

The Korean Peninsula: Is Kim Dae-jung's Pursuit of a Korean Confederation Realistic?

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Introduction: Swiri fever highlights issue of reunification *

In the spring of 1999 Swiri -fever swept South Korea. Millions flocked to see the first domestic action film considered up to international standards.¹ “Swiri,”² a slick Hollywood-style spy thriller, revolves around the complex issue of Korean unification that lies at the heart of Korea's future. Since the inauguration of President Kim Dae-jung in February 1998, South Korea has debated unification more openly than ever before.

Though the film concerns a diehard North Korean secret agent trying to provoke a war between the two Koreas, who falls in love with a South Korean intelligence officer, serious themes underlie the melodrama. At the end of the film, South and North Korean intelligence officers battle each other in the back halls of a Seoul stadium during a World Cup soccer match.³ Neither the jubilant crowds nor the smiling representatives of ongoing normalization talks between South and North are aware of the hostilities. Did the scriptwriter want to remind his audience how easily war on the Korean Peninsula could break out, despite the optimistic public statements advocating Kim Dae-jung's “Sunshine policy”? Or did he intend to insinuate that – in real life as in movies – Korean political leaders are not always aware of the military's actions? In fact, it is unclear to what extent the South Korean military supports Kim Dae-jung's comprehensive engagement. His policy explicitly rules out a military takeover of the North and promotes not only engagement but also peaceful coexistence.

* This working paper is a result of three research trips the author made to the Republic of Korea (August 30 – September 9, 1998, March 1 - May 3, 1999 and June 21-30, 1999). She would like to thank James McEnteer for insightful comments on an earlier draft.

¹ The film broke “Titanic's” record for the biggest box office hit ever in South Korea less than two months after it was released. As of April 9, 1999, 4.7 million people had seen the film (“Swiri’ Tops Box Office Record,” *Korea Times*, April 11, 1999).

² *Swiri* is a native freshwater fish found only in Korea. In the film, *swiri* is the code name of the leading North Korean secret agent. Curiously, the author was told by several South Koreans that *swiri* was not a fish known to the general public before the film came out.

³ South Korea and Japan have been designated co-hosts of the Soccer World Cup in 2002. In March 1999, South Korea offered North Korea two matches to host (“North Korea to be asked to hold 2 games of 2002 World Cup finals,” *Korea Herald*, March 10, 1999).

Such questions lead to others, on which this paper will focus. How realistic is a confederation of two Korean nations, with two systems and two governments, as Kim Dae-jung envisions? Confederation presupposes the continued existence of the North Korean regime. But can the collapse of North Korea be avoided? To what extent do outsiders, specifically the United States and Korea's neighbors – China, Japan and Russia – influence the direction of events on the Korean Peninsula?

From the Thirty-eighth Parallel to Today

The Korean peninsula was divided along the thirty-eighth parallel line following Japan's surrender in World War II on August 15, 1945. When the Japanese left Korea, which they had occupied since 1910, Soviet and American troops took control of their respective occupation zones.⁴ Beyond a vague statement at the 1943 Cairo Conference that "in due course Korea will become independent and free," the Allies made no specific arrangements regarding the future of Korea after World War II.⁵ The Americans drew up hasty, haphazard plans without consulting any Koreans or Korea experts.⁶

As several scholars have noted, the thirty-eighth parallel border was imposed against the wishes of the Korean people. External powers, notably the United States, were responsible for the division of Korea.⁷ To quote former U.S. Foreign Service official and Korea scholar Gregory Henderson: "No division of a nation in the present world is so astonishing in its origin as the

⁴ For a detailed account of events in Korea after the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945 up until September 9, 1948 when the formation of two separate Koreas, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), had taken place, see chapter four "The Passions 1945-1948" in Brian Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun. A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 185-236. For a concise account, see e.g. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas. A Contemporary History* (London: Warner Books, 1999), pp. 5-8; and Roads Murphey, *East Asia. A New History* (New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 424-426.

⁵ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, p. 5.

⁶ See e.g. Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, pp. 186-190; and Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, pp. 5-7.

