuses almost exclusively on the North Korean threat. However, the SKDF has participated in foreign operations periodically since sending two divisions to Vietnam in support of US objectives there in the 1960s.<sup>172</sup> Therefore, aside from taking on domestic assistance roles before South Korea became a full-fledged democracy in the late 1980s, the SKDF has prioritized the role of national security against external aggression.

At the same time, per bilateral agreement, the United States still maintains operational control of ROK forces if war breaks out against North Korea. Some argue the delay in passing this control to the SKDF impedes its emergence as a fully sovereign military. However, for the ROK to assume wartime control, three conditions must be met. There must be “a security environment” conducive to transfer, “the right mix of capabilities to lead combined ROK-US forces,” and “capabilities that can address North Korean nuclear and missile threats in the early stages of a regional provocation or conflict.”<sup>173</sup> The

latter two of these conditions suggest the SKDF cannot be sovereign until it is fully capable against the North. However, attitudes in both SKDF leadership and the Korean Parliament regarding defense funding priorities may have to change before operational control transfer can be achieved.<sup>174</sup> If a crisis erupts in the North that leads to military conflict and the United States still has wartime control, the SKDF may lose face. However, losses on the battlefield against the DPRK would have a much worse effect should the SKDF be ill-prepared to lead the fight. The most likely scenario in war against North Korea—and perhaps the best solution if the United States still has wartime control of operations—is that US Forces Korea hand over control to the SKDF as combat concludes and stability operations begin. This will be a gradual transition that is dependent on conditions in each North Korean territory. As the transition takes place, new or expanded roles are likely to open for the Korean military that mold its future operational culture as a unified force.

These roles are important to prepare for because of the likelihood of unrest in the North in any unification scenario, and they will be formative for a future unified Korean military—the Korean Defense Forces (the KDF, as opposed to the SKDF) introduced above. First, the SKDF should prepare to expand its power projection role so that it can rotate forces in and out of North Korea regularly. Second, it will increasingly take on the role of domestic military assistance, including providing basic services to the most beleaguered members of the North’s population, augmenting governance where civilian authority is lacking, and establishing security.

This last function will be especially important following a collapse, since there will be a much greater potential for insurgent activity north of the 38th parallel. In fact, if the post-collapse environment features guerilla warfare by fragments of the KPA, the use of conventional military power to establish security is likely to be counterproductive without carefully coordinated information campaigns targeting the North Korean population. That the South Korean military is ready to execute such a strategy is doubtful, as recent assessments have judged the SKDF to have “operational shortfalls in the knowledge, planning, and potential execution of [counterinsurgency].”<sup>175</sup>

A lengthy counterinsurgency campaign may follow a renewed war with North Korea, since total military victory will be both difficult and undesirable. South Korea will have to pay for whatever it destroys in the process of subduing the North. Pursuing a strategy of annihilation would also lose South Korea the moral high ground. Any destruction in North Korea resembling the “Highway of Death” that the US coalition left behind in Kuwait after Operation Desert Storm should be avoided. It would be much better for the

SKDF to disable its opponent using nonkinetic or even nonlethal means, if possible. In any case, the words of Clausewitz are worth noting here: to lay the seeds for a healthy operational culture in a unified Korean armed forces, SKDF forces will need to examine the situation in North Korea and “establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”<sup>176</sup>

In any scenario that is not entirely peaceful, the SKDF—and later the KDF—may also need to be prepared to address security threats from China. Of the three external powers discussed previously in the context of Korean unification besides the United States, China is the most likely to intervene in North Korea during collapse or war. ROK and especially US military intervention in either scenario would violate China’s policies of “peace and stability” and “resolution of issues through dialogue and negotiation” on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, the SKDF or KDF may need to yield to diplomatic efforts by Korean and US governments with China to smooth the path to full political unification.

If the KDF does incorporate a sizable portion of the KPA into its ranks, it may need to compromise a degree of readiness for the sake of those forces’ training, reeducation, and acclimatization. In other words, a unified Korean state may need to focus internally for a time. This is a luxury many unifying states in the past did not have, due to external threats. However, assuming China is willing to accept a continued US military presence on the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, the new state would have the assurance of protection from its American ally while it builds a new defense institution.

In the longer term, perhaps over a period of decades, there is one additional role that a unified Korean military will take on: that of nation-building. Defined as inculcating national values into military members, the focus of nation-building will initially be any KPA members that transfer into the unified forces, but ultimately to recruits. Whether or not to institute a form of conscription in the former DPRK is a decision of great political consequence. Conscription in the ROK has undergone almost continual reform as part of the civilian leadership’s aim for greater legitimacy, and it is likely to face significant obstacles in a unified Korea sans a significant external threat.<sup>178</sup> Most advanced democratic nations in similar circumstances have moved away from using the military as a nation-building institution, so a unified Korea would be unique if it continued to do so.<sup>179</sup> However, to bridge the cultural, social, and economic gaps between the North and South after unification, the government should look at military service as one option through which young adults can develop social responsibility and a sense of patriotism in the

new state. This prospect touches on the military's sociology, which is the next lens of military character analyzed.

### **Sociology**

For the purposes of this paper, “military sociology” is defined as the “peacetime character” of a military force, including its size, its social and structural makeup, and its relationship to the society from which it draws its members.<sup>180</sup> For a unified Korea, a useful discussion about size concerns the Military-to-Population Ratio. MPR is likely to rise relative to the South Korean population as reservists are called up from the South to establish order and security in former North Korean provinces. However, relative to the total population of a unified Korea, MPR will drop significantly in the absence of a momentous external threat—even if select members of the KPA are integrated. The long-term effect of this drop will be a demilitarization of the Korean Peninsula. This outcome will be welcomed by the other regional powers and help a unified Korea focus on the complex, expensive task of economically and socially assimilating former North Korean territories.

However, more important than MPR is speculation about the aspects of military sociology that affect its relationship to Korean society and the military's identity as an image-bearer of a unified state. Such speculation is difficult, but it should begin with the issue of KPA integration. For the sake of simplicity this section attempts to predict the rationale and sociological outcome for three different decisions regarding former KPA personnel: no incorporation, selective incorporation of low-ranking KPA members, and selective incorporation of members up to senior leadership. The predictions will draw from the previous sections outlining the external and domestic influences on the potential of Korean unification, particularly in understanding how national identity and values in North Korea affect the character of the KPA. They also reference sociological studies of the military by Janowitz, Andreski, Licklider, and Gaub. At its conclusion, this section will make a recommendation for the best course of action regarding integration.

First, it is possible following a renewed war or a lengthy counterinsurgency campaign in North Korean territory that a unified Korean government will choose not to integrate any former KPA in its armed forces. After keeping enough KPA personnel on various posts to maintain security and accountability of weapons and equipment during stability operations and the transition to political unification, the SKDF may discharge them and hopefully connect them with means of civilian employment. A unified Korea largely under South Korean leadership may justify the decision in the name of mili-

tary efficiency and effectiveness as well as the generally antagonistic view the SKDF holds toward the KPA. As Florence Gaub observes in her studies of military integration following civil wars, there is a commonly held belief that since those in a civil war “have fought each other, they must think badly of one another and hence conflict is preassigned.”<sup>181</sup> Korea’s civil war never really ended, so this belief may still dominate South Korean thinking.

Alternatively, there may be government leaders in Seoul who see “military integration . . . as a means for making renewed civil war less likely by reducing fear” in the minds of North and South Koreans.<sup>182</sup> Incorporating some personnel from the KPA would also “reduce the number of former fighters who have to be disarmed and integrated into the society.”<sup>183</sup> The government will have to weigh the economic and societal burden of integrating the KPA into the KDF against that of integrating them into society by finding them civilian employment. The number of those incorporated into the KDF is likely to be very small regardless. However, any degree of incorporation will pit more immediate pragmatic considerations against questions about identity and ideology in the two Korean militaries. As this article has already explained, both are woven together in the concept of *Juche*, with the result that former KPA members will require extensive means of assimilation—that is, retraining and reeducation—into the KDF. However, concepts of purely North Korean identity may be less developed in the mind of a KPA private or sergeant than in the mind of a colonel or general officer. Therefore, the more junior ranks will be more easily molded by reeducation and training.

A third possibility—selective incorporation of KPA members up to senior leadership—is most likely in the case of a gradual, peaceful unification process. Leaving certain senior KPA leaders in place may be a concession to the North in exchange for accepting more democratic means of governance in the establishment of a Korean commonwealth—the second step of the South’s unification formula. After all, formation of the commonwealth assumes separate responsibility for security.<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, as Bruce Bennett has concluded, accommodating Korean military elites is a precondition to peaceful unification.<sup>185</sup> Leaving them in charge of their military organizations or giving them authority over new units that form after unification may be easier than finding positions of similar influence for them in the civilian world and more ethical than just paying them off. However, it is important for leadership in a future KDF to ask whether former South Korean military members would be willing to serve under a commander from the North. Alternately, if KPA commanders are to continue leading only KPA members, will there be an unhealthy bifurcation of hierarchies in the KDF? On one hand, units with mem-

bers of similar national background may have higher group cohesion. On the other, the most successful examples of military integration after civil wars have penetrated to the individual level rather than just the unit level.<sup>186</sup>

These are difficult questions to answer, especially if there is pressure to make decisions about integration quickly during unification as there was during the reunification of Germany in 1990. The loyalties and personalities of individual KPA members will also likely play a factor—particularly at more senior levels—making integration a case-by-case decision. There have been several high-ranking defectors from North Korea over the years, suggesting there may be others in leadership positions that are secretly in the “wavering” social class, meaning they did not fully buy into the North Korean *Juche* ideology.<sup>187</sup> They may have simply lacked the opportunity or courage to defect.

