
Towards a New Balance of Power in Northeast Asia: What Role for a Unified Korea?

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Rarely in history is one afforded the chance to redraw the strategic road map, ranging as it does from a reconceptualization of ideals, objectives, and institutions. In the Asian context, rethinking regional security is likely to hinge on such factors as the reconfiguration of America's engagement, the rise of China as a regional superpower, a politically assertive Japan, and the specter of a unified Korea. The extent to which peaceful and stable change will evolve in Northeast Asia critically depends on the synergy or dislocation that can occur on the basis of the developments noted above.

If this great geopolitical experiment succeeds, Northeast Asia will likely emerge as the most influential political and economic region in the world. If the experiment falters, however, the spill-over effect will not only impact upon regional stability, but global security as well. Seen from this perspective, it is imperative for Northeast Asia to understand that decisions taken today will leave an indelible imprint on the shaping of a future regional order. And out of the many developments which will determine the fate of a Pacific Century, a unified

Korea's role in the Northeast Asian power constellation will play a decisive role. How Korea defines this role in consort with its neighbors remains as a key national challenge and a precondition in ensuring that it will no longer be perceived as an extension of great power interests, but as an indispensable actor that can positively contribute to the birth of a new era.

The End of the Cold War and Asian Security

Prior to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, policy makers and analysts alike almost uniformly failed to forecast the change of events that would eventually lead to a reunited Germany. Even more significantly, barely anyone predicted that the Soviet Union as a political entity would cease to exist by the fall of 1990. And yet, these two critical developments resulted in a fundamental re-mapping of Europe and, by extension, the security architecture that had prevailed in the heartland of Europe since the end of the World War II.

The breakdown of the Yalta system continues to reverberate throughout Europe. The ongoing conflict in the former Yugoslavia, NATO, and the CSCE's search for new identities and missions, reconfiguration of the transatlantic alliance, and managing a new and uncertain American-Russian relationship all attest to the continuing search for a more enduring post-Cold War security architecture. Just how a new Europe—replete with new paradigms, frameworks, and institutions—will emerge remains as a conjecture at this point. Nevertheless, the stakes are enormously high if European Union is to succeed and a new vitality is to be injected into Central Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and overall US policy towards the continent.

At a glance, one might wonder why ongoing transformations in Europe matter to future developments in Northeast Asia and the Korean peninsula. However, geopolitical fluctuations in Europe cannot be ignored in postulating over-the-horizon developments in Northeast Asia. To begin with, US policy throughout the Cold War era was based on maintaining

a Eurasian balance to counterbalance Soviet and Chinese influence in these two respective regions. Accordingly, while the means by which the East-West balance was sustained in Europe and in Asia were different¹, the cumulative impact was not dissimilar, in that it was the United States which played the central role as the major balancer, albeit as an external power.

Concomitant with such a basic aim, the economic revivals of Germany and Japan were perceived to be vital components in guaranteeing containment's overall success. Moreover, by harnessing these two powers into a US-led security system meant that Bonn and Tokyo would henceforth act as the key pillars in the transatlantic and transpacific alliance structures. In the Asian context, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 accelerated the inclusion of Korea into the US security framework codified under the 1954 mutual security treaty. The end of the Korean conflict resulted also in the conclusion of the ANZUS Pact, as well as other bilateral security treaties with Taiwan (replaced by the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 following the formal recognition of the PRC by the United States), the Philippines, Thailand, and South Vietnam. In a nutshell, while the specific security threats differed in Europe and in Asia, developments in these two regions could not be regarded outside of the broader East-West conflict and the more important linkages respectively maintained with the United States.

With the end of the Cold War, however, both Europe and Asia have been forced to think beyond conventional concepts of security. Although Europe and Asia's approach to regional security in the post-Cold War era cannot be anything but contextually different, both sides have to grapple with several outstanding security issues. For example, despite a desire on the part of Europe and Asia to prolong an active US engagement, defense budgetary cuts, overall down sizing, and a changing domestic consensus on foreign deployments have resulted in a reexamination of key US commitments abroad. Clearly, the United States also recognized the need to sustain its overall ties in Europe and Asia. Nevertheless, as the United States

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also searches for a new role in the post-Cold War era, prioritization of key foreign policy objectives cannot but change.

