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Asia Pacific: Perspectives is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. **Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.**

* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

United Korea: A Work Already in Progress... A Presentation on the History and Future of Inter-Korean Politics

by Brad Washington

ABSTRACT

On the eve of the 2005 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference, the governments of the Korean peninsula found themselves in familiar positions: security and economic policies determining the immediate future of Koreans were being heavily influenced by foreign nations. Outside interest is high because the Republic of Korea (South Korea) is noted as having the world's tenth largest economy (Fifield 2005), while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is cited as a nation with nuclear weapons and military strength.

Within these over-simplified labels of North Korea and South Korea lie several critical discussions: how will economic stability, the process of reunification, and foreign policy shape the future of the Korean peninsula? What are the perceptions of Koreans about themselves? What is the nature of negotiation between Pyongyang and Seoul, without the mediation and intrusion of other governments? The goal of the following discussion is to further investigate inter-Korean diplomacy to project the vision of a united and stable Korea. Evidence will conclude that the reunification of Korea is inevitable, and has been an ongoing process since the nation's division.

Before exploring the relationship between Pyongyang and Seoul, it is prudent to revisit the Korean War, focusing on the roles of the international community before armed conflict and after the signing of an armistice.¹ The presence of nations and policies involved in the Korean War will become a consideration that re-emerges throughout inter-Korean affairs. Along with an analysis of Korean economic stability and foreign policy, this discussion will also cover the significance of Korean family and spiritual ties in politics. Finally, scenarios will be provided on how regional stability in East Asia can be achieved through a united Korea. Moreover, the evidence that serves as the basis of Korean reunification will delve into why one Korea is important to Koreans and the international community beyond avoiding a nuclear endgame.²

Origin and nature of the conflict

"The origin of the conflict is to be found in the artificial division of Korea and in the failure, in 1945, of the occupying Powers to reach agreement on the method to be used for giving independence to Korea. ...Had internationally supervised elections been allowed to take place in the whole of Korea, and had a unified and independent Korea thereby come into existence, the present conflict could never have arisen" (Halsall 1998).

In order to understand the Korean War and the quandary of Korea, the territorial rationale of China, the United Soviet

Socialist Republic (USSR) and the United States of America (USA) have to be taken into consideration. By the end of World War II, Korea was emerging from a Japanese occupation that had lasted for the first half of the twentieth century. From 1900 to 1945, the suppression of Korean people was not coming entirely from a foreign aggressor. There were Koreans who not only enforced Japanese policy, but also profited from the deaths and suffering of fellow Koreans (Cumings 1981).³ It is worth stating that the idea of a chosen few from an occupied people or nation carrying out the commands of the colonizer (whether to gain favor or to preserve one's own life) is not unique to Korean history. Nonetheless, the sight of privileged Koreans inflicting harm upon their own people "strip[ped] legitimacy from dominant Korean groups and classes" (Cumings 1981: 31). Korea was facing questions of morality, self-hatred, fear, and uncertainty at a brief moment in time where it was relatively free of foreign control.

In 1949, Korea represented the "only country in the world where [American, Chinese, Japanese and Soviet] interests and security concerns...directly intersected" (Oberdorfer 1997: xiii). After World War II, the amazing speed at which the United Soviet Socialist Republic and the United States of America struggled to gain hold of Korea is directly related to their aspirations in determining the future of the world's political landscape. However, research suggests that the USSR's and USA's desire to shape policy, in East Asia, could not be decided by control of Korea without giving serious consideration to the status of Japan. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States had become extremely familiar with each other.⁴

Japan had defeated Russia in a previous war, launched a successful attack on the United States on American soil, and occupied Korea and much of China during World War II.⁵ Now that Japan was defeated, the acquisition of its former occupied territories for all countries involved became prevalent. As the United States was in Japan measuring the devastating impact of the world's first atomic bombs and planning a strategy on how to now maintain a presence in East Asia, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and moved into Korea from the north. The USSR movement into Korea was seen as part of the Soviets' declaration of war on Japan (Halsall 1997).⁶ However, the United States slowly began to realize that "[Soviet] occupation of Korea would have important military implications for the future of Japan and East Asia" (Oberdorfer 1997: 6).

