



Korean Reunification: The Nuclear Factor

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Introduction

Within the international community the most important contemporary issue related to the Korean peninsula undoubtedly is North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its potential consequences for Asian regional stability and U.S. policy. Although that issue clearly is very important to North and South Korea as well, both Koreas also deem its impact on inter-Korean reconciliation efforts to be crucially important. The way these two themes may interact warrants more attention than is normally paid by non-Koreans. The focus of this analysis shall be on the ramifications a North Korean nuclear program may have upon the evolving Korean unification process and for the resulting united Korean state. Will it be a non-nuclear state or a nuclear-armed state?

Before addressing that evolutionary process, it is worth providing some contextual background for those readers who are not familiar with Korean affairs. While it is relatively well known that North Korea's pursuit of its nuclear weapons option became a major issue in the early post-Cold War years,^[1] nuclear weaponry has played various roles in shaping the dynamic between the two Koreas. Citizens of both Koreas are well aware that their nation's liberation from Imperial Japan's colonial rule was symbolized by the United States' dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Similarly both Koreas had to cope with the possibility that the Korean War might escalate to the use of nuclear weapons, which proved to be an inducement to halting the conflict via a negotiated armistice. The risks associated with nuclear escalation in that war helped shape a limited war strategic paradigm for the remaining decades of the Cold War. Still more important, the post-Korean War balance of power on the peninsula was strongly influenced by the U.S.-Soviet global nuclear balance of power, which incorporated on the U.S. side American use of South Korea as a venue for deploying tactical nuclear weapons that also sent a signal to deter North Korea. ^[2]

Nuclear Awareness

In short, Koreans in both halves of the divided nation were profoundly aware of the importance of nuclear weapons. This was reinforced by the recognition in Seoul and Pyongyang that neither's U.S. nor Soviet backers would tolerate the ROK or the DPRK pursuing a nuclear weapons option. This was more obvious in South Korea where the United States' role as the provider of a nuclear umbrella for various allies worldwide was used as a rationale for impeding any efforts by those allies to develop their own nuclear weaponry. Efforts by the Park Chung-hee government in the 1970s to pursue a nuclear weapons option were blocked by the United States.[3] The Park government was motivated by a combination of a desire for nationalistic self-reliance and anxieties in the post-Vietnam War context about the reliability of the U.S. strategic commitment to the ROK. As U.S.-ROK security relations adapted to the post-Vietnam War adjustments within the Asian theater of the Cold War, South Korea's overt aspirations for nuclear weaponry were stifled. However, because the PRC had nuclear weapons and many South Koreans assumed Japan—despite its pacifism and supposed “nuclear allergy”—would eventually acquire a nuclear weapons capability in order to create a balance of power with China, it was not unusual for South Koreans to harbor hopes that someday Koreans would join their ranks.

To better appreciate that mind set it is important to grasp a long-standing Korean perception of its place within the traditional Sino-Japanese relationship. This is well expressed in an old proverb: “In a fight between whales, the back of a shrimp bursts” (*gorae ssaum ae saewoodung tuhjinda*).[4] Koreans felt distinctly shrimp-like amidst late 19th century Sino-Japanese pressures on Korea, becoming involuntarily part of the Japanese empire's geopolitical quest for Asian *lebensraum* at China's expense up through World War II, and finding itself in the vortex of U.S.-Soviet Cold War tensions shaped—in part—by each's relations with Japan and China. Making matters worse, both Koreas understood that the “shrimp” nation's division into two states caught up in the Cold War dynamic exacerbated the dilemma by forcing each half of the shrimp to have to cope with the power of the whales at the same time as they were attempting to reunify their nation state so that they could make it less shrimp-like in the nuclear era.

Against this background, North Korea's post-Cold War efforts to take full advantage of no longer being under the constraints of the Soviet Union by following the same path the PRC pursued in the mid-1960s to develop nuclear weapons struck an ambivalent note in South Korea. Even though the ROK had ample reason to welcome the United States' non-proliferation policies' focus on the threat posed by North Korea's potential use of nuclear weapons against the South—turning it into a “sea of fire”—North Korea's ability to get away with doing what South Korea had been unable to do caused some adverse reactions in the South. On the official level this was most apparent with regard to South Korean discomfort regarding the style of U.S. non-proliferation policies that were largely devised for global purposes and then applied to Korea without the level of advance consultations South Koreans deemed appropriate. This U.S. approach reminded many South Koreans of past client state relationships they assumed the ROK had outgrown as a result of maturing ROK-U.S. relations. Because of the profound overtones of a *sadaejui* (flunkeyism) complex embodied in client-state ties, many South Koreans did not appreciate being thrust into this position as a result of North Korea being able to do what the ROK's U.S. ally had prevented South Korea from doing. This resistance to U.S. pressures ended up having long-term political consequences in South Korea that are very salient in the contemporary nuclear and inter-Korean situations.