In essence, the convergence of three fundamental factors has to be taken into consideration: first, a very much transformed strategic road map following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its cumulative impact on the re-articulation of US strategy; second, a growing awareness on the part of Asia that some form of an indigenous security framework is desirable;² and third, regardless of whether a continuing US presence is desired on the part of key Asian states, the domestic debate within the United States is likely to play a critical role in shaping the longer-term engagement of the United States in the region.

Taken as a whole, Asia—and more specifically, Northeast Asia and the Korean peninsula—has little choice but to consider over-the-horizon imperatives. Indeed, while Asia continues to register the highest economic growth rate in the global economy, arms spending and force modernizations are increasing at an alarming rate. It is within such a context that Asia must address longer-term security considerations.

For instance, can Northeast Asia's future stability be built on some type of a multilateral security system? On what strategic grounds will the US-Japan and the US-Korea relationship be sustained? How can trade disputes be managed without damaging existing security ties? What longer-term security framework can be envisioned at the present time? Can an Asian nonproliferation regime be sustained? The degree to which Asia can meet these challenges will determine regional stability well into the next century. And for a country whose fate has been inexorably tied to the geopolitical machinations of Northeast Asia, how Korea rises to the challenge will test its mettle as never before.

Korea in a New Northeast Asian Power Constellation

In addition to these queries, the longer-term role of Korea in the Northeast Asian power configuration cannot be excluded. Indeed, despite the global end of the Cold War, the Korean peninsula remains as the last frontier of the Cold War. Although a unified Korea's role is admittedly situation specific, it is also clear that nearly five decades since the partitioning of the peninsula, the so-called Korean Question is on the verge of being fundamentally redefined.

To be sure, just how a unified Korea will be managed depends on a number of variables and developments. Not only must questions of cost be considered (particularly in the aftermath of German unification), the political environment in which unification proceeds cannot but be considered as the crucial factor. But leaving aside for now the specifics on how unification will be realized, it is also important to postulate on the longer-term geostrategic role of a unified Korea. Much remains to be clarified, but as points of departure the following guiding principle could be considered in defining Korea's role as a unified state. To begin with, regardless of major power cooperation or potential discord, a unified Korea should act as a strategic and a stabilizing buffer. This does not mean that a unified Korea should assume a role akin to Great Britain's following the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Clearly, even a unified Korea's overall capabilities will definitely not surpass those of its neighbors. Nevertheless, from a strategic point of view, a unified Korea is likely to be perceived as the most nonthreatening power in the region. As such, Korea should seek to adroitly exploit the opportunity tendered by unification to help sustain a stable regional order through a combination of a non-threatening, stabilizing, and forward-looking foreign policy. In a sense, Korea should play the role of an inside balancer in the Northeast Asia.

Historically, Korea's fate has been decided largely upon the intervention and encroachment of external powers. It is important to recall that while the 1895-1896 Sino-Japanese War

and the 1905-1906 Russo-Japanese War broke out on account of a fundamental reshaping of the regional balance of power, the key strategic contest was focused on the Korean peninsula. Moreover, the partitioning of the peninsula in 1945 following the Allied victory in World War II materialized on the basis of Soviet intervention in the northern half of the peninsula; the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 could not have been instigated without active backing of the North by China and the Soviet Union.

In essence, Korea should undertake a platform strategy wherein it will be able to act as a positive interlocutor between the major powers. At the epicenter of Northeast Asia, Korea's choice as a major economic hub will also contribute to such a role. In addition, if such schemes as the Tumen River Development Project succeeds over the long run, the Korean peninsula must play a critical role in fostering intra-regional economic cooperation. Despite some concern to the contrary, strategically, a unified Korea will not become an anti-status quo power. More than any other country in Northeast Asia, Korea has been the victim of invasions, wars, and conflicts. As such, while a unified Korea must be strong enough to deter encroachment, it must ensure that its policies will be fostered upon transparency and positive change.