The Americans quickly scrambled to propose a boundary zone in Korea along the 38th parallel. The division was made to protect each country's interests in Asia. "Though [Soviet] forces in Korea advanced south of [the 38th parallel]" (Hinton 1983: 15), they eventually fell back after agreeing to recognize the proposal. There are many theories that exist as to why the Soviet Union agreed to recognize what has become to be known as the DMZ. Some of these are based on American ignorance about Korea and an erroneous Soviet perspective on the United States:

[The United States had no] Korea experts...involved in the decision [to divide Korea]. [Lieutenant Colonel Dean] Rusk later confessed that neither he nor any of the others involved were aware that at the turn of the century the Russians and Japanese had discussed dividing Korea into spheres of influence at the thirty-eighth parallel, a historical fact that might have suggested to Moscow that Washington had finally recognized this old claim. "Had we known that, we almost surely would have chosen another line of demarcation," Rusk wrote many years later (Oberdorfer 1997: 6).

The actions taken by the USSR and the US following 1945 would continue Korea's long period of foreign occupation. Kim Song Ju was entrusted with the leadership of North Korea by Russia. Kim Song Ju, who later became Kim Il Sung, gained the respect of Koreans "because the prime test of legitimacy in post [World War II] Korea was one's record under the hated Japanese regime" (Savada 1994: 37). Kim was able to consolidate his power quickly with the aid of the Soviets.

Kim Il Sung's doctrine of *Juche* (Cumings 1990: 313) explains that in order for Korea to be truly independent and self-reliant, it had to free itself from all foreign power and reliance. It may be because of the previous statement that historians recount the absence of *Juche* doctrine before the signing of the armistice in 1953, and during Soviet occupation of North Korea. Kim Il Sung was concerned that the USSR in time would be a replacement of Japanese occupation in the sense that Koreans would adopt Soviet ways and again favor opportunities for personal advancement over sacrificing for the prospect of Korean sovereignty.

Yi Sungman (otherwise known as Syngman Rhee, 1875-1965), was a charismatic and determined Korean who saw himself as destined to reunite his country. Rhee was old enough to remember the international world condoning Japan's annexation of Korea in 1905. The popularity of Rhee in South Korea was dependent on various platforms, the most important of which was how he defined himself as anti-Communist. Rhee's charisma with Koreans south of the 38th parallel was unmatched by any other politician contending for the Presidency. However, what Rhee had in vocal support he lacked in financial backing. As Rhee spoke out against Communism, Koreans who had achieved wealth during the Japanese occupation supported Rhee's political adversary Kim Song-su (who was also a wealthy landlord).

Further complicating matters for Rhee and Korea was the constant state of disarray the United States found itself when addressing the future of South Korea. One of the many problems facing Rhee was that the United States had invested heavily in the idea of using Japanese forces (and Koreans that aligned with the Japanese) and advisory panels in its occupation program in southern Korea. While Syngman Rhee's condemnation of Communism won him some level of support amongst the conservative base of government in the United States, there was still the obstacle of dealing with the wealthy people of South Korea.⁷ By stressing his commitment to pro-

tecting the wealthy against multiple political (and extremely nationalistic) groups that grew out of Korea's independence, Rhee's political base was boosted (Kim 1983: 12).

As Rhee cradled the wealth of Korea under his banner, his road to the Presidency came in the form of a landslide.⁸ Unfortunately for the land owners, their relationship with Rhee soured rather quickly after the election of 1948.⁹ After Rhee's victory ensured that he (at the age of 72) would be the first President of South Korea, "he never ceased to call for a "march north" to unify the country by force."¹⁰

As to the question of who started the Korean War, the revision of history in Pyongyang and Seoul has made it difficult to cite a statement or an act that began conflict. What can be stated more accurately is the level of international participation in the war. As major combat in the Korean War developed, it became apparent that North Korea was receiving support from a country other than the Soviet Union. "Kim [Il Sung] sought Stalin's backing for his assault, but documents from Soviet and Chinese sources suggest that he got more support from China" (Savada 1994: 39). Much of the military support from China were Koreans who fought in China during their civil war. While Kim Il Sung was initially successful in his war for reunification, the entrance of the United States (at the urging of Syngman Rhee) alongside fifteen other nations drove North Korean forces back across the 38th parallel. The three-year war ended in a stalemate with the entrance of additional Chinese forces to protect North Korea in 1953, marking the time of a truce between the warring factions.

By 1953, the concept of what it was to be North Korean and South Korean no longer lay in international doctrine and law. The cardinal labels that divided the nation of Korea had become owned by the Koreans, defining differences among beliefs, family and culture to acknowledge the necessity of a massive foreign military buildup. Where should Koreans now turn for help?

The Challenges of Reconciliation

"Korea has been invaded more than 3,000 times so Koreans are now enjoying doing some invading, but without guns and cannons" (Fifield 2005).

Reconciliation between North and South Korea begins with the unifying power of the global economy (Cumings 2005: 509). Ironically, for as long as Korea has been divided, plans have been constructed on how to unify it. Historians, politicians and media outlets have invested an immeasurable amount of time and money exploring when and in what manner Korea would again be one nation. Still, both the governments of Pyongyang and Seoul seem content on pursuing the question of unity through a gradual policy. The stages of this gradual policy would allow for trade and domestic interactions between the two countries, call for intimate cooperation between the Korean governments, and finally agree upon a new and central government for the country.

In investigating the stage at which this gradual policy exists, it is important to not focus on other countries that have a stake in the success of Korean unification. If one is to

read the stories about Korea from foreign media sources, the headlines rarely stray from the Six-Party talks that are to convince North Korea to end nuclear proliferation (and that the future of a united Korea hinges on the day-to-day results of nuclear talks alone), or the development of the South Korean economy.¹¹ While both of these issues are obviously important in Korean media as well, the foreign press does not extensively explore how the unification process has long been established through economic interaction between North and South Korea.

In order to evaluate how economics unifies the Korean peninsula, Koreans have looked to history and innovative programs to spur monetary growth and stronger ties between each other. The former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung helped to begin the Sunshine Policy in 1992. Though criticized as being no more than legislation appeasing a North Korean government that should be handled with more force than negotiation, President Kim used the Sunshine Policy to successfully communicate with North Korean President Kim Jong-Il. The Korean economy represented an avenue South Korea could use to “actively push reconciliation and cooperation with the North [Koreans]”.¹²

Businesses in South Korea have invested in ventures in North Korea to protect government interests and provide opportunities for family reunions. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, South Korean officials and economists have studied how West Germany’s economy was severely weakened by the incorporation of East Germany. The potential windfall of a devalued South Korean currency could have a devastating effect on investment in Korea, as well as the world’s markets. For North Korea, the idea of their government simply being absorbed into Seoul is a greater concern than economic balance. Therefore, the concern over a potential economic crash helps Seoul align very closely with Pyongyang on the idea of a gradual move towards reunification.

Yet, there is still one very important economic consideration that weighs on a united Korea: “[T]he idea of special assistance cannot be automatically applicable in North Korea’s case unless the nation is classified as a conflict or postconflict state in need of emergency financing for the reconstruction of its impaired physical infrastructure” (Lee 2003: 358). As a result, there would be no guarantee of economic aid from organizations like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund for Korea. While Korea would not be without its international alliances, foreign edicts and agreements have not worked out well historically.

The Hyundai Corporation, located in South Korea and a huge player in the international market, began tours to North Korea in 1998. While the viability of the venture being economically prosperous was always in question,¹³ the strength of the program lay in its dedication to start the process of Koreans working with Koreans as soon as possible. Hyundai’s attempt to work with North Korea has spurred small businesses and entrepreneurs in South Korea to start companies in the north. While the politics and genuine fears of nuclear proliferation and the Korean War still loom over these ventures, a wide variety of business offering everything

from clothing to golf clubs are taking a stake in North Korea.¹⁴ The margin of profit loss in inter-Korean businesses is developing as a prominent topic as South Korea’s economy continues to boom. However, Seoul is committed to building the foundation of a Korean economy with Pyongyang that it hopes will ultimately allow for further cooperation on the peninsula.¹⁵

Before envisioning the role a united Korea would have in the world, it should be mentioned that unification could not take place without an emotional longing for family reunification among the Korean populace. Though Koreans acknowledge separate governments, they share a common history and lineage spanning several millennia. Family reunions, a program that began at the end of the twentieth century, have connected families with relatives not seen for decades. The coverage of these emotional events in Korean newspapers and on television has helped to change North Koreans’ perception of South Koreans and vice versa.