In the long term, integration of senior leaders into the KDF after unification should probably be the exception rather than the rule. It may be necessary to keep a few in the short term for their expertise in certain military missions that the ROK or unified government needs to better understand. However, the burden of reeducating them into the principles of serving under a democracy will more than offset the benefits of maintaining their expertise. Instead, it would behoove the government to find civilian positions of influence for them that have minimal political consequences.

Therefore, selective integration of only the more junior members is the preferred course of action. For them, “the importance of ideological and political values” will fade against the group cohesion that develops from serving alongside others with a military mindset.<sup>188</sup> As Florence Gaub concludes, “the military as an organization embeds . . . men in a surrounding that emphasizes, just like the values [of service], similarities over differences, and provides a common basis for understanding and cooperation.”<sup>189</sup> That said, any KPA members that serve in the KDF should be volunteers—that is, those with a positive disposition to serve under South Korean leadership—at least after the initial period during which they are needed to maintain security of weapons and facilities. A unified Korea may choose to pursue conscription in the former North Korea at a later time, but forcing KPA members to serve after their state ceases to exist may undermine progress toward peace on the peninsula.

### **Professionalism**

Military professionalism concerns characteristics inherent to the institution such as expertise, responsibility, and corporateness—qualities defined by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Soldier and the State*—as well as the un-

derstanding and acceptance of a clear boundary between military and political authority.<sup>190</sup> Between South Korea's founding and its democratization in the late 1980s, three factors encouraged the SKDF to periodically transgress American-accepted civil-military professional boundaries. These factors were the North Korean threat, economic instability, and the SKDF's domestic popularity. However, the same North Korean threat, along with the professional influence of the US military and the fact that ROK military coups were generally "non-hierarchical," helped preserve a high degree of professionalism within the SKDF that continues to this day.<sup>191</sup> That level of professionalism will be sustainable during unification and in a unified Korean armed forces if those forces can accomplish three things: effectively employ principles of mission command in stabilizing and securing North Korea, disarm and integrate former KPA members peacefully, and yield political decisions to a future unified Korean government .

The first two recommendations address how the SKDF can best demonstrate the professional characteristics of expertise, responsibility, and corporateness in carrying out two expected tasks during unification. Mission command—the American term nearly synonymous with German *Auftragstaktik*—“is the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based on mission-type orders.”<sup>192</sup> Whether the ROK military conducts operations into North Korea at an advanced stage of peaceful unification, in the wake of a DPRK regime collapse, or as part of a wartime coalition, it will encounter dynamic situations in which it will need to rely on its organizational, technical, and leadership expertise. As the image-bearer of the ROK and an institution that will interface with some of the North Korean population before most other government institutions, it will need to remember that its responsibility is for the security and welfare of that population as much as for South Korea's. Finally, the corporateness of the SKDF should reinforce its unity in carrying out assigned missions.

Disarming and integrating former KPA members narrows the professional focus to a group with shared values and norms more similar to the ROK military's own than those of the general North Korean population. This comparison will likely be more accurate the more specialized the KPA member is within the military profession, since entry into specialized jobs takes place through competitive selection, disciplined self-selection, or both. However, even for the basic recruit, “the military occupation provides its personnel with a stronger alternative in identity terms than do other institutions.”<sup>193</sup> It is up to the SKDF to capitalize on

such common bonds for promoting peace and convince the KPA of benign intentions during disarmament.

However, the SKDF should also expect to encounter a much different psyche from its own, particularly after a war or collapse. “Nowhere else does the army mirror its society’s problems more clearly,” explains Gaub, “than in post-conflict states.”<sup>194</sup> Ideally, an information campaign targeting the KPA will precede disarmament, preventing surprises on the ground. The campaign should encourage local political and military leadership to become a stabilizing influence rather than a resistance force. However, ROK military should anticipate renegade actions and respond in a way that is proportional, deescalatory, and out of necessity. Doing so will set a positive precedent for the professional heritage of a unified Korean military.

Yielding political decisions to the ROK government—the third recommendation in this section—is a humble recognition of what does not fall within the military’s expertise. The SKDF may be called upon to initiate governance in areas where it does not exist after a war or collapse. However, Seoul will likely have plans for cities and towns to transition to civilian governance once they have met certain conditions of stability and security. It is important for the SKDF and the KDF after it to recognize ahead of this transition that “military governments do not bring economic development or political democracy and often result in the eventual weakening of the military itself.”<sup>195</sup> While the developmental state model of economic growth under Major General Park Chung-hee in the 1960s might offer a counterexample to this assertion, the question is whether a military government is necessary to provide the needed stimulus for the lengthy task of closing the economic gap between North and South in unification. South Korea has come too far as a democratic state to risk the military’s professionalism again for achieving economic growth.

There is also a caution for the United States regarding its influence in shaping the professional image of a unified Korean military. Considering that the United States will be sharing the wartime burden and at least have an advisory capacity under other circumstances, it may exert pressure on the ROK to shape a unified armed forces according to its own mold. There are positive and negative aspects to this pressure. On the positive side, the United States has successfully integrated a diverse population into a military that is second to none professionally. This success has lessons for integrating the KPA.

On the negative side, the United States may urge the ROK to adopt policies toward the KPA that leave local SKDF military personnel at odds with local

civilian and military leadership in the former DPRK. Granted, the military is perhaps the best institution through which to pursue North–South social integration since it is nationally based and not locally based. However, policy consequences may still be localized, and they will be felt long after US influence is gone.<sup>196</sup> For example, similar to other communist militaries in Asia, the KPA has traditionally assumed economic assistance roles during certain times of the year in many parts of the country. This need may amplify during unification because many former North Koreans will likely flee southward, leaving large parts of North Korea bereft of human labor.<sup>197</sup> The United States and its military should consider the KPA's potential to fill this gap when making recommendations for disbanding or integrating it. The SKDF may even be able to assist the local population alongside the KPA. Such considerations will benefit the domestic professional image of the future KDF in North Korea, even if there is a short-term sacrifice in terms of the expertise and corporateness embodied in more exclusively military roles.

### **Technology**

There are two considerations relative to military technology for the unification of Korea. First, what role will technology play in the unification process? Second, what role will relative technological capacity between the military forces of the two states play in a future unified armed forces? The external and inter-Korean threat environments during a potential unification contribute to answering the first question, whereas the external threat environment, intelligence value, and propensity for building military cohesion help answer the second question.

An environment that is free of domestic (inter-Korean) threats will favor gradual, peaceful unification and therefore minimize the impact of military technology in the process. Ideally, North Korea will have denuclearized prior to political unification, removing nuclear capability as a bargaining chip in the process. However, it is possible that the South Korean model of unification may proceed with some residual North Korean nuclear capability still in existence, in which case the United States may have to play a balancing, deterrent role in the process. This role will include preventing China or Japan from intervening militarily in a manner that destabilizes the Korean Peninsula.<sup>198</sup>

If deterrence against North Korea fails and war breaks out, the DPRK may seek to leverage its nuclear superiority against South Korea or even coerce the United States into ceasing its support for the ROK. In this case, the key for the United States in preventing a regional nuclear conflict is to

assure South Korea and Japan that its nuclear umbrella is sufficient to obviate their own need for nuclear weapons. Part of this assurance will be the willingness to destroy North Korean nuclear capability in the initial stages of an inter-Korean conflict or respond with a retaliatory nuclear strike if the DPRK resorts to employing nuclear weapons. Assuming these measures are successful, the remainder of a war on the peninsula will be conventional in character, and US–ROK technological superiority will likely play a large role in forcing a political truce upon the regime in a short period.

However, if the KPA resorts to irregular warfare afterward, dragging on the conflict for months or years, technology will matter much less than political resolve in bringing the conflict to an end. If there is not enough resolve in the United States and the ROK to pursue unification in these circumstances—either because of domestic costs, opposition from China, or both—it is possible that a different regime takes over North Korea. In such a case, technological superiority will have no strategic value in bringing about unification. This assertion also applies if the DPRK regime collapses and the ROK and United States lack the political will to pursue unification.

If Korea does unify, the value of the North's military technology to the ROK will depend on the residual external threat—and perhaps a little on intelligence value and the contribution of certain weapons technologies to institutional cohesion in a unified Korean armed forces. To contain any arms race that might come from a competition between China and Japan after Korean unification, it would behoove the United States to continue playing a balancing role. Otherwise, a united Korea is going to worry about becoming victimized like it was in previous Northeast Asian conflicts between its neighbors.<sup>199</sup> If its concerns are validated, it may elect to keep a lot of former North Korean weapons systems operational despite their relative obsolescence.

However, in the absence of a significant external threat, there are few reasons not to dismantle and dispose of the myriad of equipment, facilities, and weapons systems the DPRK currently possesses, both nuclear and conventional. The costs of maintaining them would be staggering in terms of manpower, material, and integration costs. Korea would need to retain many KPA personnel (including those belonging to the Korean People's Navy and Air Force). Furthermore, due to international sanctions that prevented more recent purchases, the most advanced of North Korea's weapons systems date from the 1980s.<sup>200</sup> They are decades behind the ROK in automation, networking, and electronic warfare capabilities, so they would not be worth the cost to keep them operational. Moreover, because North Korea generally acquires “appropriate, rather than cutting-

edge, technology, and offsets quality with quantity”—a tendency reinforced by *Juche* ideology—integrating them into the ROK’s existing security architecture would strain the defense budget of a unified Korea with only marginal benefits to show for it.<sup>201</sup>

Among the few practical reasons for a unified Korea to retain certain systems and equipment would be for their intelligence value or as a catalyst for military cohesion. First, keeping certain aircraft, submarines, ships, and missiles operational in small numbers may have value for “red-teaming” in training and understanding how to counter threats from China or Russia, which manufactured most of North Korea’s weapons systems. Second, some weapons systems may be useful as coalescing platforms for the integration of SKDF and former KPA units—at least in the short to medium terms. Korea may even decide to create combat units that mix North Korean and South Korean systems within certain categories such as naval patrol or airborne search and rescue, together with qualified personnel from the two former states. Such initiatives should be on a small scale because weapon sustainment costs will be much higher than for more homogenous units. However, they may be worth their extra cost for the models of inter-Korean cooperation they set.