⁷ See e.g. Andrea Campana, "History and the Issue of Korean Unification," *Review of Korea Studies* (Seoul, Academy of Korean Studies), vol. 1 (Sept. 1998), pp. 197-198; Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, p. 186; and Sung Chul Yang, *The North and South Korean Political Systems: A Comparative Study* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 149.

division of Korea; none is so unrelated to conditions or sentiment within the nation itself at the time the division was effected; none is to this day so unexplained; in none does blunder and planning oversight appear to have played so large a role. Finally, there is no division for which the U.S. government bears so heavy a share of responsibility as it bears for the division of Korea.”⁸

After the Korean War (1950-1953) the ideological lines hardened between the North and South. With the exception of a few promising interludes the relationship between the two Koreas has remained hostile and suspicious. Both Koreas invoke reunification as a paramount goal. But the “great national unity”⁹ remains as far-off in 1999 as in 1972, when Pyongyang and Seoul issued their historic South North Joint Communiqué, announcing their mutual commitment to the principles of unification. Though nearly half a century has passed since the Korean War ended, the two Koreas are still technically at war. Four-party talks with the United States and China, to discuss a formal peace treaty to replace the 1953 Armistice, have made scant progress.

The past decade has been calamitous for North Korea. Despite boasts of self-reliance, the country plunged into economic disaster when Soviet aid abruptly ended in 1991. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income plummeted during the 1990s. In 1994, founding father Kim Il-sung passed away. That same year Pyongyang managed to avert a war with the United States by wiggling out of its defiant position on the nuclear issue.¹⁰ In 1995, floods and drought aggravated the misery in this last bastion of Stalinism.

During the same period, South Koreans voted their first civilian president into office in direct elections (1992) and held local elections for the first time in over thirty years (1995). Two former presidents were tried and convicted for bribery, insurrection and treason (1996). Before the Asian financial crisis hit Seoul in late 1997, per capita annual income had soared to 10,000

⁸ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, p. 7, quoting Hendersen’s chapter in *Divided Nations in a Divided World* (David McKay, 1974), p. 43.

⁹ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, p. 409.

¹⁰ The 1993-1994 crisis over North Korea’s nuclear activities was defused by the Agreed Framework of October 1994. Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear program, and was promised compensation by Washington. Consequently, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization was set up. In addition to the US, Japan and South Korea, KEDO was joined by Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Finland, Indonesia and New Zealand. Attempts to persuade China and Russia to join were unsuccessful.

dollars. South Korea joined the OECD in 1996. Though the Asian financial crisis and its aftermath have seriously mitigated the “South Korean miracle,” Koreans south of the thirty-eighth parallel enjoy an existence in stark contrast to their northern brethren.

Korean reunification rhetoric is deeply imbedded in Cold War propaganda. The Korean peninsula holds the most powerful concentrations of opposing military forces of the post-cold war era. An estimated 1,1 million North Korean soldiers face 660,000 South Korean and 37,000 American troops, ready to start another devastating war at a moment’s notice.

Kim Dae-jung’s Three-step Reunification Proposal

In February 1998, South Korea’s new President, Kim Dae-jung, enunciated his Comprehensive Engagement Policy (CEP) toward North Korea, colloquially known as the “sunshine policy.” In essence it is based on three principles: South Korea will not tolerate armed provocation; South Korea has no intention of absorbing North Korea; and South Korea will actively pursue peaceful cooperation and interaction with North Korea. Kim’s policy differs from those of previous South Korean administration in several essential ways:

First, in an attempt to “prepare the framework for peaceful coexistence and pave the avenue toward unification,”¹¹ the “sunshine policy” encourages private and non-governmental economic, cultural and humanitarian contacts with North Korea. Subsequently, an increasing number of North Korean publications, television programs and films have been allowed into South Korea. The Kim Dae-jung government has substantially liberalized (though not eliminated) decades-long controls on private contacts with North Korea. In 1998 alone, 3,317 South Korean businessmen, scholars, journalists, aid workers, musicians and others visited North Korea.¹² That

¹¹ *A Handbook of Korea* (Seoul: Korean Overseas Culture and Information Service, 1998), p. 201.

¹² Yang Sung Chul, “Kim Dae-jung Government Policy toward North Korea: Theoretical Underpinnings and Policy Directions,” p. 4. Paper presented at conference “The United States and the Two Koreas at the Crossroads: Searching

number exceeds the total of South Korean visitors to the North for the previous nine years (1989-1997)¹³ and clearly marks a new stage in inter-Korean relations. Since the 1950-1953 Korean War, no letters, phone calls or other forms of direct contact have been permitted between civilians across the border.¹⁴ The effects of decades-long propaganda, coupled with a near-total lack of information about the isolated North, will certainly complicate the eventual process of unification.¹⁵ Kim Dae-jung's belief that the Koreans can only change their attitudes through people-to-people relations may prove to be his "sunshine policy's" most valuable legacy.