Popular culture in South Korea, a growing international phenomenon, has dramatically shifted the perception of North Koreans from sworn enemies to misunderstood family members. Through music, television and cinema, Koreans are seeing themselves as sharing a common thread. And while the Korean governments place limits on the number of visits and visitors to their respective countries, there is a shared responsibility in preserving their image of how Koreans should be defined at every level.¹⁶

“A unified Korea’s diplomacy for the post-Cold War world might well recapitulate Huang Tsun-hsien’s 1880 recommendation that [Korea] have “intimate relations with China, association with Japan, and alliance with America” (Cumings 2005: 507).

For the first time in nearly a century, Koreans will determine the future of Korea. Over the last two decades, the governments of North Korea and South Korea have faced each other in negotiations and across the DMZ, usually in the presence of international diplomats. The plans and documents Koreans have comprised allow them to shoulder inter-Peninsula policy and work towards reunification. So why would the nations of Japan, the People’s Republic of China, and the United States of America be skeptical of a new Korea?

First, the role of international interests (for the sake of military or political gain) would dramatically be diminished in Korea. Korea would not antagonize a rift from its traditional trade and military partners. However, the potential economic and geographical positioning of Korea would see diplomatic discussions become more evenly balanced and significantly change the nature of international negotiations on everything from farming subsidies to arms trades.

Second, what would other countries gain or lose from a new Korea? In the case of China, military and economic security are at the forefront of its concerns. The government of Beijing has been one of the very few to keep a working relationship with North Korea and South Korea. It is my opinion that China favors the gradual plan of Korean reunifi-

cation. Specifically, China would support keeping in place two separate governments for a period of time, especially when considering the imaginary barrier the 38th Parallel provides against a U. S. presence at Chinese borders. While it is clear that China and the United States are global partners, they are still global competitors, and the idea of military action in Taiwan keeps the attention of both nations.

At the same time, China would welcome a united Korea if it offered a stronger economic stimulus in East Asia. In the past, China has helped to provide billions of dollars in support for North Korea, mostly in the form of food and medical aid. Yet, the growing desperation of the North Korean economy, coupled by the mass of refugees fleeing across into Chinese borders, is a problem China will not continue to tolerate. In the end, if Korea can offer a large and robust economy in a partnership with China (South Korea is currently one of China's top trading partners), China may be willing to work with the initial challenges faced by a unified Korean economy.¹⁷

For Japan and the United States, Korea could be a solidifier or a hindrance in their relationship. If a strong South Korean economy would merge with North Korea and continue to thrive, Japan would be faced with two nations (the other being China) that could compete legitimately on its level. "That is one reason why [some] Japanese eaders...have taken a dim view of Korean reunification, and in the past actively thwarted it by lining up almost exclusively with [South Korea]" (Cumings 2005: 508). Nonetheless, if a united Korea would mean an assured stabilization of the Pyongyang government and allow a closer look on just what is the extent of nuclear weapons in northern Korea, Japan would still benefit.

The United States has as little clarity on the impact of a united Korea as it had on a divided Korea in the 1950s. There is vague evidence at best to suggest the United States has even considered the possibility of an alliance between the governments of Pyongyang and Seoul. The current leadership in Washington, D. C. would prefer a united Korea under the same pretext as a united Germany, void of any trace of a communist government. However, as stated earlier, the reality of such a unification process taking place is small and undesirable by both Korean governments, especially because it may lead to yet another lengthy stalemate on the future of the peninsula. On the other hand, despite a mixed view on the United States in South Korea, both countries remain strong trading partners, and the Republic of Korea has continued to shoulder American debt. With Japan as a strategic partner, an alliance with a united Korea could allow the United States to have a larger position in East Asia, and a strategic edge over China. Whatever the scenario, the forces of a rising economy, common identity, and political confederations have steered North Korea and South Korea on a path towards unification.

The most difficult and promising aspect of a united Korea is that there is no multinational timeline when the process should begin and end. North Korea's constant threat to produce nuclear weapons and break off negotiations, and

South Korea's determination to not completely break-off discussions with Pyongyang, have kept many nations from heavily investing in Korea's future. Ironically, tension on the Korean peninsula has allowed Koreans to delve further into the challenges they will continue to face, and decide how their interests can best be served. The process of one Korea becoming a reality has already begun, and the speed and nature of how it will be manifested depends on the collaboration among the Korean people themselves.

ENDNOTES

1. In interviews conducted on Thursday, November 22nd, 2005, Scott Bruce of the Nautilus Institute and Dr. Patrick Hatcher of the University of San Francisco were clear to cite that the signing of the armistice was in no way an acknowledgment that the Korean War had officially ended, leaving open the very real possibility of future military conflict.
2. In the following discussion, I have made the decision to use North Korea (instead of The Democratic People's Republic of Korea) and South Korea (versus The Republic of Korea) in order to emphasize the significance of the Korean War and the DMZ on the future of the Korean peninsula.
3. "Koreans could no longer simply blame [Japan] for the misfortunes that befell them, since the regime often presented itself in the person of a Korean official" (Cumings, 1981: 30).
4. From the entrance of Commodore Perry opening U. S. trade in Japan to the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the war between Japan and Russia (with U. S. President Theodore Roosevelt acting as an intermediary), the contentious history amongst the three nations reads as a series of forced cooperation with attacks and counter-attacks that always followed.
5. It is worth quickly noting that at least the Japanese occupation of Korea was a formal agreement between Japan and the United States, so long as Japan acknowledged U. S. interests (often referred to as freedom of action) in the Philippines.
6. At the Yalta Conference of 1945, Russia agreed to align with America and Britain if "[t]he former rights of Russia violated by the treacherous attack of Japan in 1904...be restored" (*Modern History Sourcebook*, 1997).
7. In some ways, it much more difficult for Rhee to rally support than Kim Il Sung. Rhee won support with anti-Communist language, but lacked the heroic stance against the Japanese that Kim Il Sung possessed.
8. "Rhee [was] determined to protect Kim's [Kim Song-Su was Rhee's closest competitor in the race for the Presidency in 1948] group from the attacks of the nationalists in exchange for their financial and political support" (Kim 1983: 12).
9. "As soon as Rhee had used Kim's group to achieve his election to the presidency, he turned against this wealthy group of landlords in order to establish his own independent leadership of the Korean government" (Kim 1983: 12-13).
10. 'Syngman Rhee (Yu Sung-man; 1875-1965)' (*The Encyclopedia of Asian History*, The Asia Society, 1988).
11. As an extension of the nuclear Six-Party talks, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and United States President George W. Bush met ahead of the APEC summit to condemn nuclear weapons in North Korea. It was a statement born potentially just as much out of a united front against nuclear weapons in Pyongyang as South Korea being called on by the U. S. to uphold a partnership originating from American support in the Korean War (*CBS News*, November 2005).
12. Federation of American Scientists, 1999.
13. People in South Korea are still very skeptical of North Korea and

- fear for their safety by traveling north.
14. In the fall of 2006, North Korea will embark on creating a 18-hole golf course sponsored by American companies as an experiment in capitalism (*Kansas City Star*, 2005).
 15. "The Korea International Trade Association (KITA) said trade between South and North Korea will hit the US\$1 billion mark for the first time this year thanks to progress in the joint industrial complex in the North's border city of Kaesong" (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2005).
 16. "Ghost Recon 2, designed for Xbox players, is one of several new video games in which the virtual bad guys are North Koreans. But if the Korea Media Rating Board has its way, its boxes will be stamped "Banned in Korea." While U.S. game designers see North Koreans as diabolical enemies, South Korean game censors say they see North Koreans as wayward cousins" (*International Herald Tribune*, 2005).
 17. As an example of China's consciousness on supporting nations that can support the Chinese economy came last week as Beijing announced it did not favor an Asian Bloc economy (i. e. European Union) because it did not include the United States and Europe, extremely important trading partners for the nation (

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