Regardless of what North Korean military technology a unified Korea decides to retain and dispose of, the disappearance of the DPRK threat will likely decrease the “demand for military hardware in the future.”<sup>202</sup> This decreased demand will negatively impact current ROK defense industries. Of course, the same decrease may shift much-needed government money to the monumental task of integrating the economies and societies of North and South Korea. Absorbing former North Koreans with military-related skills will be a small part of this task, and legacy ROK-led joint projects such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex “might represent a workable model in post-unification” for employing northerners.<sup>203</sup> However, such initiatives will “require substantial capital outlay, coordination, and cooperation between government and private enterprise.”<sup>204</sup> The enormity of such tasks is likely to confound those taking them on. Therefore, any lessons from previous unification cases will be helpful, particularly in the military arena. The next section seeks to bring those to bear upon the Korean case.

### **Summary of Potential Korean Unification Scenarios and Military Outcomes**

Table 2 below summarizes the conclusions of several of the previous sections about Korean unification. While speculative, this summary extrapolates from the current geopolitical environment, inter-Korean relations, character of the South Korean and North Korean militaries, and associated trends.

**Table 2. Summary of potential Korean unification scenarios & military outcomes**

1st independent variable	<b>degree/type of external influence on unification*</b>	likely strong or moderate, indirect (mix of supporting/opposing)
	<b>prominent external factors</b>	Support from US, China, Russia, & Japan for unification; US–China relations in particular
2nd independent variable	<b>degree/type of domestic influence on unification*</b>	strong or moderate, direct
	<b>prominent domestic factors</b>	opposing national identities & values; different preferences for national security & strategies for unification
intervening condition	<b>character of unification</b>	three scenarios: gradual reform, war, and collapse of North Korean regime and/or government.
1st dependent variable	<b>fate of KPA</b>	large-scale integration unlikely; degree will depend on several factors, including means of unification. Recommend assisting those not retained with finding future civilian employment.
2nd dependent variable: unified Korean military character	subvariables	Orientation: likely territorial defense, based on ROK military.
	<b>Operational culture</b> (orientation/ roles)**	Roles: national security, domestic military assistance, nation-building
	<b>Sociology</b> (Military-to-Population Ratio, incorporation of former KPA, assimilation of former KPA, and disposition toward military service)	MPR: likely less than current ROK MPR of 1.1% low incorporation of KPA likely/recommended thorough assimilation of incorporated KPA members likely/recommended retained KPA members should have a favorable disposition to continue military service
	<b>Professionalism</b> (expertise / responsibility to society / corporateness / civ-mil relations)	Professionalism likely high, based on current ROK standards, but will depend on employment of mission command in stabilizing/securing North Korea, ability to peacefully disarm/integrate former KPA members, and yielding of political decisions to a future unified Korean government.
	<b>Technology</b> (impact on unification & evaluation as a distinguishing feature afterward)	Impact will depend on manner of unification; NK nuclear weapons will be key concern; KDF will not retain NK technology except for what has intel/training value

In this analysis, “strong influence” means the actor can determine whether unification takes place, with means such as military invasion and/or occupation to bear on the issue. “Moderate influence” indicates diplomatic means of affecting unification, but not necessarily military means. “Direct influence” means the actor takes part in the unification process itself, either militarily or politically, whereas “indirect influence” means it does not.

\*\*Based on military typologies developed by Forster, Edmunds, and Cottey.

## **Section 7**

### **From the Past, the Future: The Lessons of Germany and Vietnam**

Which of the three scenarios for unification occurs in Korea—mutual agreement, collapse, or war—will determine to some degree which historical unification cases offer lessons for the ROK. The German reunification case has the most to offer for Korea in the case of either a gradual reform or a collapse of the North Korean government, while the unification of Vietnam contains some lessons for the peninsula if a war breaks out. The analysis of the German reunification case further breaks down lessons into those that apply at the international (external) and domestic (internal) levels. The analysis of the Vietnamese unification case identifies two lessons at the international level: one concerning the influence of China, and the other concerning the US–ROK alliance. The lessons from both historical cases will focus primarily on the fate of the subjugated or losing military and the character of the post-unification armed forces.

#### **From the Berlin Wall to the Joint Security Area: Lessons Germany Can Offer Korea if Gradual Reform or Collapse Precedes Unification**

Germany is the case that scholars most often cite in trying to understand the potential of unification in Korea and the way in which it might proceed. The comparison is reasonable: both states were largely victims of the polarity of Cold War relations between the Soviet Union and the West, and leaders on either side of the divide in the two states argued for the superiority of their government. If Germany could unite, why cannot Korea?

The deeper one looks at each case, however, the more distinctions appear on both the external and domestic levels. On the external level, it becomes necessary to compare the Soviet Union in 1989 to China in 2022. Like the Soviet Union when the Berlin Wall fell, China is working to liberalize its economy. However, the Soviet Union did so as a struggling superpower, whereas China is doing so as a great power on the rise. While the Soviet Union was withdrawing from alliance commitments to satellite states like East Germany, China sees few reasons to allow a buffer state like North Korea to fall and can continue propping it up. Furthermore, under Gorbachev the Soviet Union was rapidly becoming more open politically; China is still authoritarian.

The question also arises of how similar the European sense of community and collective security is to that in East Asia. The creators of NATO had envisioned its contribution to both community and security, so that “even in times

of serious threat the leaders of the NATO member states took NATO's community building aspects seriously and paid attention to the inclusion of these aspects in NATO's institutional form."<sup>205</sup> Reforming the Bundeswehr within the NATO construct placated those who were concerned with the impact of a united Germany and unified Bundeswehr on the regional balance of power.

In Northeast Asia, there is no such community-security construct under which a unified Korean military can exist. This absence concerns countries like Japan that stand to lose from Korea's unification. Although Korea has no modern history of beginning interstate wars with its neighbors, as a unified state it will considerably alter the long-term balance of power in the region.

There are also differences between the cases at the domestic level. In the German case, unification originated in "the East Germans' desire to live like the people in West Germany," along with a gradual integration of values between populations on the two sides in the years leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>206</sup> Such value integration made structural integration relatively easy in 1990. In contrast, although South Korea has produced structural plans for unifying the country and envisions how common values will reinforce them, that vision has yet to be realized.<sup>207</sup>

Furthermore, three restrictions inhibit North Koreans from reaching the stage of civil protest East Germans did at the Berlin Wall. First, the control of information in North Korea is such that much of the population does not know how people live in the South. Second, the lack of a functioning civil society makes it difficult to rally public expression in favor of social reforms. Third, the redundancy of government security mechanisms in the state counters any grassroots efforts at change.<sup>208</sup>

Nevertheless, there are two reasons for taking lessons from the German case for Korea. First, the slim chance of Korea uniting along the same lines as Germany does not translate into a low probability of Korea uniting at all. Second, if unification were to take place differently than in the German case, there are still lessons that Germany can teach about how to handle the losing military and shape the unified armed forces in a new Korea. Because Germany was largely a successful unification case in terms of stabilization, security, and military integration, these lessons are largely positive. The sections below address these lessons at the international and domestic levels, respectively. Some of these lessons also have implications for US policy on the peninsula and in the region.

**The Unification of Germany: Lessons at the International Level.** Despite differences in the characteristics of external powers in the German and Korean cases, a unified Korea can learn from efforts Germany made toward its

neighbors on military issues. Considering US involvement in the success of Germany's unification and its enduring interest in the stability of the Korean Peninsula, it can benefit from remembering certain aspects of the German case as well.

The first lesson is the necessity for the unifying country to engage proactively in dialogue with external powers in the period leading up to and during unification. The nature of dialogue will be different depending on whether unification results from a gradual "meeting of the minds" between the two Koreas or from a North Korean collapse. Germany seems to have been a mixture of both scenarios in that the two governments had recognized each other diplomatically and an integration of values took place between the two states' populations, but East Germany increasingly suffered from economic stagnation and political incapacity. These latter conditions made it easy for Chancellor Helmut Kohl to bypass East Germany's Erick Honecker in his discussions with Gorbachev about European unity. This dialogue made the subject of German unity and the future of the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA) and the Bundeswehr—as well as the disposition of the Soviet Army in East Germany and a united Germany's membership in NATO—easier to address with Gorbachev once unification was imminent.

As North Korea's remaining great power patron and the hermit kingdom's only other geographic neighbor, China is the first outside country other than the United States with which South Korea should discuss Korean unification, particularly in the event of a North Korean collapse. So far China has been unwilling to discuss the issue with the United States. If a North Korean collapse is imminent, however, China may be willing to do so with the ROK.

As with the West German–Soviet discussions, ROK–China summits in the event of a collapse of the DPRK will also need to broach the topic of the disposition of military forces and facilities in North Korea. West Germany accepted that Soviet forces stationed in East Germany would remain there long enough to assist with security and the disposition of military materials that had been under their control. China does not have military forces actively stationed in the DPRK, but both the ROK and China may be interested in having a limited number of PLA units to assist with internal security, particularly near the Chinese border. Inherent in this discussion must be an understanding—similar to the one requiring Soviet forces to depart East Germany completely by 1994—that the PLA leave once sufficient stability is achieved.<sup>209</sup> A mutually agreed-upon date is preferable, with possible modifications later as the two countries reassess the North Korean situation.

In the less likely case of a gradual unification between the Koreas, there would be two notable differences in the discussion with China. First, China's role will be lesser than the Soviet Union's, and the role of North Korean leadership will be greater than East Germany's. This is particularly true if a regime more amenable to reform replaces the Kim dynasty. Second, the discussion will center less on maintaining stability in the DPRK and more on long-term regional security. This optimistic outcome is predicated upon the DPRK being able to move from a failed command economy to one with sustainable markets without collapse. Regardless of whether North Korea collapses or reforms prior to unification, it is advisable to incorporate more external players into the discourse on this topic.

Thus, multilateral dialogue provides the second major lesson of the German case, with implications for US participation in Korea's unification. Once "the United States had concluded that the GDR [German Democratic Republic, i.e., East Germany] was disintegrating and that German Unification would indeed occur," the George H. W. Bush administration drafted a plan for managing the "external dimension of the process" that involved the major outside powers.<sup>210</sup> The so-called 2 + 4 talks that came out of this plan included the two Germanys plus the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France. The inclusion of the latter two states was important because of Germany's history of aggression in Europe. To assure Britain and France, the United States recommended that Germany continue as a member of NATO. Representatives' agreement on this proposal opened the way for West Germany to discuss with the Soviet Union the composition and character of the Bundeswehr after unification.

If Korea unites, the United States may have another opportunity to engineer multilateral talks among regional players centered on national unification. For Korean unification, 2 + 4 talks would include the two Koreas, the United States, China, Russia, and Japan. This format is not new, as the George W. Bush administration brought together these same powers for the Six-Party Talks beginning in 2002. These talks centered on North Korea's denuclearization, and external players offered aid and recognition in return. Although lack of progress suspended the talks in 2009, restarting them under the auspices of Korean unification has the potential to finally resolve the nuclear issue.<sup>211</sup> For the talks to take place, it is assumed that North Korea will have already collapsed, been gradually reformed, or been beaten in a war. Therefore, there should be little disagreement on *whether* the peninsula should be denuclearized. Rather, *how* to dispose of the DPRK's nuclear weapons and facilities will be the center of the debate.

In addition, as with the 2 + 4 Talks in Europe, multilateral talks among the Asian powers may also be a useful forum for addressing what a Northeast Asian community should look like following Korean unification. The lack of a common regional identity like that in Europe will likely prevent the formation of “a single overarching institution,” but it will be necessary to discuss whether the current Asian architecture needs to change to preserve regional stability.<sup>212</sup> That architecture is currently a “fluid and results-based” mix of “bilateral, trilateral, and other multilateral relations” that allow both the United States and China to achieve “positive-sum gains.”<sup>213</sup> A unified Korea may disturb this balance if it leans heavily toward Beijing, because doing so would significantly weaken Japanese and US regional influence. If the United States can form a consistent foreign policy toward China that recognizes its interests in the Korean Peninsula, it will be able to pursue dialogue with Beijing more confidently. At the same time, the United States may be able to win the battle with China for Korea’s loyalty by proactively supporting Korean unification efforts. It must do so carefully, however, letting Seoul retain the upper hand in the process so as not to propagate an image of foreign nation-building.<sup>214</sup> These recommendations recognize there will be a fine line between cooperation and competition with China over Korean unification.

A third and related lesson concerns the role of an enduring US presence in the region. The maintenance of a few US bases in Germany to facilitate cooperation with European allies and serve as forward deployment sites may be a model for American presence in Northeast Asia following Korean unification. As mentioned earlier in this paper, all three of the other external powers approve of a US presence if it serves to preserve the stability that has existed in the region for the previous several decades. The United States should not need to establish any new bases to pursue this end, but it should commit to maintaining a military presence in former South Korea that has credible deterrent value and is useful for military diplomacy.

Fourth, as with Germany in Europe, the future of a unified Korean armed forces will need to become part of any Asian security architecture discussion. The combined size of KPA and ROK forces will be of particular concern to external powers. Currently, the total active-duty personnel of the two Koreas number just over 1.7 million—larger than the active-duty military of India.<sup>215</sup> Along with the financial burden of sustaining such a force, regional pressure will drive Korea to cut its manpower drastically. The outcome of this cutback for the KPA is that the percentage able to serve in the unified armed forces may be even less than in Germany—not to mention barriers stemming from differences in military culture that candidates will have to overcome.

Fifth and last, like Germany, Korea will also need to restructure its military to better contribute to the post-unification regional security environment. Equipping the Bundeswehr to be more expeditionary as NATO evolved to respond to contingencies over a larger geographic area was a visible sign that Germany had accepted its role in the broader security framework that its unification had helped create. To the degree that the disappearance of the North Korean threat frees a united Korean military to cooperate in regional and global security efforts, Korea may learn to accept a wider role as well. This possibility aligns with the previous recommendations of this paper about the operational culture of a unified Korean military. In the short term, the Korean task of assimilating the northern half of the peninsula into its economic, political, and military systems will absorb much of the state's attention. The effort will be incredibly costly, particularly if a war precedes unification. In the long term, however, a united Korea can become a middle power whose military makes valuable contributions to national defense, regional security, and global stability in a similar manner to Germany today.

**The Unification of Germany: Lessons at the Domestic Level.** The integration of values through initiatives such as Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and the desire of East Germans to live like those in the West spurred German unification. However, the physical isolation of the NVA from society and its close ties to the GDR's political party filtered information from the West and diminished its liberalizing impact in the military sphere. For this reason, together with the historically adversarial relationship that existed between the Bundeswehr and the NVA, the German case provides some valuable lessons for South Korea and the potential integration of the KPA into a unified KDF. As with lessons at the international level, most below apply best to a scenario in which North Korea collapses or has taken some steps toward reform prior to unification.

First, like the Bundeswehr, a unified Korean military has several reasons to integrate at least some of its former rival's personnel into its ranks despite stark differences in military culture and values. The first reason is psychological: the KDF cannot profess to be truly Korean unless it permits some of the KPA to continue serving. In unification, South Korea would be more than doubling its territory and increasing its population by a half. An acquisition on this scale without co-opting any of the territory's military forces will look more like a conquest than an effort at "reconciliation and cooperation," as the ROK's unification strategy advocates.<sup>216</sup> The second reason is social: as in East Germany, it would be unjust "simply to throw that many people onto the streets in such a poor, unstable economy."<sup>217</sup> The practical reason follows the social one, since hundreds of thousands of unemployed KPA members are

likely to form independent militias and add to the country's instability in the aftermath of a political collapse. A final reason is military-related: the KPA's expertise will be needed to inventory, guard, maintain, operate, and dispose of all the equipment that will come under new military management once unification is complete. This requirement dictates only a short-term commitment by KPA personnel, but if the KDF decides to accept any of the equipment as its own, these personnel will become valuable as cadre for training new recruits on it.<sup>218</sup> The KDF will need to balance the need for these cadre against the need for promoting the SKDF's professional military values, which KPA members are unlikely to embody.

The second lesson from Germany on the domestic level addresses this challenge: if a unified Korea desires for KPA veterans to become valuable contributors to the KDF, it will need to mandate the period of transition that shapes them for service in it. For Germany, that period was two years and entailed a process of evaluation, reeducation, and socialization for each former NVA member.<sup>219</sup> If the member was not forced to separate prior to the end of the period and did not leave voluntarily, he became a full-fledged member of the Bundeswehr. For Korea, the road a KPA member must navigate to reach this point may be longer and more difficult because of the length of the two Koreas' political division and the degree of ideological separation between them. It will be too steep for some, particularly if they are older or above a certain rank. This is the primary reason this paper recommends integrating only junior KPA members.

Another consideration for integration, one that West Germany also confronted, is that a change in military sociology is inevitable if the dominant state's military integrates many personnel from the subjugated state. The hierarchical structure of the military and the institutional cohesion observed by scholars in the integrated militaries of other states after civil wars may mitigate the negative impact of North Korean ideology somewhat in the integration process. Nevertheless, there is also merit in the belief of George Washington that people who are placed in a new group "retain the Language, habits, and principles (good or bad) which they bring with them."<sup>220</sup> Some North Koreans who serve in an all-Korean military force may hold on to the values that shaped their prior service no matter how much reeducation they receive. This possibility reinforces the need for a two-year probationary period like that followed by the Bundeswehr for former NVA members.

A third lesson from Germany arises from its debate over disbanding NVA bases quickly or keeping them operational long enough to make more informed decisions. This debate will be even more acute in North Korea because of the ex-

pected cost of unification, the ideological divide, and the obsolescence of the DPRK's technology already mentioned. The government allowed the Bundeswehr discretion in determining what NVA units to shut down, but it advocated for shutting them down very quickly to save money. The Bundeswehr leadership fought for time to make more informed decisions because of the consequences for stability, foreign interference, capabilities, cost, and manpower.<sup>221</sup>

For example, keeping NVA units operational contributed to stability in East Germany by securing important military facilities and providing continued employment during a critical transition period. Closing facilities and releasing NVA personnel too quickly might have increased economic and social instability, with the result that Soviet forces would have delayed their departure from the former GDR. A possible third-order effect to this instability would have been delays in other unification processes that depended on the departure of these forces. If China interferes with Korean unification because of perceived instability in the former DPRK, similar dynamics to those in Germany may be present.