Second, Kim Dae-jung intends to "separate economics from government." That much-touted phrase embodies the President's pledge to support private business and other non-governmental contacts with North Korea regardless of possible difficulties between the two governments or provocations from the North. As a result, despite criticism from opposition politicians, the government did not restrict economic ties or grassroots-level contacts when a North Korean submarine entered South Korean waters in December 1998, or even after the worst naval clash since the Korean War, in June 1999. Similar incidents in the past caused the Seoul government to suspend its promised pursuit of engagement with the North.

Third, in an equally clear-cut departure from previous administrations, Kim Dae-jung pledged not to link inter-Korean relations with ties between North Korea and the United States,

Japan or any other country. Previous South Korean governments objected to direct contacts between the United States and North Korea, insisting that all roads to Pyongyang pass through Seoul. Kim Dae-jung has encouraged Washington (as well as Tokyo) to improve ties with

for a New Passage," March 26, 1999, Seoul. The figure 3317 excludes more than 80,000 South Korean tourists who since November 18, 1998 had taken part in tightly supervised tours to Mt. Kumgang in North Korea onboard Hyundai cruising ships ("Sunshine is Best for North, Seoul Says," *International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1999).

¹³ Yang Sung Chul, "Kim Dae-jung Government Policy toward North Korea: Theoretical Underpinnings and Policy Directions," p. 4. According to Yang, 2407 South Koreans visited North Korea from 1989 to 1997. According to *A Handbook of Korea*, 3023 South Koreans visited North Korea from 1988 until the end of May 1998 (p. 203).

¹⁴ Mary Jordan, "Koreans Search for Family as Their Time Runs Short," *International Herald Tribune*, April 15, 1999. According to Jordan, estimates of how many South Koreans have a parent, sibling or child still living in the North range from 400,000 to 1 million. According to a *Korea Times* editorial, there are 7.67 million members of separated families of which 1.23 million are so-called first-generation victims of separation ("Recovery of 'Chollyun' Bond," June 7, 1999).

¹⁵ For an analysis of the perceptions South Koreans have of the North, see e.g. Geir Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea: The Cultural Dimension in Korean Politics* (Richmond: Curzon, 1998), pp. 41-65.

Pyongyang, regardless of progress or setbacks in inter-Korean relations. According to Dr. Yang Sung Chul, Member of the National Assembly, Kim Dae-jung “firmly believes that such an improvement would create an environment for better North-South relations.”¹⁶ The role of external parties on the Korean Peninsula will be discussed below.

Kim Dae-jung sees his unification formula as a “three-stage approach.”¹⁷ The first stage, lasting approximately ten years, would entail a confederation of South and North Korea, with each government retaining its respective system. The second stage would join both halves of the peninsula in a Federation of two Koreas. A single federal government would administer foreign relations and defense, while regional autonomous governments North and South would handle each region’s internal affairs. The third and final stage would entail complete unification, with the Korean peninsula governed either by a centralized government or several autonomous regional governments, as in the federal systems of the United States and Germany.¹⁸ The difference between the federal stage and complete unification is somewhat vague, partly because, according to Kim Dae-jung, the Korean people must make the final choice through democratic procedures. Kim Dae-jung concedes that “by simply entering the second stage of federation, one could argue that de facto unification is achieved.”¹⁹

No previous leaders of South or North Korea have predicated the unification process on the peaceful coexistence of two Koreas defined as two different states.²⁰ The North in particular has held fast to the principle, “one-nation and one-state,” rejecting the possible ideological coexistence of capitalism and communism in one nation. Based on this logic, North Korea has justified its attempt to foment revolution in the South.

¹⁶ Yang Sung Chul, “Kim Dae-jung Government Policy toward North Korea: Theoretical Underpinnings and Policy Directions,” p. 5.

¹⁷ For an overview of Kim Dae-jung’s three-stage unification formula, see chapter 1 of Kim Dae-jung, *Kim Dae-jung’s “Three-Stage” Approach to Korean Unification. Focusing on the South-North Confederal Stage* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California), pp. 1-36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5, 14-15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁰ Kang In-duk, “1998 Perspective of the Situation Around the Korean Peninsula, and the Roles of the Surrounding Countries,” *East Asia Review* (Seoul: Institute of East Asian Studies), vo. 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998), p. 16.