Although various strategies could be considered in bringing such a strategy to fruition, one potential option could lie in broadening and sharpening existing ties with the United States. Ironically, although the United States is the only out-of-area power in the region or outside balancer, it has played the most important role in fostering intra-regional balance. Although the United States is in the process of reevaluating its long-standing role in the region, owing to a changing security consensus in the post-Cold War era coupled with declining defense resources, it goes without saying that it is equally important for the United States to be actively engaged in the Asia-Pacific in general and Northeast Asia in particular.

While the United States was the major external balancer

in the region throughout the Cold War years, it is inevitable that it will rethink its strategic priorities in Europe, Asia, and other regions. However, given the enormous stakes it has in ensuring a stable evolution in Northeast Asia, the United States is unlikely to disengage from the region. As a result, while the United States is likely to continue to maintain its critical partnership with Japan and an increasingly important relationship with China, it also stands to reason that a unified Korea will afford a new opportunity for the United States. Based on the overall record of this transpacific alliance, the United States and Korea have every reason to sustain a strategic collusion well into the next century.

Such a role for a unified Korea, however, should not be construed to be exclusionary nor targeted against any specific power. In considering the strategic environment over the long haul, it is important to keep in mind that there are sound grounds in which to sustain the Korean-American partnership in Northeast Asia. Clearly, once Korea is unified, the rationale for a continuing presence of US ground forces will be weakened substantially. Nevertheless, akin to a unified Germany's continuing membership in NATO—albeit with on-going stationing of US forces at a much lower level than before—there are sound strategic grounds in sustaining a military partnership between the United States and Korea even after unification. An effective alliance between the United States as an outside balancer and a unified Korea as the inside balancer will go a long way in securing a stable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific.

Looking to the Future

The main points outlined above hinge critically on how the Korean peninsula will be transformed in the months and years ahead. While it is difficult to pinpoint a time frame for unification, it is clear that change in some shape or form will occur in the not too distant future. But unlike the past, where Korea's fate was determined largely on the basis of external

factors, transformations in the peninsula in the foreseeable future will likely materialize through a series of peninsula-specific developments. Most importantly, however, progressions within the North and South Korea's comprehensive adjustment to a series of potential changes in the North will likely emerge as crucial benchmarks within the peninsula over the next several years.

Obviously, incremental and progressive change in the Korean peninsula is the best possible alternative, marked by a series of political and military confidence-building measures, greater economic cooperation, and across-the-board exchange. But given the unique nature of the North Korean political system, and the political costs associated with any wide-ranging opening of the North Korean system, Pyongyang is unlikely to be receptive to openness and liberalization.

Although efforts were made on the part of the two Koreas in the early 1970s and again in the mid-1980s to achieve a breakthrough in inter-Korean ties, progress was not forthcoming. For instance, while the July 7 1972 Communiqué between the two Koreas was the first attempt to codify the inter-Korean relationship, the entrenched regional balance, coupled with domestic imperatives, stalled further improvement in the bilateral relationship. Although intermittent contact and exchange was realized in the early to mid-1980s, it was not until the late 1980s when significant changes occurred in and around the Korean peninsula.

Of these changes, perhaps the most significant were Moscow's enunciation of a pragmatic foreign policy, Seoul's articulation of the so-called Northern Policy, and China's increasingly robust contacts with South Korea. In a series of adroit diplomatic initiatives coincident with the Eastern European "revolution" of 1989-1990, Seoul succeeded in opening diplomatic ties with the Eastern bloc. Moreover, as it became increasingly apparent that South Korea's membership in the United Nations would not be vetoed by Beijing and Moscow, Pyongyang shifted its long-standing position and opted to

jointly enter the United Nations with the South in May 1990. For the South, however, the biggest windfall was the establishment of formal ties with the Soviet Union in September 1990, followed by the formalization of ties with China in August 1992.