South Korean popular culture also was influenced by reactions to what North Korea was attempting to do on the nuclear front, U.S. responses to the DPRK, and memories of past U.S. involvement in South Korea's attempts to develop a nuclear option. In 1994, the same year as the United States and North Korea came close to war over getting the DPRK to acquiesce to U.S. demands, a South Korean novelist—Kim Chin-myung—clearly touched a nerve in Korean society via a conspiratorial novel about a U.S. plot to prevent North and South Korea from collaborating in pursuing nuclear weapons to cope with Japan's nuclear agenda. This three volume novel, *The Rose of Sharon Has Blossomed* (*Mugunghwa kkot i piusumnida*)[5] became a major hit, selling over 4.5 million copies. The *Mugunghwa* (Rose of Sharon) in the title is the Republic of Korea's

national flower and can be seen as a symbol of a future reunited Korean nation. The general public's interest in this topic suggests empathy for the suspicions the novel expresses about U.S. purposes in impeding Korean nuclear ambitions—Northern or Southern.

Lest one chalk that up to a decade old literary fluke, the same author produced another conspiratorial novel in 2003 called *The Third Scenario* (*Jae sam ui sinario*)^[6] that focuses on U.S. efforts to prevent Korean unification, assassinate the leaders of both Koreas, and make use of a war in Korea for U.S. purposes. This book has sold over a million copies.^[7] Beyond any literary merits these novels may possess, they are far more important in the ways their phenomenal popularity suggests a willingness on the part of many South Koreans to contemplate the merits of the entire Korean nation demonstrating its strategic sovereignty by becoming a nuclear power. That would be a formidably well armed “shrimp” indeed. Koreans contemplating such an option might well consider adapting a label some Singaporeans use to describe their country's strong defenses, namely a “poison shrimp.”^[8] Such attitudes are reflected in early 2004 polling data that found thirty nine percent of South Koreans considered the United States posed the greatest threat to the ROK, compared to thirty three percent who ranked North Korea as the greatest threat.^[9] Similarly other early 2004 polling showed forty six percent of South Koreans saw the United States as the main obstacle to Korean reunification, compared to twenty five percent who named the DPRK.^[10]

Inter-Korean Context

Against that background, inter-Korean efforts to reconcile their differences and seek reunification concurrent with a U.S.-led campaign to resolve the problems stemming from North Korea 's nuclear weapons aspirations may complicate that campaign's prospects. All Americans who are concerned about the efficacy of U.S. efforts to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear agenda and pursue a more moderate set of foreign and defense policies would be well advised to familiarize themselves with past^[11] and recent efforts^[12] in both Koreas to deal with reunification. Similarly, they should become familiar with the recent analyses done in the United States about North Korea ^[13] and about U.S. policy options toward Korean reunification.^[14]

As important as the nuclear issue is to the United States and the other major power players involved in the Six-Party Talks process (China, Japan, and Russia), for the two Koreas all of those attempts also are part of a larger process aimed at reconciling and unifying their nation. Because of that inter-Korean contextual perspective, while it has to appear sympathetic to the United States' hardline “CVID” jargon (“complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement”) aimed at pressuring Pyongyang to acquiesce to U.S. demands, Seoul also does its best to get Washington to understand its desires for a more moderate approach to inducing North Korea to change its policies. Although U.S. officials have suggested that the “CVID” approach is no longer the core of U.S. policy toward the North Korean nuclear issue,^[15] many South Koreans remain convinced that it is. That viewpoint is reinforced by the all too evident gap between the Bush administration's brand of conservatism^[16] and the Roh Moo-hyun government's very liberal policies. The ROK under Roh has been frustrated by its inability to get the Bush administration to pay more attention to how it thinks the U.S.-ROK strategic partnership should deal with the challenges posed by North Korea. In sharp contrast, they have found the PRC to be more cooperative and flexible. This rapport is reinforced by the increasing overlap in ROK-PRC socio-economic interests.^[17]

Amidst the U.S. political campaign season the next round in the Six-Party Talks was effectively postponed until after the November elections, even though China, which hosts these talks in Beijing, wanted them to be held in late September.^[18] On balance, this probably will prove to be useful because the victor in the U.S. presidential race will then have a four year mandate in the future of his administration. Equally important, turning that electoral corner will eliminate the ambiguity demonstrated by both South and North Korea about having to deal with the Bush administration representing the United States at the talks. Both Seoul and Pyongyang leadership harbor hopes that, were Senator Kerry to become President Kerry, the United States would be far

more amenable to a negotiated resolution of the nuclear issue that would be simultaneously closer to the ROK's position on dealing with the DPRK's nuclear option[19] and more acceptable to North Korea. Although the Kerry campaign welcomed indications that South Koreans as well as many others around the world are more supportive of his candidacy than of President Bush's reelection,[20] among the last things his campaign would have wanted is any sort of de facto endorsement by the Kim Jong-il regime. How much genuine difference there might be between these alternative U.S. administrations' approach to the North Korean nuclear issue, and toward the prospects of resolution of that issue becoming part of the Korean reunification process, is very debatable. Regardless of the outcome in the United States, however, in the wake of those elections a U.S. administration will have to address these Korean issues and both Koreas will have to deal with U.S. policy toward them.

September Surprise

This entire situation was shaken by surprising revelations in early September that South Korean scientists were working on nuclear power experiments in the year 2000.[21] This caused Seoul to try to explain the experiments as both minor and unrelated to nuclear weapons.[22] As South Korea's past nuclear experiments drew increasing attention, ROK officials cautiously acknowledged the experiments could have more theoretical significance than originally ascribed to them.[23] In turn, all this activity drew more critical attention[24] and caused the IAEA to refocus its attention on South Korea.[25] Compounding the controversy of the Korean nuclear situation were the subsequent reports of a North Korean nuclear weapons test near the DPRK's border with China that were swiftly denied by North Korea and discredited by most international observers, but—when seen in the context of South Korea's nuclear experimentation—they added to the sense of ambiguity surrounding Korean nuclear issues.[26]

All of this attention to nuclear issues in both Koreas tended to reinforce the conventional wisdom behind U.S. policy and the policy of the United States' main Asian ally, Japan, toward Korea which was succinctly expressed by former Secretary of State James Baker in the conclusion of a recent opinion column: "No country, including China and Russia, wants to see a nuclear weapons capability on the Korean Peninsula." [27] That assessment from a conservative vantage point was offered in support of the current President Bush's efforts to create support for the United States' attempt to block nuclear proliferation in Korea. A similar viewpoint was expressed in considerable detail by one of the United States' leading progressive analysts of Korean affairs, Selig Harrison, whose overall perspective is quite different from the current Bush administration.[28] Whether the United States is led by a second term of the Bush administration or by a Kerry administration, it is likely that these parameters will shape U.S. policy toward Korea in pursuit of more or less the same goal.

As balanced and sound as that goal is, and as much as the United States has every right to expect its South Korean ally to support that objective, there is reason to second guess the prospects for success. U.S. desires for a non-nuclear Korea are not new. Koreans in both Koreas are well aware that the United States prevented the ROK under Park Chung-hee from becoming a nuclear power, clearly wants to halt North Korea's current nuclear agenda, and is more than annoyed by the persistence of some South Koreans to explore the ROK's nuclear potentials. In this context it is legitimate to ask whether U.S. pursuit of a non-nuclear Korea will succeed in preventing Koreans in a reuniting Korea from having the same nuclear option that China successfully pursued and Japan must contemplate as it confronts both China's rising power and the possibility of a strong reunited Korean nation state in between Japan and China. In short, may the *Mugunghwa*/Rose of Sharon of literary notoriety yet blossom? It could under certain circumstances.

Unification By War

Were Korea to unify as a result of a war that would entail U.S. intervention in order to rescue the ROK from the DPRK by eliminating its nuclear capabilities, thereby creating circumstances likely to lead to Chinese involvement as well, the resulting united Korean state would be unable to pursue many options—nuclear included—that the foreign interventionists are prepared to block. Moreover, a united Korea that would emerge from war would likely be so damaged by the war that it could not pursue a nuclear option. Similarly, albeit far less dangerous to all concerned, were a united Korea to emerge as a result of any North Korean collapse scenario, the burdens imposed on South Koreans as they pick up the pieces and try to assemble a viable Korean nation state would be so formidable that Seoul's abject dependence on foreign assistance would compel such a united Korea to acquiesce to all the foreign benefactors' desires that Korea not pursue a nuclear option.

The costs and risks associated with the renewed war and catastrophic collapse scenarios make it clear why they should be avoided if possible for the sake of Korea's future. Even if the United States and other countries might perceive these scenarios in a somewhat favorable light because they would almost certainly preclude a nuclear option for the resulting united Korea, the inherent costs and risks are too large. Similarly, the potential for preemptive North Korean regime change to create costly long-term burdens for the resulting united Korea—that would foreclose its nuclear option—on balance make this scenario very undesirable for Korea.^[29] Were any country or countries to pursue that sort of scenario via economic, political, or military means, it/they would end up paying the price in both financial terms and in future relations with Korea.

A Better Option

Clearly there is a better option. The United States—and any of the other countries that want to avoid a nuclear Korea—should develop policies designed to help both Koreas' mutual engagement policies intended to reconcile their differences and create the means to develop a unified Korea. For the United States and its South Korean ally this would entail greater appreciation by Washington of President Roh Moo-hyun's version of President Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" now called the "policy of peace and prosperity"^[30] and the ways President Roh uses the policy to expand South Korea's engagement with North Korea.^[31] Such support by the United States—preferably in conjunction with China, Japan, and Russia—will minimize the chance that the *Mugunghwa*/Rose of Sharon nuclear option will ever be contemplated seriously by Koreans because of their collective sense of gratitude and obligation toward the external powers that will have acted as facilitators and catalysts for peaceful Korean reconciliation and unification.

If the United States and the other major powers were to abstain from such engagement in assisting the two Koreas to become one, especially if the United States were to be perceived in both Koreas as once again pretending to be supportive of a Korean reunification agenda while expecting it will fail (as others have in the past) that Koreans can see as analogous to the "free vote" congressional metaphor,^[32] it could well set the stage for inter-Korean bilateral negotiations—without any external mediation or assistance—which might produce a united Korea with reasons to be well disposed toward a nuclear option. The foundation of those reasons would be Korean nationalism that is already motivating both Koreas' fervor for reuniting and would receive a tremendous boost were the two Koreas to resolve their differences solely on their own. A united Korean nation state spawned by such a process is virtually certain to be very conscious of its independence and national pride. While it is conceivable that such a Korean state could pursue a neutralist foreign policy as some have advocated,^[33] a nationalistic united Korea is far more likely to be pragmatic in its international realism, perhaps aligning Korea with Kenneth Waltz's contention that greater possession of nuclear weapons can enhance geopolitical stability.^[34] This would enable Korea to strive to be on a par with its Chinese and Japanese neighbors. Since the PRC is a major nuclear power and Japan has the technological know-how to become a nuclear power very rapidly—making Japan a de facto "virtual" nuclear power^[35]—it is all too easy to visualize a nationalistic united Korea that owed no obligation to any external power

for its creation contemplating a nuclear option in order to generate a stabilized regional balance of power. Such a Korea might well perceive the notions embodied in the *Mugunghwa/Rose of Sharon* literary metaphor as the essence of realism capable of making Korea a truly formidable "poison shrimp." Clearly, however, none of this would be in U.S. national interests regarding its nuclear non-proliferation policies.

On balance the most prudent approach the United States can take toward the Korean nuclear issue is to avoid the war-based, collapse-based, regime change-based, and autonomous negotiations-based scenarios for resolving inter-Korean tensions. Instead, the United States—preferably in conjunction with regional partners—should do its utmost to be supportive of the inter-Korean engagement processes that can reconcile Korean differences and reunify the Korean nation in a state that will have moral and geopolitical obligations toward its external benefactors and the international system they play major roles in shaping. That approach will simultaneously resolve the Korean nuclear issues and the longstanding issues surrounding a divided Korea that should have been resolved decades ago.

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