There are also lessons from the German case for Korea in terms of capabilities and costs. Keeping many NVA units functional preserved important capabilities until the government could decide which to keep and which to relinquish. Personnel in those units maintained the weapons systems, facilities, and equipment that Germany might decide to retain. Although it ultimately did not retain a lot, shutting down the bases where the Tu-154s, Mi-8s, and MiG-29s were located until the Bundeswehr had the means of properly acquiring them would have taken more effort and money than simply keeping them open.

The ROK military takeover of North Korean armed forces units may face similar challenges, particularly if unification takes place as quickly as it did in Germany. The Seoul government and the military must agree on the balance between disbanding North Korean military units to save money and preserving them long enough to make informed decisions about the fate of units and personnel. According to Korea experts Victor Cha and David Kang, "studies find that the ROK will experience a 200,000-person gap in its ability to meet its currently projected labor power needs for a future military."<sup>222</sup> Unless the ROK makes up this shortfall before unification takes place or anticipates relying heavily on outside forces, keeping critical North Korean personnel in place may be more important than the money retained from shutting down the North's military units in a short period.

If UN or third-country forces are assisting with stability, the government and the military must also coordinate when to replace them with North Korean personnel.<sup>223</sup> Other than the geopolitical effects of this decision, the most

important consideration informing it is the degree of success in assuring the North Korean military and population of the ROK's good intentions. North Korean willingness to cooperate in minor stabilization roles will be a good sign they are ready to take on major ones. Because of the ideological separation that existed between the two countries for so long, however, reaching this point may be a bigger challenge in Korea than it was in Germany.

There are two more sociological considerations from the German case that offer lessons for a North Korean collapse. These concern how the subjugated state's military forces relate to its government and its society leading up to unification, with implications for whether that military promotes violence after the government's collapse. Cha and Kang state "militaries that are independent of politics and are self-sustaining autonomous actors tend to remain intact after the government collapses. Those that are most closely associated with political entities tend to fare less well after political disintegration, and therefore might be more easily reformed."<sup>224</sup> Drawing from this assertion, Cha and Kang argue that the KPA falls somewhere in between an autonomous and a dependent actor. The KPA's need in recent years to become self-sufficient in the absence of a functioning economy has made it less dependent on political leadership than the East German military, which was rather powerless by the time the Bundeswehr entered the former GDR. However, the KPA's loyalty to Kim Jong-un make it more dependent on political control than militaries such as Egypt's that have taken over the government in times of unrest.<sup>225</sup>

In view of this assessment, the ROK may be able to reform some KPA personnel, but it should be wary of military leadership that perceives unification as a direct threat to its livelihood. This possibility highlights the conclusion of Bruce Bennett that a unified Korea will need to co-opt KPA military leaders to keep the peace.<sup>226</sup> In the face of resistance from these elites, it will be very tempting for the United States to intervene. However, it will be necessary to weigh the strategic benefits of military intervention against those of letting the ROK take ownership of its unification. This decision will be difficult in the event of a DPRK collapse, and a national war would understandably make the benefits of intervention appear much greater.

The second question of sociological consequence for which German unification offers a lesson concerns the subjugated military's relation to society. This issue is important because the answer may determine whether the subjugated military initiates violence against its fellow citizens following a collapse—particularly if they rise up against the remnants of the government. The NVA and the KPA are similar in that both militaries' border units committed violence against their people when they tried to escape the country—

the former at the Berlin Wall and the latter near the Chinese border.<sup>227</sup> The lack of direction from the GDR's governing political party—the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED)—when the Berlin Wall fell prevented the NVA border guards from taking action against those fleeing to the West. However, the physical separation of the NVA from society made such action more likely than if they had regularly interacted with it. There is some hope for a peaceful unification if North Korea collapses because, as previously mentioned, many soldiers in the KPA have engaged with the population in economic assistance roles. They “have been conscripted to perform work projects, building dams, roads, and so on. These factors make it less likely that they would gun down mass citizen demonstrations prompted by a politically unstable environment.”<sup>228</sup> However, “special forces . . . are more likely to intervene against the people given their tight organization, closeness to the leadership, and lack of interaction with society.”<sup>229</sup> If DPRK special operations forces elements do initiate violence against the population or even the SKDF, South Korea's military may find itself in an irregular warfare campaign in the North that couples kinetic strike against guerrilla-like special forces with stabilization operations among the population. Needless to say, it is highly unlikely that a unified Korean military would include veterans of North Korean special operations forces.

As stated, most of the lessons above apply in a collapse or gradualism scenario. The remote possibility of a unification that proceeds directly from a war between the two Koreas brings to mind a different historical case.

### **From the 17th to the 38th Parallel: Lessons Vietnam Can Offer to Korea in the Event That War Precedes Unification**

Although the possibility of a resumed Korean War is slim today, the Second Indochina War—known best in the United States as the Vietnam War—offers lessons for both containment of the conflict and US commitment to the ROK alliance if one breaks out. The first lesson concerns the United States' and South Korea's relationship to China. Although China supported North Vietnam militarily, the United States was able to carry on the war without prompting its active intervention. America's departure from Vietnam without a true victory does not negate this lesson, since improvement of US relations with China had preceded that departure. But if the United States had been the victor in Vietnam, China might have felt threatened and US–China relations may have suffered. This counterfactual outcome has implications for the potential unification of Korea under a democratic government and China's acceptance of a post-unification Korean military. The presence of nuclear weap-

ons development facilities in the DPRK is another factor affecting Chinese influence in an armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula that was not present in Vietnam. US policy for a war on the Korean Peninsula that leads to unification should consider the similarities and the differences between that war and the US experience in Vietnam.

The second lesson from Vietnam concerns how the US–ROK alliance can generate the necessary level of US support in case of a North Korean attack while still encouraging the ROK to take ownership for its own defense role. This is a negative lesson in the sense that America failed to find this balance with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, the ground forces of the South Vietnamese) in Vietnam.

**The Unification of Vietnam: Lessons for US–China Relations.** China’s historical relationships with Vietnam and Korea and a shared border with both explain China’s enduring interest in the stability and political leanings of both countries. Both the Vietnamese and the Koreans were among the “Sinified tributaries” of the Han Chinese, and Chinese characters “formed the foundation of the traditional writing systems” of both countries.<sup>230</sup> These similarities between Vietnam and Korea in their relationship to China have important implications for US–China and ROK–China relations if an active war breaks out on the peninsula again. The development of these relations will ultimately impact the fate of the KPA and the character of a post-unification Korean armed forces.

If an armed conflict erupts on the Korean Peninsula, two important questions the United States will need to address are whether and how to employ its military forces north of the 38th parallel. Understanding how China may react should be a prime consideration in answering those questions.

In modern history, China has valued the sovereignty of Vietnam and Korea if sovereignty contributed to stability on its borders or China did not perceive a threat in the regional balance of power. In 1950, the push of US and UN forces to the Yalu River crossed an instability threshold that prompted Chinese intervention. In 1979, China sought to teach Vietnam a lesson after its intervention into Cambodia by breaking Vietnam’s sovereignty and invading across the China–Vietnam border. By its invading the country, China also sought to “confirm that Moscow would not honor its treaty obligations to intervene on Vietnam’s behalf.”<sup>231</sup>

The positive lesson of Vietnam for US–China relations in the case of an armed conflict in Korea today is that, aside from providing equipment and limited advice on its use, China did not intervene militarily in Vietnam during the Second Indochina War. Although the distraction that the Soviet Union posed on the opposite Chinese border further discouraged it from invading after 1969,

even before that time the United States was careful to avoid giving China a rationale for doing so. President Lyndon Johnson understood China's concerns, and he sought to avoid escalation of the conflict into a wider war with China by limiting most aircraft strikes against North Vietnam to targets south of Hanoi.<sup>232</sup> Although domestic political concerns largely drove Johnson's decision making, and his restrictions prevented attacks on many significant military targets, the constraints lessened the chances that aircraft would cross the Chinese border and elicit attacks by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The United States could afford to be less discrete after the Sino-Soviet split and Nixon's diplomacy with China. Diplomacy's effectiveness was evident first in its effect on the confidence of US leadership in authorizing military action. The earliest example was Nixon's approval of airstrikes in January and February 1972 against the Vietnamese DMZ and the area where Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam intersected. These operations ceased in time for Nixon's departure for a diplomatic visit to China on February 17 of that year. US confidence in approving armed reconnaissance near the Chinese border later the same year testified to the success of America's normalization of relations with the PRC.<sup>233</sup>

Diplomacy's effectiveness was also evident in China's restraint the same year following a few US mistakes during operations against North Vietnam. These included a "US incursion and air attack on Chinese buildings" and "splinter damage to Chinese ships from American combat operations."<sup>234</sup> Although Beijing issued warnings to Washington over these incidents, its response differed markedly from five years before, when the Chinese had shot down two US aircraft for inadvertently crossing the Chinese border north of Hanoi.<sup>235</sup>

The outcomes above offer two lessons for any US military action that takes place against North Korea in the case of a war on the peninsula. First, the United States should exercise caution in North Korea as it seeks to align military operations with political goals. It may need to time certain military action against North Korea with diplomatic visits to the PRC that emphasize the two nations' common interest in stability on the peninsula.

Second, the United States needs to preserve normal relations with China so that communication between leaders rather than military provocation is a first resort if either nation's military makes an oversight in judgment that affects the other. This way, China and the United States will prevent a spiral of misperception in their relationship.

Three differences between the Second Indochina War and a potential military conflict in Korea today will make effective diplomacy with China more difficult, however. One notable difference is that there probably will not be a significant Sino-Soviet split for the United States to use as leverage in bargain-

ing. As recently as October 2020, Russian president Vladimir Putin hinted at the possibility of a future Chinese-Russian alliance, considering common strategic goals and positions relative to the United States over the last few years.<sup>236</sup> Unless the United States can drive a wedge between the two great powers, it will have to seek other means of inducing China to accept US policy for the military outcome of another Korean war, such as economic or financial incentives.

The second difference is the presence of nuclear weapons in North Korea. Two of China's national aims listed by the US Institute for Peace are "avoiding a nuclearization of the region" and "limiting the military role of the United States in and around the Korean Peninsula."<sup>237</sup> In view of these two aims, the United States should seek to convince China of the two nations' mutual interest in addressing the nuclear problem and the United States' ability to help resolve it if necessary. If the Chinese are intent on conducting their own military operations in North Korea to secure nuclear weapons and facilities, the United States should not risk a military conflict with China over the issue. It should either pursue agreements to deconflict PLA and US military actions in North Korea or allow other forces to conduct the operations. Once nuclear facilities are secure, it will be possible to bring in UN inspectors and members of the International Atomic Energy Agency to properly identify and dispose of weapons and material inside them. China may be more willing to accept ROK terms for peace on the peninsula once these steps have been carried out.

Finally, there is the difference in US objectives between the Vietnam War at its conclusion and a potential Korean conflict. Instead of peace with honor as in Vietnam, the United States has signaled its willingness to assist the ROK with regime change in North Korea or at least foster the conditions for it once the KPA is disabled. If regime change means uniting Korea under a democratic government, China may express greater opposition to US military action in North Korea than in Vietnam. As discussed above, it may be necessary in the interest of peaceful relations with China for the United States to minimize any unilateral operations north of the 38th parallel.

There are three caveats to this recommendation. First, it does not rule out covert actions by US special operations forces to secure North Korean nuclear facilities or other key nodes whose operations threaten ROK forces. Second, it does not rule out the need for US forces to lead military operations if wartime operational control under ROK leadership has not been bilaterally agreed upon when war breaks out. Third, it recognizes that US forces may also participate in operations north of the 38th parallel under the banner of the United Nations. If instability in the North rises above a certain threshold, the ROK military will need the support of the United Nations to maintain

legitimacy. The UN's oversight and resources can also help address the instability itself. However, UN participation in Iraq and Afghanistan suggests that, even if the UN Security Council agrees to confront the DPRK militarily, most of the resource burden in another Korean conflict may still fall on US and ROK forces.<sup>238</sup> In this case, it will be difficult for the United States to avoid sending members of its own military to accompany UN troops. If those forces are operating under the UN banner, a conflict with China is less likely than if US action is unilateral.

Maintaining a cooperative relationship with China regarding Korean unification is also important for the postwar period, when the PRC and other regional players may seek a voice in the settlement of the conflict. If the United States and China can resolve the nuclear issue and the missions of their respective military forces amicably, China may be more willing to accept a multilateral postwar settlement for the peninsula or one under the auspices of the UN. The United States may be able to catalyze the support of both China and the UN for such efforts by leveraging the local knowledge and influence of nongovernmental organizations and international government organizations that have experience in North Korea.<sup>239</sup>

It is also possible that China will want to influence postwar settlement issues such as the fate of the KPA and the character of the post-unification Korean armed forces, considering that these outcomes will influence the type of Korean state on its border. If the UN has participated in the conflict, the former issue will probably be resolved under its auspices. Within the UN framework, the United States, China, and Korea should seek a policy for disarming the KPA that quickly eliminates it as a threat but ensures its members are treated humanely and have opportunities for future employment. The occurrence of armed conflict will preclude most personnel from serving in a unified Korean military. The discussions above on the aftermath of a North Korean collapse offer other options for them to work, however.

A united Korea may seek to bring some former KPA leadership to trial for crimes such as the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and the torpedo attack against the ROK ship *Cheonan*, depending on when unification takes place. China's former patronage of North Korea may motivate it to intervene politically in such matters, but it may be less likely to do so if it perceives that a unified Korea is stabilizing internally. If the United States succeeds in maintaining a dialogue with China throughout the postwar period, it will also be able to influence Beijing's stance on the matter so that it respects Korea's sovereignty in issuing judicial decisions.

The character of a Korean armed forces following unification will also elicit interest from Korea's neighbors because of those forces' effect on regional balance of power. As this paper discussed above, a future unified Korea is likely to lean toward China in a regional crisis, and its military will follow suit. The negative effect of this outcome on the security of Japan is one more reason the United States should maintain a military presence on the peninsula long after Korean unification. This presence will give the United States continued leverage in its relationship with China and allow the American military to sustain a solid partnership with a unified Korean armed forces. This outcome is similar to what the United States had hoped for regarding Vietnam and its relationship to China in the early 1970s. As the discussion below will show, the failure of the US–South Vietnam military partnership also offers lessons for how to keep the US–ROK alliance strong and the ROK military robust if a conflict breaks out on the Korean Peninsula.

**The Unification of Vietnam: Lessons for the US–ROK Alliance.** As in South Vietnam, the United States has stationed forces in South Korea to support a government that faces a communist foe historically bent on its domination. Furthermore, that foe has a degree of military and economic support from a patron outside its borders. Yet Vietnam and Korea have had entirely different destinies. In the face of domestic pressure to end an unpopular war in Vietnam, the United States withdrew its military support. Within a little over two years after the departure of the last US combat troops, the South Vietnamese government and its military caved to Northern aggression and became a bastion of communism in the region. In contrast, 28,500 US armed forces still guard against a North Korean invasion, and the peninsula remains divided.

The split Korea of today illustrates how Vietnam might have turned out differently if the United States had remained committed to using military power to defend the South, however costly it might have been. An ARVN veteran wondered about this possibility in 2001 when he was interviewed in the United States, exclaiming “America is still in South Korea. Why are you not still in South Vietnam?”<sup>240</sup> Although the different political, economic, and cultural dynamics in Korea and Vietnam make such counterfactuals dubious, both sides in the Second Indochina War understood the significance of the United States' contribution. Part of North Vietnam's strategy to defeat the South was to create conditions under which America would leave, and South Vietnam's then-president, Nguyen Van Thieu, campaigned for US support almost continuously until his resignation.<sup>241</sup> Perhaps he understood better than many how poorly prepared the ARVN was to stand on its own.

In view of the loss of South Vietnam, there are two primary lessons for the US–ROK alliance if a war were to break out with the DPRK. First, the United States must remain committed to its promise to fight alongside the South Koreans. Second, the ROK must ensure that its military is robust enough to lead operations on the peninsula.

Regarding the first lesson, the United States must take a long view toward the alliance that draws upon its history, its present purpose, and its value for the future of Korea and the region. Leaders must convey these concepts to a Congress and an American public that are casualty-averse and increasingly skeptical of foreign military intervention in the aftermath of conflicts in the Middle East. Today’s malaise is similar to that following the Vietnam conflict, when Americans were left “baffled and ambivalent about their role in the world.”<sup>242</sup> It is important not to become baffled and ambivalent about the US role in Korea, however.

Taking a long view of the US–ROK alliance first means promoting an understanding of the sacrifices made in Korea during the first Korean War. Although this war resulted in today’s bilateral alliance, the conflict is often called “The Forgotten War” because of its brevity and the fact it concluded at the same place it began. It behooves the United States to ensure the American public does not forget the sacrifices made by its military to liberate South Korea from its invaders, however. Such reminders are not to create a perception of sunk costs—Vietnam showed that huge costs without much to show for them are perceived as a waste—but rather to reinforce the value of a free Korea for which Americans fought.

Similarly, the United States should remind Koreans and Americans of the alliance’s present purpose. This task is challenging because “the confluence of internal and external transitions is pushing the two countries together and pulling them apart at the same time.”<sup>243</sup> Considering that Koreans, Americans, and other affected players such as Japan are less worried about the threat of communism today than the hazard to regional stability that the DPRK poses, it makes sense to frame the alliance in regional terms.

The two powers have already made this change at the political level. In a series of meetings in 2002, Washington and Seoul agreed to “adapt the alliance to the new century’s strategic relationship” and promote not only security on the peninsula but also regional security.<sup>244</sup> This broader interpretation of the alliance ensures that, if a war were to break out with North Korea, the United States would view its responsibility to support South Korea in regional terms. Contrary to some expectations, this shift did not result in a debate between the powers over US commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty that

undergirded the alliance. Most South Korean political leaders concurred that the US–ROK alliance should take on a regional role, particularly as South Korea takes on greater responsibilities for regional peace and prosperity.<sup>245</sup>

The regional outlook is significant for the future of the alliance because it extends the alliance's time horizon beyond a possible war with North Korea to its aftermath and US roles in unification. If the United States can be relied upon to assist the ROK where it asks for help in its transformation of the North during the process, China will find it difficult to drive a wedge in the alliance. Moreover, Korea is more likely to lean toward the United States than toward China in the long term, with positive implications for the regional influence of the United States for decades.

The military piece of this assistance from the United States is clearly important both during and after a war on the peninsula, though it places a greater onus back on the ROK. Vietnam is a reminder that US domestic support for military assistance depends on the perception that the other half of an alliance is a willing and able partner. Although the United States had intervened in Vietnam out of a desire to protect the Southeast Asian region from the encroachment of communism, the loss of 58,000 American lives in Vietnam with little to show for it after a decade of fighting lost the support of the US public. One reason for this outcome was the overdependency of the ARVN on the United States and its failure to demonstrate that it could prosecute the war on its own. The US Congress recognized these facts and could no longer stomach supporting the ARVN after 1973.

Herein lies the second lesson for the alliance. Although the United States should guarantee strong, enduring military support to the SKDF in the event of a war on the peninsula, it is best if those forces are robust enough to successfully lead wartime operations on the peninsula. A robust ROK military capability will help ensure the conflict ends quickly, minimizing the loss of ROK and US lives. As this paper discussed above, a successful US-led offensive into North Korea is still better than a failed ROK-led offensive. However, a fully capable ROK military leading the effort will also boost national morale, bode well for the heritage of the future KDF, and give South Korea more ownership in the eventual unification of the peninsula. South Korea's phenomenal economic growth and advancements in military equipment and technology the previous few decades suggest that it is well on the way to such a capability.

At the same time, the robustness of the ROK military in the face of the North Korean threat will also depend on a more intangible quality: the ROK's ability to carry a cohesive narrative that unites its population behind the SKDF and presents a credible defense. Unlike South Vietnam, South Korea

possesses a competent democratic government that has the respect of most of the population. However, two dangers still dampen the effectiveness of the ROK's military posture.

One of these dangers is popular ignorance of the North Korean threat as memories of the Korean War fade and the ROK continues its march of economic prosperity. That the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) had a more productive economy than its northern neighbor and still suffered a resounding military defeat should serve as a warning. There is also a popular shift in blame for current relations with North Korea. Although North Korea regularly reminds the world of its harmful intentions through military actions and rhetoric, some in the younger generation blame the North's provocations on the US presence on the peninsula.<sup>246</sup> It is imperative that the ROK consistently remind its people of the US–ROK alliance's role in national security. The United States can contribute to this narrative through United States Forces Korea public affairs efforts that emphasize the United States' interest in the continued prosperity of South Korea.

The other danger for the SKDF's posture is the ROK's failure to maintain a steady political foreign policy toward North Korea in the face of its threats. As Kisoo Bae writes, "because South Korea's military policy is tied to the government policy toward North Korea, it has been restrained from conducting a consistent policy to defend the Republic of Korea's territory and people."<sup>247</sup> Wavering between accommodation and confrontation has characterized South Korea's political policy over the previous couple of decades, leading many within the country to question its identity relative to its neighbor. In turn, military preparedness may suffer from ambiguity on this issue. The identity crisis contrasts with North Korea, whose identity relative to South Korea has changed little since the country's inception.<sup>248</sup>

The result of this distinction is to make North Korean military policy more consistent and likely strengthen the country's support for its military forces. Granted, much of this support is forced or is influenced by deceptive government propaganda about the nature of South Korea. However, a consistent political policy has also given North Korea a more cohesive narrative by which to recruit, train, and organize its forces. South Korea's policy toward the North should not be static, but neither should it change with every political administration. Instead, it should present a consistent, united front to the DPRK in the face of its military threats and rhetoric.

If such a front exists and South Koreans view their military as highly capable, there are short-term and long-term benefits for the character of Korea's armed forces. In the short term, morale will improve, and Koreans will be less

likely to try and avoid the draft that so many currently view as an impediment to their future job success. More Koreans will also be likely to continue their service. Both effects would be a boon to Korea's armed forces, considering that low birthrates are shrinking the size of the state's future manpower pool.<sup>249</sup>

In the long term, a military that has the full support of its population will be able to take more ownership for the peninsula's unification if an armed conflict breaks out. Greater ownership will enhance unit pride and heritage in the aftermath of the conflict. This is the outcome that many Americans and South Vietnamese may have once imagined for the ARVN; it is still achievable for the ROK's armed forces.

## **Section 8**

### **Lessons from Other National Unification Cases**

This section handpicks aspects of unification in five other historical cases for lessons in a potential Korean unification. These include Imperial Germany in 1871, Poland between 1919 and 1921, Yemen in 1990, Austria in 1955, and Hong Kong's assimilation into China in 1997. Depending on the case, these lessons can be positive or negative.

Imperial Germany's unification is instructive for the ways in which the state accommodated the elites of other states and duchies that came under its sovereignty. Poland's emergence as a single country after over a century of division under foreign control is a successful example of the triumph of nationalism over socialist ideology in unification—an achievement South Korea will do well to emulate. At the occasion of Yemen's unification in 1990, the failure to integrate the military forces of the unified Yemeni states in a way that prevented armed conflict afterward offers a negative lesson for Korea.

Austria's reassertion as an independent country in 1955 after a decade of divided occupation may offer a lesson for Korean unification as well. Austria and Korea both occupy a central location in their respective regions and are surrounded by more powerful neighbors, begging the question of whether Korea might be able to follow Austria's path to neutrality following unification. Finally, the assimilation of Hong Kong into China questions whether a united Korea could reasonably carry out a policy of "one country, two systems."

#### **Imperial German Unification**

Seoul would do well to adhere to a carefully tailored policy of accommodating certain North Korean military elites similar to Berlin's in obliging certain monarchs of the states and duchies it absorbed in 1871. The German

states and duchies that came under Prussian dominion fell into three categories: those won over through diplomatic efforts, those Prussia defeated or annexed and then liberally “Prussianized” (conformed to Prussian culture and laws), and those it conquered or annexed and Prussianized strictly—or at least attempted to. History shows that after unification Prussia had the best relationships with the leaders of states and duchies in the first category and, consequently, with those leaders’ military forces. These leaders willingly supported Berlin against other foes, and Prussian military occupation was not required to keep the peace in their territories.

This outcome has lessons for South Korea in any unification scenario. Although the ROK must win (or soundly defeat) the leadership of just one state rather than several to create a peninsular union, there are several military and political elites who are independent enough from Pyongyang to threaten the sovereignty of a unified Korea even in the absence of the Kim regime. Like the monarchs of certain states in Prussia’s regional neighborhood, some of these elites may be amenable to ROK-led unification. The ROK will need to sort these out from others that will actively resist and risk the lives of “hundreds of thousands” of South Korean citizens in doing so.<sup>250</sup>

Although the temptation will exist for the ROK to bring the latter category of DPRK elites to justice, the risks inherent in the attempt and the length of time it will require to find and arrest many of them suggest such a policy is unwise. Instead, similar to Prussia in its accommodation of monarchs in Bavaria, Württemberg, and Saxony, South Korea should allow North Korean elites to keep their positions of influence where possible. It should also establish “a legal basis for extending amnesty to most North Korean elites” and begin affirming their importance early in the unification process.<sup>251</sup> This strategy will help preserve peace in a gradualism scenario or accelerate its onset following war or North Korean government or regime collapse.

### **Polish Reunification**

To secure the loyalty of the majority of the North Korean population in unification, Korea needs to launch an information campaign that draws upon the unifying elements of its history much like Poland did in the years leading up to 1921. The Polish vision, proclaimed relentlessly by Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, was to bring together ethnic Poles of all social classes and former citizenships. The military became the primary vehicle for promoting the vision, appropriately because of military (and paramilitary) exploits since the closing days of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 1790s. These include the

1794 Kosciuszko Uprising, the wars fought under the Duchy of Warsaw between 1807 and 1813, and uprisings in 1830 and 1863 against Russia.

Likewise, Korea needs to capitalize on previous unifying moments in promoting a national vision that eclipses the socialist mantra North Koreans have been hearing for decades. Some of these moments come from military exploits, such as Wang Kon's establishment of the Koryo Dynasty in 935 and Admiral Yi Sun-shin's routing of the Japanese invasion of 1592.<sup>252</sup> Others do not, such as King Sejong's invention of the Hangeul language in the early fifteenth century and (much more recently) the March First Movement against Japanese occupation in 1919. What is important is that the achievements are distinctly Korean and do not favor one half of the peninsula or the other. The narrative that promotes them will need to overturn generations of false propaganda in North Korea about their origins, so a thorough campaign is justified. Just as Pilsudski lectured throughout Poland to further the nationalist cause, the ROK should deploy experts in Korean history to North Korea for speaking tours as unification unfolds. They may need security details in some places, but delivering speeches in person will exceed the benefits of broadcasts and recordings in opening the North Korean mind.

One word of caution is that many events around which Korean nationalism may coalesce negatively highlights the Japanese. The Polish case offers another lesson here. Its nationalist narrative pitted the Poles directly against the newly formed Soviet Union, which, like Japan in Korea's history, had previously occupied the majority of the state. Nationalism helped galvanize the Poles against the Soviets when they invaded Poland, but if there had been an active regional balancing power the invasion might not have happened. As with other regional conflict scenarios that could take place after Korean unification, one featuring a nationalist Korea and an increasingly assertive Japan would benefit from US mediation. It is obvious that the breakout of such a conflict would be a failure of US foreign policy. The failure is easily preventable since America has standing bilateral treaties with both states.

### Yemeni Unification

Reflecting on the failure of Yemen to unify peacefully in the 1990s, the ROK needs to be resolute in disbanding all North Korean military organizational structures whose continued existence could incubate a later rebellion. The newly formed Republic of Yemen (ROY) began statehood with parallel military organizations, one from each of the former Yemeni states. Political attempts to meld the two were poorly planned and largely for image. When disagreements arose at the national level only four years later, residual armed

forces from the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen (DPRY)—the subjugated state in unification—had an easy recourse to rise up against the ROY. In retrospect, the ROY may have avoided short-term social and political friction by leaving the DPRY military structure in place, but the decision opened the door to long-term armed rivalry.

For Korea, there may be a delicate balance between disbanding the KPA immediately and leaving it in place for the duration of the ROK's planned dual-state commonwealth—the second step of the ROK unification strategy leading to a unitary Korean state. While immediate disbandment could produce social and economic chaos, the commonwealth phase could last for years. During this period, KPA sentiment could fester, and its leadership could leverage residual organizational connections to take hostile action against ROK military or government posts in former North Korean territory.

A contrast between reunified Germany and Yemen is helpful in this respect. Although the German Bundeswehr struggled at times to balance the need for disbanding the NVA quickly against the need for preserving social and economic stability in East German territory, it offers the best model for Korea. The Bundeswehr was able to sustain the military pay system for NVA members until they were released, and it helped many find meaningful employment afterward.

There is little evidence the ROY armed forces took such an active role. Instead, the ROY government dismissed most DPRY military personnel with only half of their former pay up to retirement and no pension afterward. Existing literature suggests that the sense of neglect felt by many such personnel was one reason they later joined armed secessionist movements. The persistence of military organizational links and the ability to procure weapons helped give momentum to these movements. Considering these lessons, Korea would do well to remove both the motivations and organizational ties for former KPA personnel to take up similar causes against the new state.

### Austrian Unification

The neutrality of Austria following its independence from divided occupation in 1955 offers a short-term model to a peaceful Korean unification scenario. However, regional power dynamics will likely prevent Korea from maintaining a neutral stance in the long term. In the short term, the extended deterrence offered by the US nuclear umbrella should allow a unified Korea to focus internally and adhere to a neutral foreign policy much like Austria did under the protection of NATO in the 1950s. There are two shortcomings with this proposal in the long term, however. First, even if a united Korea were to

significantly downsize its combined active-duty forces of 1.9 million personnel, it would still present a considerable regional threat. Japan may be tempted to bolster its military capabilities against this threat, and “China could not guarantee a neutral unified Korea.”<sup>253</sup> Second, even if Korea’s armed forces shrink by several hundred thousand, the neutral option overlooks regional history. China, Japan, and Russia have disputed Korea for well over 100 years, so a neutrality policy would not be a successful long-term solution.<sup>254</sup> It is more likely that Korea will eventually lean one way or another—either toward the United States or China. Which way it goes will depend largely on the staying power of the US–ROK alliance, the ability of the United States to temper Japan, and Korea’s perception of China’s intentions should it continue to grow in relative economic and military power.

### **The Assimilation of Hong Kong**

A ROK-led policy of “one country, two systems” similar to China’s toward Hong Kong offers another short-term model to peaceful Korean unification, but it is unsustainable in the long term. Such a scenario imagines a mix of democratic free-market and socialist command economic influence in North Korea similar to what exists in Hong Kong today. The difference between the Korean and China–Hong Kong cases is that trends would be going in opposite directions. Judging by the erosion of democratic freedoms in Hong Kong the previous few years, the city-state will increasingly come under the domination of socialist China. However, it is also difficult to conceive that former North Korean citizens would live indefinitely under a socialist Pyongyang government once the barriers to information (if not also travel) are weakened between North and South Korea. In either case, the “two systems” concept breaks down.

This prediction suggests that similar to the regional sphere, neutrality is unlikely to persist long in the domestic sphere after Korean unification. Eventually, the state will either lean toward democracy and free markets or socialism and a command economy (though even in today’s North Korea most citizens depend on illicit markets for goods).<sup>255</sup> If Korea leans toward socialism and a command economy, it will likely be because a government forces these systems upon the people. If it leans toward democracy and free markets, it will be because the government fosters an environment for these systems to flourish naturally. They already flourish in South Korea, and while the costs will be immense for creating a similar environment for their growth in the North, the trend will be much more spontaneous than if North Korea was to dominate unification and the trend were to proceed in the opposite direction.

This distinction may be one more reason North Korea's government is so hesitant to yield control to the ROK in unification.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has speculated on various aspects of a post-unification legacy for Korea and its military. What we do know is that current Northeast Asia geopolitical dynamics (the first independent variable in this paper) and the tense but generally enduring stability between North and South Korea (the second independent variable) make unification unlikely in the near term. The United States, China, Russia, and Japan would likely accept unification only under four conditions: denuclearization; peaceful dialogue between the Koreas; a gradual, phased political process; and the continuance of a limited but assertive US military presence in South Korea. Furthermore, opposing identities, values, national security preferences, and strategies for unification help keep the Koreas divided.

The challenge, therefore, is in transitioning peacefully to unitary statehood from a condition of suspended civil war between countries that differ markedly in almost every respect. Such a transition is daunting enough that unification through war or the collapse of North Korea appears more probable, regardless of what regional powers would prefer. The way around these undesirable scenarios is for the two states to draw from historical events and time periods that awaken a broader national consciousness. In the end, a unification process largely dominated by South Korea appears almost determined.

The manner of unification is likely to be formative in the fate of the North Korean People's Army (the first dependent variable of this paper) and the character of a unified Korean armed forces, the KDF (the second dependent variable). Gradual reform offers the best opportunity for the ROK military to integrate the North's existing army, the KPA. War or state collapse offers less opportunity because of the increased chances of hostility and irregular warfare in the aftermath of either scenario.

However, even following the outbreak of war there are reasons to integrate some portion of the KPA into a unified Korean military. As a national institution bearing the state's image, the military is perhaps the most suitable vehicle from which to begin building the new Korean nation. Integrating the subjugated state's forces is a viable means to do so provided they can be reeducated into the societal and professional military values of a democracy such as South Korea. Military integration will also demonstrate solidarity toward the population of both states, provide sustained employment to a number of per-

sonnel during the expected economic upheaval of the transition, and alleviate North Korean concerns that the SKDF is just an occupying force. Moreover, studies have shown that military cohesion tends to override former national allegiances when integration takes place at the individual level.

In the meantime, there are several ways the SKDF can prepare for unification. It should train not only in the role of nation-building, but also domestic military assistance. Within this latter role, it should be amenable to assisting the KPA with economic assistance functions, even if these compromise professionalism and capability in more exclusive roles in the short term. The SKDF should also brush up on irregular warfare capability through exercises simulating the aftermath of war or North Korean government or regime collapse. Finally, with the exception of North Korean technology that is useful for intelligence or integration purposes, the SKDF should be prepared to dismantle and dispose of most of its neighbor's obsolete military technology.

Among several historical cases that can be considered national unifications, German reunification is most similar to either a reform or collapse unification scenario in Korea. Because German reunification was peaceful and rapid despite being somewhat unexpected, most of the lessons it offers for the Korean case are positive. In other words, Korea (and the United States in support) would benefit from emulating the manner in which German reunification took place.

At the international level, positive lessons from German unification include the value of proactive dialogue between Korea and regional players, as well as among regional players; the need for an enduring US military presence in Northeast Asia; incorporation of the outcome for the KDF into discussions on regional security architecture; and the need to restructure those forces to better contribute to the post-unification regional security environment.

Domestically, the SKDF (and later the KDF) would also benefit from emulating the manner in which the Bundeswehr approached disbanding and/or integrating the NVA during unification. The most notable lessons include the need for a period of transition that shapes KPA veterans for service in the KDF, careful but timely decision making regarding the handling of KPA facilities, and the need to understand the relationship of the KPA to its government and North Korean society when attempting to disband or disarm units and restore security.

The unification of Vietnam offers the most pertinent lessons for the Korean case if a war breaks out on the peninsula. These lessons are both positive and negative—that is, there are some examples of what failed or could have happened otherwise to guarantee a unification that was peaceful or at least sup-

ported US foreign policy. First, because the Vietnam War did not escalate into combat with the Chinese, the US–China relationship offers a positive lesson for Korea. It highlights the need to coordinate certain military actions against North Korea with diplomatic visits to China and maintain an open dialogue with the PRC in general.

Considering that the Vietnam War resulted in the departure of US assistance at an inopportune time and the defeat of the ARVN only two years later, lessons for the US–ROK alliance on the Korean Peninsula are negative. The first lesson is that the ROK and the United States should take a long view of the alliance that encompasses its history, current purpose, and scope for the future. This vision looks beyond US assistance in a Korean War to the ability of the alliance to shape a unified Korea and ensure stability for the region. The second lesson is that the ROK should continue to push for a robust military that can lead wartime operations on the peninsula if necessary. A fully capable Korean partner will help achieve a quicker joint victory in an armed conflict, thereby minimizing casualties. It will also improve military morale and give Korea a greater sense of ownership in its own unification, with implications for the pride and heritage of a post-unification Korean armed forces and the respect of the Korean public. Advancing a robust military for the ROK will depend on having a cohesive narrative favorable to military strength and a consistent political policy toward North Korea.

Certain aspects of five other historical unification cases offer their own lessons for Korean unification. Some reinforce other lessons, such as the need (evident in the Yemen case) to remove military organizational structures in the subjugated state that might support a rebellion later. We learn from the experience of imperial German unification that Korea will also need to co-opt or find new positions of influence for many of North Korea’s military elites. Poland demonstrates the value of an overriding national narrative and the need for a balancing power in preventing post-unification regional conflict. Austria’s neutrality following reunification and the “one country, two systems” construct through which China assimilated Hong Kong offer temporary solutions to a unified Korea, but they will likely fail in the long term.

Together, these lessons should be useful for mitigating violence during Korean unification and developing robust, professional Korean armed forces that are favorable to the United States. However, the lessons must be applied discriminately and cautiously. As Robert Jervis writes: “By making accessible insights derived from previous events, analogies provide a useful shortcut to rationality. But they also obscure aspects of the present case that are different from the past one. For this reason, a dramatic and important experience often

hinders later decision making by providing an analogy that will be applied too quickly, easily, widely.”<sup>256</sup> This warning is particularly true for Korea’s unification, which evaporated “beneath the interminable talks of Panmunjom” in the Korean War and is not likely to be any more quick or easy in the future.<sup>257</sup>

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