

*US Foreign Policy toward the Korean Peninsula:  
An Anti-Unification Policy or Just Too Many  
Uncertainties to Account For?*

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**Abstract**

Based on interviews conducted in Seoul in July 2006, the author explores apparent contradictions in South Korean perceptions of the United States' attitude toward Korean unification. These common perceptions regarding international support (or lack thereof) for unification are: the regional powers - China, the US, Japan, and Russia - do not support the unification initiatives proposed by South Korea; reunification is impossible without support from the regional powers, particularly the US and China; North Korea, under the Kim dynasty, will never accept reunification under South Korean terms; North Korea's main concern is survival; cooperating with North Korea is the only sure path toward reunification; and unification will eventually be realized. The author analyzes these perceptions in relationship to US interests in Northeast Asia and the Korean peninsula, and he argues that while Korean unification is not part of an explicit US policy, neither is the US intrinsically opposed to reunification. Rather, the US is more concerned about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and power balancing than it is about Korean unification, a fact that will not change in the short term.

**Keywords:** perceptions, foreign policy, United States, Korean peninsula, unification

But lasting peace will come to Korea only when Korea is made whole... only Koreans, North and South, can solve the problem of unification. But all Korea, North and South, should know that the United States stands ready to act in the interests of lasting peace.

President George Bush

Despite the desire of people on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone... to end the division of the peninsula, all efforts to reunify the country have foundered: neither war nor diplomacy has succeeded in putting Korea back together again. The best -- maybe the only -- antidote against an unstable, undemocratic, reunified Korea resulting from unification is time. If the history of South-North relations is any guide, Koreans, by themselves, are unlikely to be able to marshal the political, diplomatic, economic, and psychological resources necessary to bridge the huge chasm separating them.

William M. Drennan

Although there was much to criticize in US policy before North Korea's 1950 invasion of South Korea, the most likely alternative to division of the peninsula would have been a unified communist state. If that had happened, nearly 70 million Koreans today would be living in an impoverished tyranny. And the ability of what we now call the "North" to commit mischief and even mayhem would be magnified dramatically.

Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow

The Pyongyang people are the same as us, the same nation sharing the same blood... We lived as a unified nation for 1,300 years before we were divided 55 years ago against our will. It is impossible for us to continue to live separated physically and spiritually.

President Kim Dae Jung

Whatever their differences, the five governments that must contend most directly with Pyongyang--Seoul, Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow--all assume that a rapid reunification of Korea is not only unlikely, but would run contrary to their national interests if it occurred.

Nicholas Eberstadt

Most US citizens born before 1975 can remember, if vaguely, the heightened nuclear crisis of 1993/94 on the Korean peninsula, or President Kim Il Sung's death in 1994 when hundreds of thousands of North Koreans took to the streets weeping in sadness, or maybe even more clearly the provocations of the Taepodong 1 missiles launched over Japan's territory in 1998. Yet the immediacy of these events has faded and already they seem a distant memory for most Americans. After all, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea could threaten the US' allies, but the range of this threat remained geographically and psychologically distant from the shores of the continental United States.<sup>1</sup> Although North Korea finally began to receive regular coverage by the popular US news outlets in the 1990s because of these events, it had been on the minds of foreign policymakers in Washington and academics throughout the world for over a decade as they predicted a doomsday nuclear face off in Asia or attempted to understand why the Cold War continued to rage on the Korean peninsula in Northeast Asia.

Nonetheless, ever since North Korea tipped its poker hand to the US on October 9, 2006, after the DPRK claimed to have successfully performed its first nuclear test, the bluff game ended and the blame game became the new fad in party politics in Washington. The apparent progress recently made in the six-party talks now has critics wondering if President Bush's policy toward the Korean peninsula is a complete failure or if hope remains that his policy could realize its ends. The current strain on the US-ROK alliance might be mended by the successful completion of these multidimensional bilateral negotiations, including the US-ROK Free Trade Agreement, turning wartime command control over to the ROK, and the relocation of US troops from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to a new cost-sharing base south of

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<sup>1</sup> The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) will be referred to as North Korea and the Republic of Korea as South Korea or ROK.

Seoul.

Without a doubt, the ROK-US alliance has seen better days. It has been a trying relationship - especially since the late 1990s. South Korea's consolidated democracy and civil society have shown clear elements of anti-Americanism, and its leftist sunshine policy toward North Korea contrasts starkly with the recent rise of nationalistic sentiment in the US. This sentiment grows out of an eight-year reign by the ideological right in the oval office, which has reverted to an old school containment policy of openly confronting North Korea verbally and attempting to internationally isolate the Kim Jong Il regime.

While the diverging interests and contrasting methods of US and ROK foreign policy toward North Korea do not appear to present a near solution, the blame game and partisan-based academic debate seem to indicate that the George W. Bush (GWB) administration reversed President Clinton's policy, giving us a middle road between no policy and a neoconservative unilateral policy. *How does one determine if the US has no policy; a failed policy; a verbally aggressive containment policy with a military bluff for a backbone, or; a policy with imperialistic means on the verge of nuclear warfare?* Unfortunately, the black and white portrayal of US foreign policy has not been helpful. In addition, these questions cannot fairly be answered because US foreign policy, including GWB's, is far more complex in that it is influenced by multiple interrelated variables, several regional actors, and a US history - not limited just to GWB - of a slow learning curve in its bilateral relations with North Korea.

Within the camp of International Relations and Northeast Asian (NEA) studies, the nuclear crisis is of great interest. The Korean peninsula still hosts many unresolved issues from the Cold War, making it an epicenter for potentially explosive political fireworks. The ROK-US alliance requires major adjustments as South Korea slowly moves away from its former client state status, proving itself to be one of the few US allies which has risen to middle-power status via

industrialization and democratization.<sup>2</sup> While the ROK is unique in that it can now afford to defend itself, remnants of the Cold War live on, and South Korea has yet to make the psychological adjustments necessary to take ownership of its full potential.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the ROK-US difficulties, the Korean peninsula has been called “the dagger aimed at the heart of Japan,”<sup>4</sup> and North Korea has been referred to as “China’s fourth northeastern province.”<sup>5</sup> All of these factors generate great anxiety for Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the US when considering the possibility of national unification.

The US-North Korea political quandary is *sui generis*, in that few small states have had more success confronting US policy while provoking confusion and instilling fear at the same time. Let’s remember North Korea is, as Samuel Kim calls it, “the longest-running political, military, and ideological adversary for the United States, and vice versa.”<sup>6</sup> Just as inter-state conflicts seem to be less prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, North Korea has achieved exactly what makes non-state actors so threatening to the US - weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Just as North Korea has gained leverage over the US in its bilateral relationship, over time South Korea has enhanced its own clout in peninsular issues. The North Korean dream - held into the 1970s - of forcing unification by war is no longer plausible. But any future

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Robertson, “South Korea as a Middle Power: Capacity, Behavior, and Now Opportunity,” *International Journal of Korean Unifications Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2007, pp. 151-174.

<sup>3</sup> Wonhyuk Lim, “Transforming an Asymmetric Cold War Alliance: Psychological and Strategic Challenges for South Korea and the US,” *Policy Forum Online*, 06-30A, April 18, 2006, pp. 1-13.

<sup>4</sup> Katsu Furukawa, “Japan’s View of the Korea Crisis,” *Center for Nonproliferation Studies*, February 25, 2003, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/jpndprk.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> “China and North Korea: Comrades Forever?” International Crisis Group, *Crisis Group Asia Report*, No. 112, February 2006, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=3920>.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel S. Kim, *North Korean Foreign Relations in the Post-Cold War World*, Strategic Studies Institute (April 2007), p. 56.

unification will be under South Korea's conditions, whether it be passive through political means or forced by military involvement.

Once the complex regional relationships and geopolitical interests are calculated into the formula, the hope of Korean unification seems to be a farce. Because global, regional, and domestic factors must be considered when analyzing Korean unification, this topic remains one of the most ill-prepared prospective studies among East Asian scenarios. It is almost trite to speak of an event that depends on so many different factors - timing, circumstances, actors, etc. However, for South Koreans, and very possibly for North Koreans, unification is of utmost importance; a foreigner conversing with South Koreans gets the sense that nothing else matters *but* unification.

Even if the main concern of South Korea was, is and always will be national unification, however, the main concern of the US is North Korea's WMD. For this reason, future Korean reunification is an often-neglected topic in the US policy circles. *Accordingly, the argument of the author is that while Korean unification is not part of an explicit US policy, neither is the US intrinsically opposed to reunification. It is essential to understand that the US is more concerned about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and power balancing than it is about Korean unification, a fact that will not change in the short term. South Koreans believe the US "owes" them an above and beyond effort in reuniting the peninsula because of its role in dividing the nation, but there is little reason to believe this "debt" plays into the US' geopolitical strategy in that region.*

There is little consensus among scholars on whether or not the US supports Korean unification. In fact, there is not consensus on whether or not unification would be beneficial for US objectives, either short-term or long-term. Strikingly, there is little research that points to concrete data that shows how and where the US has opposed Korean unification any time after the Korean War. The majority of the academic arguments asserting that the US opposes unification points to issues

like forward military presence, the US nuclear umbrella, or its resistance toward having bilateral contacts with North Korea. While this may be a symptom of a US attitude, they can easily be debated as being directly related to US security, and not related to an anti-unification policy. For this reason, the following questions need to be asked and explored: Does the US have a policy regarding unification? Why or why not?<sup>7</sup> In order to answer these questions, the following subtopics will be addressed in this paper: the South Korean perception of unification, US interests in East Asia, US interests in Korea and unification, and the major power interests on the Korean peninsula.

## **Contradicting Assumptions**

Many of the general perceptions held by South Koreans - government officials, academic scholars, and common citizens - paint a bleak picture of the prospects for eventual Korean reunification. These general observations leave little room for hope for unification in the short term due to the opposition by most world powers. In this paper, these observations or hypotheses will be explored and touched upon in their relevance to US foreign policy toward the Korean peninsula and its (lack of) unification policy.

### ***South Korean Observations***

- *The regional powers, including China, the US, Japan, and*

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<sup>7</sup>For some in-depth and frequently cited texts on the subject, one should see Robert Dujarric, *Korean Unification and After: The Challenges for US Strategy* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 2000); Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and US Disengagement* (Princeton University Press, 2003); John Feffer, *North Korea, South Korea; US Policy At A Time of Crisis* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

*Russia, do not support the unification initiatives proposed by South Korea.*

- *Reunification is impossible without support from the regional powers, particularly that of the US and China.*
- *North Korea, under the Kim dynasty, will never accept reunification under South Korean terms.*
- *North Korea's main concern is survival.*
- *Cooperating with North Korea is the only sure way toward reunification.*
- *Unification will be realized.*<sup>8</sup>

If one reads each hypothesis removed from the other five, each one sounds logical, realistic, and indubitable. However, when read together, one asks why South Koreans still hope for unification, and why they might *believe* it will one day be reality? That is the most intriguing aspect of this conundrum - the emotional draw of the sixth hypothesis for South Koreans overrides the realism of the first five hypotheses. For an outsider looking in, the logical jump seems irrational. For a South Korean, the only obstacles preventing national unification are the geostrategic interests of the major regional powers.<sup>9</sup> True or

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<sup>8</sup> Even though not one single interviewee held the opinion that unification might not ever occur, the time period in question varied greatly. When asked directly, interviewees stated that reunification would occur sometime in the next 20-50 years. The short-term estimates (within 3-5 years) of the 1990s seem to have died out as the North Korean regime has shown great resolve. In the 1990s, the general perception was that the end of the Cold War, Kim Il Sung's death or the disastrous famines would bring the totalitarian regime to an end, or "hard landing" as some call it.

<sup>9</sup> As a disclaimer, the author admittedly believes there is raw emotion that confuses the present US policy with the policies of the past that led to Korea's division. This is to say one cannot assume that because the US facilitated the division, the US is opposed to unification. Furthermore, while these Korean emotions are legitimate, it would be naïve to think a nation-state like the US "owes" and truly "considers" its debts to a divided people from another region, especially in a world of realpolitik and on a peninsula where so many different interests converge. For example, Selig S. Harrison claims in his textbook *Korean Endgame*, "in charting new policies in Korea to post-Cold War realities, the starting point for the United States should be



untrue, this is the perception.

Of course, there may not be clear-cut answers to the guiding research question proposed above. Of particular interest is that most US presidential administrations have implicitly or explicitly espoused reunification on the Korean peninsula. Even more relevant is the fact that most South Koreans believe the US government is not in favor of a unification scenario. That leaves us asking if there is a policy, either pro or anti, and why do South Koreans perceive the US as a key obstacle to their achieving the most important national goal in the last six decades. From the other side of the globe, some American scholars believe the US has no policy regarding unification, and this explains the confusing messages sent by the US government. *However, the distinction must be made: having no policy is very different from having an anti-unification policy, this later perception is held by South Koreans.*<sup>10</sup>

Without a doubt, perceptions matter.<sup>11</sup> Whether they are accurate or not, South Korean's perception of US foreign policy, both its objectives and strategy, directly affects their bilateral alliance.<sup>12</sup> Perceptions matter even more at the elite level where they affect how Korean

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an expression of regret for the US role in the division of the peninsula addressed to both the South and the North, accompanied by a declaration of support for peaceful reunification much more explicit and much more positive than the 1992 Bush statement," p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> A poll of college students published in 1990 found that 79 percent blamed the US for the past division on the peninsula and 64 percent see the US as being the most reluctant country to see Korea unified. Cited in Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, p. 102, and quoting US Ambassador Donald Gregg in an address before the Korean Council on Foreign Relations, Seoul, November 21, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (April 1968), pp. 454-479. For an excellent analysis of how US perceptions of the USSR affected their reasoning for defending South Korea, see Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 563-592.

<sup>12</sup> For insight on US public opinion regarding foreign policy and the US alliance with the ROK, see Brad Glosserman, "A Foundation for the Future," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (Spring 2003). pp. 210-211.

leaders interact with US leaders and how these leaders pursue the realization of their objectives - including which goals they believe are realistic. Public opinion carries weight in that it can easily work against the betterment of bilateral relations, i.e., pressure on US troops to withdraw or anti-Japanese sentiment, which might limit confidence-building initiatives. The fact that South Korean elites perceive the US as being opposed to its national objective makes North Korea seem more accommodating than the US.<sup>13</sup>

### **Possible US Arguments for Opposing Korean Unification**

A number of scholars have pointed out why the US is not in favor of national reunification on the Korean peninsula. The reasons vary widely, but they include geopolitical and strategic interests, a stake in current economic ties, and maintaining a forward military presence Northeast Asia. While these arguments are convincing and may even be true, they are based on the assumption that Korean unification would cancel out the current advantages that the US holds under a divided peninsula. The reasons behind this assumption must also be questioned and examined because if they are erroneous, a US anti-unification policy would be just as flawed or the very critics of US policy would be misguiding the debate.

Two convincing reasons for which the US would oppose Korean unification are power balancing (against China) and the need for its forward military presence in the region over the long term.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Choong Nam Kim "Changing Korean Perceptions of the Post-Cold War Era and the US-ROK Alliance," *Analysis from the East-West Center*, No. 67 (April 2003); Yoo, Dong-ho, "6 in 10 Koreans Back US Military Presence: Nearly Half Say US Biggest Barrier To Unification," *Korea Times*, February 23, 2004; Choe, Song-won "S. Koreans: US A Bigger Threat Than N. Korea," *Stars and Stripes*, January 16, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Some might argue that the US obstructs unification in the same way it thwarted Korean wishes in the post-World War II period. However, any good historian knows that permanent division was not the US' ultimate or initial goal, even if it did not see

Of course, there is much to be determined about whether the Sino-American relationship will be played out as a competitive or cooperative one.<sup>15</sup> The common logic is that the US wants to assure that a unified Korea would not fall under the influence of what might turn out to be a competitive China, or, in the worse case scenario, a China facing off against the US in a new sort of Cold War. Those who see China as a threat to US national security surely envision a more defiant People's Republic of China (PRC) as it gains more material power, more influence both globally and as a hopeful regional hegemony.<sup>16</sup> Just the same, this assumption is only deduced from unconfirmed beliefs, which are not based on concrete data. Firstly, there is no assurance that China will be a direct and aggressive competitor to the US in the future. In fact, some Chinese scholars assert that China would welcome a continued US presence in Korea, preferably more limited than the present one, so that the US might curb a military buildup or nuclear race between a potentially nationalistic Korea and/or with a "normal" Japanese state. Secondly, the inference that Korea will fall

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or respect the peninsula as a nation-state. Samuel S. Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 238-240. Had the US not divided Korea at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel with the Soviets, most likely South Korea would have been absorbed by the communist North Korean regime upon Japanese disarmament and US military withdrawal. This is to say, US self-interests in power politics, disrespectful agreements at the Cairo, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences, in one way or another, led to the ultimate division of the peninsula. Accordingly, the US made a client state out of Korea and perpetuated the division. The only real way Korea would be unified today would be if the US had not defended its own interests on the peninsula, and thus Korea would be a unified totalitarian government under the north's control. The fact that Bruce Cumming's in *The Origins of the Korean War*, Studies of the East Asian Institute (1981), pp. 71-91, presents evidence, to the fact that the North was not controlled by communists until the US subsequently incited the non-communists to leave the North, does not guarantee the division would not have persisted or that the communists with Soviet support would not have effectively gained control.

<sup>15</sup>G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (eds.), "Conclusion: Images of Order in the Asia Pacific and the Role of the United States," in *International Relations Theory and the Asia Pacific* (Columbia University Press: NY, 2003), pp. 432-435.

<sup>16</sup>*The Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) stated that the US "is more susceptible to large-scale military competition," an obvious reference to China, United States Department of Defense, 2001, p. 4.

under Chinese influence is far from certain. The present strengthening of commercial relations between South Korea and China will not prevent a unified Korea from being a new economic competitor with China, nor will Sino-(unified)-Korean ties automatically surpass the meaning of a ROK-US half-century mutual defense treaty, the regular flow of Korean immigrants into the US or the symbolic and deeper importance of the new ROK-US FTA. Even if the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty were to be annulled, US influence Northeast Asia would not die out. “With the world’s largest and most productive economy and dominant culture, a stable constitutional system and attractive entrepreneurial environment, and the globe’s most powerful military, America would remain influential.”<sup>17</sup> Far from being a new Chinese client state, a unified Korea will consist of over 75 million habitants, armed forces of great magnitude and will most likely exert itself as a nationalistic upper-middle power wary of political marriage with anybody after six decades of division.<sup>18</sup>

The other common logic for which critics say the US opposes Korean unification is due to its long-term projection of a forward military presence. Following the same line, the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty is aimed at containing North Korea; a need for US troops on the peninsula would formally cease to exist upon Korea’s unification. Legally speaking, the treaty would be nullified, having served its purpose for well over five decades. Notwithstanding, there are many signals that while South Korean civil society may always question the presence of US military, as stated above, even China may welcome a continued US military presence so as to cushion Japanese military rearmament.<sup>19</sup> Without a doubt, Japan in the short term will desire a

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<sup>17</sup>Carpenter and Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum*, p. 132.

<sup>18</sup>For more on a possible Sino-Korean rivalry, see Robert Dujarric, *Korean Unification and After*, pp. 42-50.

<sup>19</sup>For a strong argument that the PRC wants the US troops out now, see Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, pp. 322-327.

continued US military presence to balance China's regional rise. As Niklas L. P. Swanström points out: "Whether or not it is admitted, the US has been a guarantor of stability since the 1950s and in practice kept down military spending. If the US withdrawal takes up phase there will be an increased military expenditure in Northeast Asia to meet new challenges in an uncertain region that risk destabilizing the Korean peninsula."<sup>20</sup>

Ever more surprising, some say Chairman Kim Jong Il has mentioned to US and Chinese diplomats that North Korea (secretly) sees itself eventually as an ally of the US and see a need for the US presence to balance against Russian, Chinese, and Japanese influence.<sup>21</sup> President Kim Dae Jung, in a conversation with Kim Jong Il, was reported as saying: "The peninsula is surrounded by big countries, and if the American military presence were to withdraw, that would create a huge vacuum that would draw these big countries into a fight over hegemony." In response, Kim Jong Il stated: "Yes, we are surrounded by big powers—Russia, China, and Japan, and therefore it is desirable that the American troops continue to stay."<sup>22</sup> Many point to the fact that South Korean civil society has been actively protesting against US military presence on the peninsula, a movement that seems to be

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<sup>20</sup> Niklas L. P. Swanström, "The Korean Peninsula in the US's Post-9/11 Military-Security Paradigm," paper presented at the first ROK-US-China future forum on "The Changing ROK-US-China Relationships and the Future of the Korean Peninsula," Institute for Diplomacy and Security Studies and Center for Contemporary China Studies, Hallym University (October 30, 2004), pp. 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Beal cites Governor of New Mexico Bill Richardson, journalists of the *Washington Post*, Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis, all as pointing to interactions with North Korean officials who explicitly or implicitly gave this impression. See "The North Korea-China Relationship: Context and Dynamics," working paper series, Centre for Asian Pacific Studies, No. 184 (June 2007), [http://www.library.ln.edu.hk/etext/caws/caps\\_0184.pdf](http://www.library.ln.edu.hk/etext/caws/caps_0184.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Doug Struck, "South Korean Says North Wants US Troops to Stay," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2000; "US Troops to Stay in Korea," *BBC News*, September 20, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/933902.stm>; Don Kirk, "A North Korea Shift on Opposing US Troops?" *International Herald Tribune*, August 10, 2000, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2000/08/10/korea.2.t.php>.

growing in the last decade. However, two clarifications need to be made: Firstly, neither leftist Presidents Kim Dae Jung nor Roh Moo-hyun have pressured the US for a reduction in its military presence, nor have they insinuated that the US presence is transitory. Indeed, a member of South Korea's Foreign Ministry's think tank, the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), calls for a US presence just the same: "Even in the absence of a military threat from North Korea," the alliance should be revamped "to focus on promoting stability in Northeast Asia."<sup>23</sup>

In fact, several US administrations have sought to reduce troop numbers in South Korea, most of which have failed due to Korean objection.<sup>24</sup> It is just as relevant to point out that GWB requested and carried out a deployment of US troops from South Korea to reinforce forces in Iraq. There is a reason to believe the reduction in Korea is permanent, and it is noteworthy it was initiated by the US.

So logic follows that if there is no guarantee, perhaps little probability, even that South Korea falls under the Chinese sphere of hegemonic influence, one must question why the US would prefer the status quo with a threatening North Korean regime to a unified Korea. The direct question is: Does the US prefer a DPRK with a WMD or a unified Korea with a number of uncertainties? It is hard to imagine a unified Korea could be more threatening to US global, regional or national interests than is a nuclear-armed North Korean regime on the brink of collapse desperately interested in selling its WMD on the worldwide market.

What critics do not understand is that it is not a question of A or B: Nuclear DPRK or unified Korea. Rather, a non-nuclear peninsula

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<sup>23</sup> Doug Bandow and Kim Sung-han, "Seoul Searching: Ending the US-Korean Alliance," *The National Interest* (Fall 2005); See Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, pp. 174-189.

<sup>24</sup> Under President Nixon's "Guan Doctrine," the US reduced troop numbers from 60,000 to 40,000. Carter later announced a withdrawal of another 26,000 troops, but after much objection, only pulled 3,000 troops from the peninsula.

is the first objective, but this cannot be realized simply because it is the US' desire. As stated in the first five hypotheses, the US is not the only nation perceived as obstructing unification, rather China, Japan *and*, most importantly, North Korea must be on board for South Korea's goal to be realized. North Korea's goal is not unification under South Korea's conditions; rather its primary interest is survival.<sup>25</sup> The US would be extremely naïve to think pushing for unification would solve the nuclear issue in the short term.

In order to understand why the US does not push for national unification, one must look at what are US interests and strategy in East Asia, and more specifically on the Korean peninsula.

## US Interests in East Asia

Like any country with a foreign policy and military with global reach, the international and regional interests of the US are directly related to its national interests. A summary of US vital national interests could be summarized in the following manner<sup>26</sup>:

- To prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons attacks on the US or its military forces (*note: prevent attacks on the US, not prevent others from obtaining nuclear weapons*);
- To ensure US allies' survival (Korea and Japan) and their active cooperation with the US in shaping the international system;
- To prevent the emergence of hostile major powers or failed states on US borders (*note: not prevent the emergence of hostile powers abroad; while this may be important, it is not vital*);

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel S. Kim, *North Korean Foreign Relations*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Graham T. Allison, Dimitri K. Simes, and James Thomson, *America's National Interests*, a report from the Commission on America's National Interests, 2000, [http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/2058/americas\\_national\\_interests.html](http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/2058/americas_national_interests.html).

- To ensure the viability and stability of major global systems (trade, financial markets, supplies of energy, and the environment);
- To establish productive relations, consistent with American national interests, with nations that could become strategic adversaries (*note: China, Russia*).

US security concerns in East Asia, including the Korean peninsula, are consistent with these national security interests. Without falling into the debate on what is “vital,” US principal interests in East Asia have been two-fold since the start of the Cold War:

- Holding backing a hostile hegemony, to prevent a rival nation from rising up to control the region’s resources or its people;
- Maintaining the status quo, to ensure and promote regional stability via peace and prosperity, freedom of navigation, and open sea lines of communication with access to open markets.<sup>27</sup>

Since the Spanish-American war in 1898, the US has maintained significant military forces in the region. Furthermore, between 1941 and 1973, the US fought in three major conflicts to protect what were

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<sup>27</sup> *America’s National Interests* (2000) is more specific in formulating its list of vital, extremely important, and important national interests in East Asia. They are worth noting: Vital that the US establish productive relations with China, America’s major potential strategic adversary in East Asia; that South Korea and Japan survive as free and independent states, and cooperate actively with the US to resolve important global and regional problems. Extremely important that peace be maintained in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean peninsula; that China and Japan achieve lasting reconciliation under terms that benefit America. Important that the East Asian countries, including China, continue on the path toward democracy and free markets; that East Asian markets grow more open to US goods, services, and investment; that a peaceful solution is reached to secondary territorial disputes such as those in the South China Sea or Senkaku Islands. Also see Andrew Scobell, “The US Army and the Asia Pacific,” in Brian Loveman (ed.), *Strategy for Empire: US Regional Security Policy in the Post-Cold War Era* (Lanham MD: SR Books, 2004), pp. 69-100; Norman D. Levin, “US Interests in Korean Security in the Post-Cold War World,” in Andrew Mack (ed.), *Asian Flashpoint: Security and the Korean Peninsula* (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1993), pp. 21-28.



considered at the time vital interests. US considers itself a Pacific nation, and its economic and security ties are clear examples of how the US has strengthened its relations in the region.

While there has been a lot of fanfare about US interests changing dramatically since the September 11 attacks, East Asia is probably the region where the US interests have seen the fewest changes in relation to its new war on terror. In specific terms, the US continues to work to meet China's rise, to curb nuclear proliferation and control an unpredictable North Korea. Due to the fact that Iraq continues to bog down the US economically, attention on East Asia has been of second tier. It is worth remembering that East Asia did not harbor any of the terrorists involved in the September 11 attacks. Niklas L. P. Swanström points to four important changes in US tactics that have affected the region.<sup>28</sup> Without a doubt, 9/11 has given Japan the opportunity to make adjustments toward becoming a "normal" state and also positively affected the US-Japanese alliance. President Bush's hard-line stance in the post-9/11 period has also made flexibility with North Korea more difficult when needed, even as North Korea continues to represent a traditional security threat to the US and its neighbors while acquiring WMD to become a non-traditional threat as well.<sup>29</sup> Of greatest relevance, the US has withdrawn several thousands of troops from South Korea to deploy them to Iraq and accorded an agreement with South Korea to relocate its DMZ troops to south of Seoul in Osan and Pyongtaek.<sup>30</sup> By 2008, there is expected to be 24,500 troops, a drastic reduction

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<sup>28</sup> Swanström, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Victor Cha points to the North Korea's ground invasion threat in the Cold War as compared to its proliferation threat and bargaining leverage with coercive deterrence. "The upshot of this for US security interests is that the current threat posed by North Korea is more complex and problematic than during the Cold War," "The Continuity Behind the Change in Korea," *Orbis*, No. 44 (Fall 2000), pp. 585-598.

<sup>30</sup> 5,000 troops will leave South Korea this year, 3,000 in 2005, 2,000 in 2006, and 2,500 in 2007 and 2008, "US agrees to slow S. Korea pull-out," *BBC News*, October 6, 2004.

from the traditional 37,000. Indeed, US foreign policy in the post-9/11 era has seen fewer changes in East Asia, but this is not to say its few changes have not had an indirect affect on the Korean peninsula.

## **US Interests and Support for Korean Unification**

The strategic goals of US policy toward the Korean peninsula has been subject to very little change since it was first spelled out in 1953 under President Eisenhower's administration by the National Security Council (NSC).<sup>31</sup> While its means and methods have fluctuated, formally speaking, the US' two main objectives for the last 53 years have been:

- Create and maintain an effective containment system against North Korea;
- Encourage and cultivate cooperative relations within the ROK-US alliance via economic assistance, the reduction of tensions on the peninsula, and support of an inter-Korean dialogue and unification.

It could be argued that considering the greatest of North Korea's present-day WMD threat, a third objective should be added as a compliment to the goal of effective containment. The fact that the second objective, the betterment of inter-Korean relations may have hindered the realization of the first objective, does not necessarily mean neither of these were not US objectives in the past or in the present. Rather, the US did not foresee what might be a logically internal contraction or simply did not anticipate that North Korea could play South Korea's soft engagement policy against the US fear of the

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<sup>31</sup> NSC 170/1, as stated in Chae-jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: US Policy and the Two Koreas* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 275. The NSC helped formulate and execute US policy on military, international, and internal security affairs.

proliferation of WMD. This is to say, North Korea has effectively driven a wedge between the ROK-US alliance by utilizing South Korea's sunshine policy (an approach to achieve the second objective) to weaken the traditional hard-hand of containment. Strategically speaking, containment was and continues to be the guiding principle in US foreign policy toward North Korea. Without a communist North Korea, there would be no ROK-US alliance.

In its attempts to contain the North Korean regime over the last half century, the US-ROK strategic relationship has rested on three basic pillars: The 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty, continuous bilateral consultations, and combined military forces. Further complementing this strategic relationship are the economic ties, shared values, and significant immigrant flows that have served to deepen the security binds over the last half century.

With an inverse relationship in regards to the ROK-US alliance, US-North Korean contact was basically non-existent for over four decades, except for a variety of critical crisis escalations, from the end of the Korean War until President Reagan's "modest initiative" in 1988, which allowed for unofficial non-governmental visits by North Koreans to the US and the relaxing of some stringent financial regulations on the North Korean government. After years of having no contact, the US government eventually realized that engagement was necessary: "We came to the conclusion that if you're really going to achieve some sort of semblance of peace on the Korean peninsula, the only way to do that is to take steps to try to open the place."<sup>32</sup> A "comprehensive approach" was recommended by the State Department during the Bush administration from 1990-1994 in which the normalization of diplomatic relations would be a good trade-off for North Korea's complying with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In effect, this approach, although varying

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<sup>32</sup>Gaston Sigur, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific in the Reagan administration. See Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), p. 194.

in shape and size, became the basis for US foreign policy toward North Korea for the next 11 years until President GWB called for “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID)” of all nuclear activities *before* the US would consider bilateral engagement, loans, aid, and security guarantees.<sup>33</sup> Just because US foreign policy in the post-9/11 era seems more aggressive toward North Korea does not mean the US is opting for pressure with the aim of collapse. It is misleading to propose that the US seek a regime collapse: “Regardless of what some neo-conservatives in the US have argued for, the policy of President Bush is not to destroy or force North Korea to a collapse. This simply out of a realist calculation of the possible consequences of such an incident, i.e., a preventive attack on South Korea and Japan by a North Korea in chaos.”<sup>34</sup> William M. Drennan agrees that the US does not seek a North Korean collapse: “The US objective is neither to prop up the regime or system in the North, nor to seek its collapse; rather, the US shares South Korea’s stated goal of seeking a manageable and peaceful process of change resulting in a reunified peninsula that contributes to peace and stability in the region.”<sup>35</sup>

As Robyn Lim argued in 2003 for a withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, he points out the only US vital interest is the balance of power: “This presence is a relic of the Cold War, which now represents a hostage to North Korea, and inhibits the United States from pursuing a hostile policy towards Pyongyang. After all, America’s only vital interest in the Korean peninsula is the defense of the US homeland against North Korean missiles - a capacity Pyongyang is expected to possess quite soon... After all, America’s only vital interest in East

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<sup>33</sup> Clinton utilized what some have called “congagement” and even contemplated a possible armed conflict with North Korea in 1994. John Ferrer, *North Korea South Korea: US Policy at a Time of Crisis* (Seven Stories Press, 2003), p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Swanström, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> William M. Drennan, “Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification,” *Policy Forum Online*, The Nautilus Institute, August 22, 1997, [http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/9a\\_Drennan.html](http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/9a_Drennan.html).

Asia is to maintain a balance of power that suits its interests.”<sup>36</sup>

Even as US presidents have modified their foreign policy toward North Korea over time, tuning and adjusting all of its deficiencies, the final objective is a non-nuclear peninsula. GWB and Clinton had strikingly different approaches to peninsular issues; but the goal never was out of sight - a nuclear free peninsula.<sup>37</sup>

US interests in East Asia and on the Korean peninsula are based on the need for stability. *One could define stability as the status quo if needed, but stability is more than that.* The status quo is one dimension of the stability, but maintaining and increasing stability might also necessitate changes to the status quo. Korean unification might be just that scenario change. Again, the fact that the US does not work *toward* unification is not the same as being opposed to it. The means cannot be confused with the end. Nonetheless, some scholars still insist that the US is opposed to Korean unification:

Despite rhetoric about creating a ‘permanent peace’ on the Korean peninsula, Washington has no near-/medium-term interest in promoting reunification—and insiders will tell you so ‘off-the-record.’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Robyn Lim, “Korea in the Vortex,” *China Brief*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, January 14, 2003, [http://jamestown.org/china\\_brief/article.php?articleid=2372790](http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2372790); Carpenter and Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum*, pp. 128-130. These authors argue that we have no vital interests on the Korean peninsula to protect, thus we should withdraw our troops. They state what is vital for South Korea is necessarily vital for the US, and even if protecting the ROK were vital, tens of thousands of troops are not necessary to protect the vital interests, i.e., we have vital interests in other parts of the world without stationing over 30,000 troops there. Furthermore, the logic goes that protecting vital interests does not require subsidizing the defense of South Korea forever.

<sup>37</sup> Jihwan Hwang, “Realism and US Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective,” *World Affairs*, Vol. 167, No. 1 (Summer 2004).

<sup>38</sup> “Great Power Interests in Korean Reunification,” CSIS (October 1998), cited in Charles L. Pritchard, “Korean Reunification: Implications for the United States and Northeast Asia,” presented at international symposium on peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia, January 13-14, 2005, pp. 6-7, <http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/fellows/pritchard20050114.pdf>.

Although the South Korean perception and many a scholar's assertion that the US never had a unification policy, publicly the White House has a long list of public declarations sharing the same goal of unification as do the South Koreans.<sup>39</sup>

President Truman on New Year's Day 1949 states: "The United States government will endeavor to afford every assistance and facility to the new United Nations Commission on Korea established there under in its efforts to help the Korean people and their lawful government to achieve the goal of a free and united Korea."<sup>40</sup>

President Eisenhower wrote to President Syngman Rhee in a 1953 letter concerning the Panmunjom Armistice:

The moment has now come when we must decide whether to carry on by warfare a struggle for the unification of Korea or whether to pursue this goal by political and other methods...

The unification of Korea is an end to which the United States is committed, not once but many times, through its World War II declarations and through its acceptance of the principles enunciated in reference to Korea by the United Nations. Korea is unhappily not the only country which remains divided after World War II. We remain determined to play our part in achieving the political union of all countries so divided. But we do not intend to employ war as an instrument to accomplish the worldwide political settlements to which we are dedicated and which we believe to be just. It was indeed a crime that those who attacked from the North invoked violence to unite Korea under their rule. Not only as your official friend but as a personal friend.

The United States will not renounce its efforts by all peaceful means to effect the unification of Korea.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, states, p. 107, "until 1992, the United States was not explicitly committed to reunification as a goal of US policy." According to Harrison, President Bush only publicly supported Korea's unification policy to cool the rising anti-American sentiment in South Korea.

<sup>40</sup>Harry S. Truman, White House statement announcing recognition of the government of Korea, January 1, 1949, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=13182&st=korea&st1=united>.

<sup>41</sup>Dwight D. Eisenhower, letter to President Syngman Rhee of Korea concerning acceptance of the Panmunjom Armistice, June 7, 1953, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9869&st=korea&st1=unification>.

Along with a number of US documents and US presidential speeches throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>42</sup> President Carter's well-know assistant on National Security Affairs, Zbigniew Brzezinski, touched upon unification:

... during the recent visit to Seoul, President Park and President Carter jointly announced their desire to explore possibilities for reducing tensions in Korea with representatives of North Korea. Only through authoritative discussions between representatives of the North and South Korean governments can a framework for peaceful coexistence between the North and the South be established and progress toward eventual reunification of Korea be achieved. The United States is prepared to assist in that diplomatic effort.<sup>43</sup>

Ten days later, President Carter commented along the same lines in a dinner party with South Korean President Park in 1979: "We must take advantage of changes in the international environment to lower tensions between the South and the North and, ultimately, to bring permanent peace and reunification to the Korean peninsula."<sup>44</sup> Throughout the Cold War, there was a bipartisan agreement in Washington that the reduction in tensions on the peninsula is directly related to inter-Korean dialogue.

In a speech at the White House, President Reagan commented on President Chun Doo Hwan's visit to Washington:

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<sup>42</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, joint statement following discussions with President Park of Korea, November 2, 1966, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=27977&st=korea&st1=unification>; Lyndon B. Johnson, joint statement following discussions with the President of Korea, May 18, 1965, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26971&st=korea&st1=united>.

<sup>43</sup> Jimmy Carter, "United States Troop Withdrawals from the Republic of Korea," statement by the President, July 20, 1979, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32622&st=korea&st1=unification>.

<sup>44</sup> Jimmy Carter, Seoul, Republic of Korea, toasts at the state dinner, June 30, 1979, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32564&st=korea&st1=unification>.

We also shared views that the endeavor to resolve the Korean question through direct dialogue between South and North Korea are more important now than ever before. At the same time we exchanged views on a wide range of diplomatic cooperation with a view to maintaining and strengthening peace on the Korean peninsula. The Korean government is making, in good faith, efforts through direct dialogue to do something about the antagonism and mutual distrust that have been allowed to accumulate over the years. We must ultimately achieve peaceful reunification of the divided land through democratic means.<sup>45</sup>

In the 1990s post-Cold War period, US documents or public speeches were quite a bit more eloquent in their formulation of long-term goals related to national unification, expressing them in optimistic language familiar and inspiring for the Korean peoples, as stated by President George Bush in 1992 in front of the Korean National Assembly,

For 40 years, the people of Korea have prayed for an end to this unnatural division. For 40 years, you have kept alive the dream of one Korea. The winds of change are with us now. My friends, the day will inevitably come when this last wound of the Cold War struggle will heal. Korea will be whole again, I am absolutely convinced of it.

For our part, I will repeat what I said here three years ago: The American people share your goal of peaceful reunification on terms acceptable to the Korean people. This is clear. This is simple. This is our policy.<sup>46</sup>

As stated by President Clinton in 1993,

As the Cold War recedes into history, a divided Korea remains one of its most bitter legacies. Our nation has always joined yours in believing that one day Korea's artificial division will end. We support Korea's peaceful unification on terms acceptable to the Korean people. And when

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<sup>45</sup> Ronald Reagan, remarks following discussions with President Chun Doo Hwan of the Republic of Korea, April 26, 1985, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38554&st=korea&st1=unification>.

<sup>46</sup> "Korea Will Be Reunited, Bush Assures Lawmakers," President Bush's address to the Korean National Assembly in Seoul, South Korea, January 6, 1992, <http://www.fas.org/news/skorea/1992/921006-rok-usia.htm>.



the reunification comes, we will stand beside you in making the transition on the terms that you have outlined. But that day has not yet arrived. The demilitarized zone still traces a stark line between safety and danger. North Korea's million men in arms, most stationed within 30 miles of the DMZ, continue to pose a threat. Its troubling nuclear program raises questions about its intentions. Its internal repression and irresponsible weapons sales show North Korea is not yet willing to be a responsible member of the community of nations.

So let me say clearly: Our commitment to Korea's security remains undiminished. The Korean peninsula remains a vital American interest. Our troops will stay here as long as the Korean people want and need us here.<sup>47</sup>

As stated by President Clinton's US Secretary of State Winston Lord in 1996: "What are those long-term objectives on the Korean peninsula? US policy seeks to achieve a durable peace and to facilitate progress by the Korean people toward achieving national reunification. We look forward to the day when all Koreans will enjoy peace, prosperity, and freedom as well as constructive relations with their neighbors."<sup>48</sup>

Definitely President GWB has been more guarded in using optimistic references to the Korean peninsula, considering his distrusting disposition of the North Korean regime and undoubtedly for all the attention his "axis of evil" comments received. Nonetheless, President Bush has stated on a number of occasions his support for inter-Korean dialogue and for a reduction of tensions:

And of course, we talked about North Korea. And I made it very clear to the President that I support his sunshine policy. And I'm disappointed that the other side, the North Koreans, will not accept the spirit of the sunshine policy...

In order to make sure there's sunshine, there needs to be two people, two sides involved. And I praised the President's efforts. And I wonder

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<sup>47</sup>William J. Clinton, remarks to the Korean National Assembly in Seoul, July 10, 1993, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=46829>.

<sup>48</sup>Winston Lord speech on US policy toward the Korean peninsula, February 8, 1996, <http://www.fas.org/news/dprk/1996/960208-dprk-usia.htm>.

out loud why the North Korean President won't accept the gesture of good will that the South Korean President has so rightfully offered. And I told him that we, too, would be happy to have a dialogue with the North Koreans. I've made that offer, and yet there has been no response.

There is no lack of diplomatic rhetoric supporting Korean unification. *It is the ordering of interests that truly highlights why South Koreans perceive the US as obstructing their primary national objective.* The US and ROK have shared one common interest since the end of the Cold War: Avoid another Korean War, or actively discourage any North Korean threat. As the DPRK became a real potential threat due to its search for nuclear weapons, preventing North Korea from obtaining nuclear technology also became of utmost importance. Because of a shared primary objective, the US and ROK were able to work together in the 1980s and 1990s to hinder North Korea's nuclear ambitions. However, as North Korea's military reach improved and South Korea's perception of its neighbor's true threat changed, the US and ROK secondary interests slowly drifted apart. The ROK secondary interests differ from the US secondary interests, and they could be crudely summarized in the following manner.<sup>49</sup>

ROK Interests	US Interests
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid another Korean War</li> <li>• Discourage DPRK threat</li> <li>• Discourage DPRK WMD program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid another Korean War</li> <li>• Discourage DPRK threat</li> <li>• Discourage DPRK WMD program</li> </ul>
Achievement of peaceful unification	Protect long-time allies (ROK and Japan)
Preventing the emergence of a regional superpower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain influence as regional superpower</li> <li>• Prevent any other power (Russia or China) from acquiring more influence over the Korean peninsula</li> </ul>

<sup>49</sup>Young-Kil Suh VADM, "The Future of the US-South Korea Alliance," *Strategic Insights*, Vol. II, Issue 10 (October 2003), pp. 1-7.

This is to say, unification could be favorable for US' interest; at the same time, unification could work contrary to US' interests. *If US cannot assure its first, second, and third interests can be guaranteed, it will waiver before investing in a different and less important goal, i.e., unification.* Because so many variables affect the final outcome of unification, and unification is not clearly advantageous, the US will never actively push for that process to begin until the potential outcome can be better calculated. In a word, the US only acts out of self-interest.

## Major Power Interests

The interests of other major powers concerning the Korean peninsula do not differ much from those of the US. These shared interests look to maintain the status quo - save a concrete desire to “foster” economic growth - and include:

- Avoiding a renewal of the Korean War;
- Preserving peace and stability on the peninsula;
- Fostering continued economic growth;
- Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- Preventing Korea from being dominated by, or aligned with, a hostile power.<sup>50</sup>

Any change in the status quo could also be detrimental to the interests of the other major powers, most specifically China and Japan, due to the economic competition, nationalist sentiment, and large middle-power status that a unified Korea would represent.<sup>51</sup> Ronald

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<sup>50</sup> Drennan, “Prospects and Implications of Korean Unification.”

<sup>51</sup> Samuel S. Kim, *North Korean Foreign Relations*, believes China's main concerns are North Korea's survival and reform, then a non-nuclear peninsula, p. 50. Also see Carl E. Haselden Jr., “The Effects of Korean Unification on the US Military Presence in Northeast Asia,” *Parameters* (Winter 2002-03), pp. 120-132; Christopher P. Twomey, “China Policy Towards North Korea and Its Implications for the

N. Montaperto states: “Because of domestic economic and political priorities, no nation - with the possible exception of North Korea - has an interest in disrupting the overall stability [or status quo] that prevails in the region.”<sup>52</sup> Adding to the argument, Robyn Lim claims: “Therein lies the rub. It’s illusory to think that Beijing will cooperate. China’s vital interest in relation to the Koreans is to exert dominant influence over the process of reunification. Thus Beijing has every reason to keep propping up the regime in Pyongyang, lest it collapse and events spin out of control.”<sup>53</sup>

Victor Cha, an extremely influential advisor to GWB, and Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, goes one step further in his dead-on analysis:

The peninsula’s location in Northeast Asia and Korea’s status as a small power surrounded by larger ones make Korea geostrategically critical to the major powers. One need only look at the past century, during which the United States, Japan, China, and Russia all fought at least one major war over control of the peninsula. So long as states vie for power and influence in the region, therefore, Korea will suffer the fate of the “shrimp crushed between whales.” If the peninsula were located at the North Pole, unification through independent means might be possible, but its pivotal position is such that major-power interests are bound to be engaged in any changes on the peninsula.

The complementary argument to *chajusong* [independence] is that all the major powers, their rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, wish to prevent Korean unification lest it upset the regional balance of power. Koreans are so indoctrinated in this view that it has become an unquestioned fact, and any evidence to the contrary is dismissed or simply ignored. This is a terribly overstated myth. The major powers, in particular the United States and Japan, do not oppose unification per se. They simply prefer the known status quo to an unknown and

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United States: Balancing Competing Concerns,” *Strategic Insights*, Vol. V, Issue 7 (September 2006).

<sup>52</sup>Ronald N. Montaperto, “Asia Pacific,” in Peter L. Hays, Brenda J. Vallance, and Alan R. Van Tassel (eds.), *American Defense Policy*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 515, 514-522.

<sup>53</sup>Robyn Lim, “Korea in the Vortex.”

potentially destabilizing future. The primary objective of each major power on the peninsula with regard to its own security is to maintain the strange form of stability that has emerged since 1953 based on deterrence and stalemate. A suboptimal outcome, in the minds of all concerned with the peninsula, is still preferable to a change in the status quo that may lead in unpredictable and unpleasant directions.

Nevertheless, were the two Koreas to begin a process of unification tomorrow, it would be wholly within the interests of the major powers to support it without prevarication. This is so because any actions to the contrary would risk making an enemy of the newly united and more powerful Korea. Thus, while the impetus for changing the status quo is not likely to come from the major powers, Koreans can be assured that once they start the process themselves the external powers would be obliged to support it, not out of affinity, goodwill, or loyalty (although these factors may be present), but because it is in their respective interests to do so.<sup>54</sup>

Under South Korea's unified conditions, even a change in the status quo would be detrimental to the Kim dynasty in North Korea. Considering that the US is the *least* Pacific country with interests in the peninsula, the possibility exists it could gain most - apart from South Korea - in future unification.

The fact that unification on the peninsula is not part of US interests does not mean it is opposed or obstructing the process. Rather, it could be argued just the opposite for the other major regional powers. It could be argued that the US is the only major power not predisposed to opposing unification.

In comparison to the regional major powers such as Japan, China, and Russia, the US, being a distant interested party, does not face any immediate threat from Korean unification. China, Russia, and Japan could face refugee flows, economic disruption or even the possibility of armed conflict on or near their territory. In the longer term, a unified state of 74 million Koreans (UN estimates, 2006 revision) with all the nationalist sentiment of a recently divided state, presents a much bigger problem to China, Russia, and Japan, all of which have territorial disputes with one of the Koreas, than it does to the United States.

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<sup>54</sup> Cha, "The Continuity Behind the Change in Korea."

Possibly, a liberated North Korea would be predisposed to good relations with the United States as has occurred in Eastern Europe. <sup>55</sup>

It is quite easy to argue that the US, amidst the rest of the major powers, is the ultimate obstacle to South Korea's desire for unification. However, its emphasis on the US as the primary snag is misguided, based on the fact that the US is not innately or directly opposed to Korean unification. Neither the US nor China will urgently push for unification, nor allow the Koreans to control their own destiny without some interference. Drennan correctively asserts: "In any case, while no outsider can impose a unification solution on Korea - and would be foolish to try - the major powers have significant stakes in the future of Korea, and are likely to see the fate of the peninsula as too important to be left for the Koreans alone to resolve."

South Korean emphasis should contemplate all the factors and variables that leave future planning uncertain for the US. These uncertainties, related to influence, power balancing, WMD, troop withdrawal, and regime collapse, are not only part of the vested interests of the United States, but rather play into the strategic planning, both for the present and future, of all the major powers involved on the Korean peninsula. Times have not changed so much on the Korean peninsula since the bipolar power struggle during the Cold War. Just as it was then, the major powers prefer the status quo to instability.

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<sup>55</sup> Conversation via email with the administrator of the webpage, <http://www.korea-unification.net>.