Following such external developments, the two Koreas initialed the landmark Basic Agreement in December 1991.³ Nevertheless, substantial progress has not been forthcoming primarily on account of the ongoing dispute over North Korea's potential nuclear weapons program. While the North recently agreed to reaccept the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) inspection on seven declared nuclear facilities, there is no guarantee that the North will accept a continuity of safeguard measures, or challenge inspections on two critical undeclared nuclear sites at Yongbyon. Clearly, the nuclear issue is a major roadblock towards any meaningful progress in the inter-Korean dialogue. Although the South Korean government remains hopeful that a diplomatic solution will be ultimately forthcoming, doubts remain as to whether North Korea will negotiate in good faith.

But it is crucial to understand that the North Korean nuclear issue is symptomatic of the overall political situation in the North. Given that regime survival is a key imperative for the North, Pyongyang has fully exploited the opportunity tendered by the nuclear dispute to open a communications channel with the United States, in addition to seeking a series of concessions on the part of South Korea and the United States.

Although North Korea's handling of the "nuclear card" has resulted in major dividends thus far, the longer-term trend is unlikely to continue to favor the North. For all practical purposes, South Korea has garnered the upper hand in the long-standing competition with the North. As a result, while the North has been able to enjoy a diplomatic windfall over the nuclear issue, the "correlation of forces" in the long run overwhelmingly favors the South.

In summary, the challenge for South Korea at decade's end lies in fostering controlled and manageable change in the

Korean peninsula, although such a task is likely to be complicated by the overriding North Korean factor. But assuming that unification will be realized under terms favorable to the South's conception of a Korean Commonwealth, articulation of a comprehensive platform strategy to assist in the maintenance of a stable balance in Northeast Asia is likely to emerge as a key foreign policy task. Based on its newly formed ties with Russia and China, and coupled with a robust relationship with Japan, a unified Korea can play a constructive role going into the twenty-first century. Reinvigorating the Korean-American alliance, in an effort to better meet the manifold challenges of the future, is an agenda which has already arrived. For Seoul and Washington, accepting this very challenge and transforming it into a concrete action plan remains as an untested, but nonetheless, critical exercise. ♀

Notes

¹ It should be noted that following the open split in Sino-Soviet dispute in the last 1960s and the subsequent U.S.-Sino rapprochement initiated by the Nixon Administration in the early 1970s, Soviet force deployments in the Far East received greater attention on the part of the United States.

² For instance, based on overriding political and military factors, the United States chose to maintain a European balance through a collective security system, i.e., NATO whereas it maintained a series of bilateral security alliances in Asia.

³ As is well known, the United States terminated its military presence in the Philippines in 1993 although it continues to maintain a bilateral security treaty with Manila. The first phase in the force reductions in the Western Pacific under the so-called East Asia Strategy Initiative (EASI) have already been made (such as the withdrawal of some 7,000 U.S. forces from South Korea) although further reductions in the ROK have been postponed indefinitely on account of the North Korean nuclear threat. Over the longer term, however, it will be increasingly difficult to justify the deployment of ground forces in the Korean peninsula, particularly in the post-unification era.

⁴ For instance, several scholars have argued that akin to the process of Europe-

anization of European security, the time has come for Asia to consider a broad Asianization of Asian Security. While this concept is in its infancy, the gradual reduction of the U.S. presence, an increasingly robust and worrisome arms race in Asia, and the potential for key domestic political change amongst other factors have been cited as key factors warranting a new intra-regional security consensus.

⁵ The official title of the Basic Agreement is "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Exchanges and Cooperation" and was signed on 13 December 1991. The agreement was subsequently brought into force on 19 February 1992. The two sides also agreed on a Denuclearization Statement on 30 December 1991. Wherein they pledged not to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store nor deploy nuclear weapons and further that nuclear energy would only be used for peaceful purposes coupled with an agreement that neither side would acquire reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities.