

## Policy Watch: Korea after unification

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It may be years away, but the unification of the two Koreas is bound to occur some day -- the most likely route through the collapse of the North.

This could occur because "Dear Leader" proves to be a threat to too many in the Communist leadership, who agree to unification with the South in exchange for retaining some position of authority in the unified state. Or it could occur as a result of a succession struggle emerging as a result of the demise, incapacitation, or de-legitimation of the "Dear Leader."

However and whenever it occurs, though, the unification of Korea is likely to result in the government of the South taking over the entire country. If this indeed happens, how will this affect Korea's international relations?

Many Chinese observers fear that the unification of Korea will be bad for Beijing since this will result in an even stronger Korea allied to the United States -- and possibly U.S. troops -- on its very border. This view, however, is probably mistaken. There is an old adage about international relations with extraordinary predictive value that runs as follows: "When the purpose of an alliance comes to an end, the alliance itself comes to an end."

Thousands of U.S. troops have been deployed in South Korea for over half a century because both Washington and Seoul fear another attack from the North. Once Korea is united, however, there will no longer be a North Korea to fear or a South Korea to fear it.

Considering the rise of anti-American sentiment that has taken place in South Korea even though it remains under threat from North Korea now, Korean attitudes toward the United States are likely to be even less friendly once that threat no longer exists. Korean public opinion, then, can be expected to seek a distancing from the United States soon after unification. Most, if not all, U.S. armed forces stationed there may be withdrawn from the South since they will no longer be needed against the North.

Korean-Japanese relations may also become rockier after Korean unification. There are already important strains between South Korea and Japan even though both now fear North Korea and are allied to the United States. The elimination of the threat from the North will lead to the surfacing of these Korean-Japanese differences -- many of which stem from Korean resentment of the Japanese occupation of Korea for several decades until the end of World War II.

Relations between a united Korea and Russia, by contrast, might improve dramatically. It has been many years since Moscow was the principal backer of Pyongyang; Beijing largely took over this role even before the downfall of the Soviet Union. While their reasons for it differ, the fact that resentment toward the United States is common in both Russia and Korea will serve to bring Seoul and Moscow closer together, as will their joint ambivalence toward Japan. If it hasn't occurred already, the collapse of the North will enable Moscow and Seoul to expand their trade relations through linking the Trans-Siberian Railroad with the Korean railroad system.

The most important question, though, is how a united Korea will relate to China. If, as predicted here, a united Korea distances itself from the United States and U.S. forces withdraw

from Korea, China will be very pleased. On the other hand, a united Korea -- which combines the South's technical expertise with the low-wage manpower that will undoubtedly exist for many years in the former North -- will prove to be a formidable competitor with China both for exports to other countries and for investment from them.

In addition, South Korea has refused to recognize the territorial concessions that North Korea made to China in the past. The differences between Seoul and Beijing on this issue matter little so long as Korea remains divided but could become a major source of contention between them after unification.

China, it should be noted, has managed to peacefully resolve its border issues with most of its neighbors and may also be able to do so with united Korea. On the other hand, the mistrust between China and India stemming from the border they fought over way back in 1962 and have yet to agree upon shows that failure to resolve a border disagreement can have a long-term negative effect.

If united Korea's relations with China are relatively good, then Korea can afford to be relatively independent of the United States and Japan and friendly with Russia. If, on the other hand, united Korea's relations with China are relatively poor, Russia is likely to be neither willing nor able to help Korea against it.

Korea, then, may find itself relying once again on its old allies -- the United States and Japan -- despite its desire not to have to do so.

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