President Kim Dae-jung insists that his government's policies do not seek North Korea's collapse. Citing the successful U.S. policy of détente toward the former Soviet Union, he argues that engagement with communism has always worked better than confrontation.²¹ He hopes to coexist peacefully alongside the fierce but failing North Korean regime and negotiate the establishment of a confederation. He justifies a process of gradual unification with economic figures. Based on studies of German unification, the South Korean Ministry of Unification estimated in September 1998 that it would cost 300 billion dollars over a period of ten years to raise the North Koreans' standard of living to 60 percent of the South Korean level.²² Other estimates have cited the costs of unification as one trillion dollars – “a figure so large as to be infeasible, even if spread over a period of ten to 25 years.”²³ Kim Dae-jung has warned that South Korea simply could not cope with the economic burden of North Korea's collapse, especially since the Asian financial crisis hit South Korea.²⁴ Whatever the figures, the task would be significantly more difficult and expensive than West Germany's unification with East Germany, because of the much wider disparity.²⁵ In human terms, the German and Korean cases are not comparable. Germans soldiers did not kill other German soldiers during World War II. At least two million Koreans died during the Korean War.

Professor Lee Chong-ship, a longtime advocate of engaging North Korea, believes the vast majority of South Koreans are hoping for the collapse of North Korea and a German-style

²¹ Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan, “Sunshine is Best for North, Seoul Says,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1999 (*Washington Post* correspondents' interview with Kim Dae-jung).

²² Author's interview with Yoo Ho-Yeol P, Research Fellow, Korea Institute for National Unification, September 7, 1998.

²³ Marcus Noland, “Why North Korea Will Muddle Through,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 4, p. 114. For an innovative approach to calculating the cost of unification, see Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Li-gang Liu, “The Costs and Benefits of Korean Unification: Alternate Scenarios,” *Asian Survey* (Berkeley: University of California), vol. 38, no. 8 (August 1998), pp. 801-814.

²⁴ Following German unification but especially since the Asian financial crisis shook South Korea in the autumn of 1997, much has been written in the South Korean press about the economic disaster that would follow if North Korea was to collapse overnight. Dr. Kim Kyung-Won, South Korean Ambassador to Washington from 1985-1988 and presently President of the Daewoo-funded Institute of Social Sciences was one of the few who put forth a dissenting view during the author's research trip in the spring of 1999. According to Kim Kyung-Won, there has been too much emphasis on the economic woes of unification. Kim said: “North Koreans have a different perception than South Koreans of the definition of a good life. In his annual New Year's address, the late North Korean leader Kim Il-sung used to define the North Korean dream as having a bowl of white rice and a bowl of beef soup. If we [South Koreans] can provide sufficient food to the North Koreans, that initially will go a long way to meet basic needs” (author's interview with Kim Kyung Won, April 26, 1999).

²⁵ See e.g. Don Oberdorfer, “Putting Korea Together Again,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 14, 1998.

reunification. “This is a very dangerous option,” Professor Lee said in April 1999. “In East Germany, security was not in the hands of East Germans. Most of the soldiers were Russians who could be sent home. But what is going to happen to the North Korean army of more than one million soldiers? The mentality of ‘if I’m going to die, you’re going to die with me’ prevails among Koreans. In the event of a collapse of the Pyongyang regime, this might become reality.” In Lee Chong-ship’s view, confederation is the only viable option. But he does not foresee it materializing in President Kim Dae-jung’s projected time frame. “The South Koreans have to change their attitudes first,” he said.²⁶

President Kim’s critics call his “sunshine policy” appeasement – a naive and ineffective approach towards a rogue nation – that endangers South Korea’s national security and gives too much to North Korea for too little. Skeptics also voice concern that President Kim’s encouragement of large-scale business deals with North Korea merely strengthens the harshly authoritarian Kim Jong-il regime.²⁷ According to Kim Deog-Ryong, Vice-President of the opposition Grand National Party, “there is the danger that North Korea will exploit President Kim’s conciliatory measures. Offering sunshine is commendable, but at the same time the North must be warned that the South also has a cold wind at its disposal.”²⁸

Many who approve President Kim’s encouragement of grass-roots contacts and his gestures of accommodation toward North Korean leaders to promote dialogue, remain skeptical about the feasibility of his three-stage unification. Longtime Korea-observer Don Oberdorfer calls Kim’s “sunshine” diplomacy a risky bet.²⁹ Human events sometimes unravel more rapidly than policy-makers plans. To quote former South Korean Ambassador to Washington, Dr. Kim Kyung Won, “History does not work that way.”³⁰

²⁶ Author’s interview with University of Pennsylvania Professor Lee Chong-ship in Seoul, April 12, 1999. He was a visiting professor at the graduate school of Kyonghi University in the spring of 1999.

²⁷ See “Former N. Korea ideologue expresses caution on Seoul’s ‘sunshine policy,’” *Korea Herald*, March 11, 1999; Han Dong-soo, “One-Sided Appeasement of North,” *Korea Times*, June 17, 1999; and Park Sang-seek, “The Sunshine Policy: Why Should We Pursue It?” (paper at conference “The United States and the Two Koreas,” March 26, 1999).

²⁸ Author’s interview with Kim Deog-Ryong in Seoul, April 19, 1999.

²⁹ Oberdorfer, “Putting Korea Together Again,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 14, 1998.

³⁰ Author’s interview with former South Korean Ambassador to Washington, Dr. Kim Kyung Won, April 26, 1999.

Aid Alone Will Not Save North Korea

The first stage of Kim Dae-jung's proposal, calling for peaceful coexistence in a confederation of two governments with opposing ideologies and conflicting political and economic systems, presupposes the continuing existence of the North Korea state. But will the state survive?

The ongoing famine in North Korea has significantly changed pre-1995 evaluations of Pyongyang's ability to exist in the post-Cold War era.³¹ International aid organizations report that between 2 to 3.5 million North Koreans (from a pre-famine population of 24 million) have died of starvation or starvation-related diseases since 1995.³² They estimate that over 60 percent of North Korean children under age seven have stunted growth and face mental development problems.³³ The famine in North Korea has been described as comparable in scale to the Ethiopian famine in the mid-1980s and the one in Somalia in the early 1990s.³⁴

According to nutritionist Esko Koskinen, who spent six months in North Korea in 1997-1998 working for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the devastating effects of the famine are not as visible in North Korea as in African countries because of the highly institutionalized nature of North Korean society.³⁵ North Korean children are not dying by the roadside, but behind the walls of day-care centers. The Seoul-based Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement, helping North Korean escapees in Northeast China since December 1996, estimated

³¹ For an appraisal of North Korea's prospects for opening and reform, see e.g. Paik Hak Soon, "Prospects for North Korea's Transformation and North-South Korea's Economic Cooperation," *The Korean Journal of Area Studies*, vol. 11 (1997), pp. 197-224.

³² In April 1999, Jenny Jihun Park of the Seoul-based Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement estimated that 3,5 million North Koreans had died of starvation since August 1995 (author's interview with Jenny Jihyun Park, April 13, 1999). The Movement has been conducting research and providing food aid to North Koreans on the Chinese-North Korean border since December 1996. According to a survey of 1694 North Korea escapees by the Movement's researchers, the mortality rate of escapees' family members (from August 1995 to September 1998) was 28,7 percent. See "The Food Crisis in North Korea: Witnessed by 1694 Food Refugees," Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement, November 1998, available on the Internet (<http://blue.nownuri.net/~kbsm>). See also Michael Laris, "UN Sees Huge Famine in North Korea," *International Herald Tribune*, February 1, 1999; and John Pomfret, "North Koreans Who Fled Tell of Famine, Save for Elite and Army," *International Herald Tribune*, February 13-14, 1999.

³³ See James Pringle, "Starving North Koreans Need the World to Help," *International Herald Tribune*, February 9, 1999; and Michael Laris, "UN Sees Huge Famine in North Korea," *International Herald Tribune*, February 1, 1999.

³⁴ Michael Laris, "UN Sees Huge Famine in North Korea," *International Herald Tribune*, February 1, 1999; and John Pomfret, "U.S. Team Reports Korean Starvation," *International Herald Tribune*, August 8, 1999.

³⁵ Author's interview with Esko Koskinen in Helsinki, August 1998. Koskinen finished his six-month assignment in North Korea in June 1998. At the time of the interview, he estimated that since the summer of 1995 about 5 percent of the North Korean population had died from starvation or famine-related diseases.

that 300,000 to 400,000 North Koreans crossed the border in 1998 in search of food. The majority returned home after stocking up on food provided by relief organizations and Chinese-Korean donors or purchased with money obtained by selling goods on Chinese markets.³⁶ About 100,000 North Koreans are presumed to have stayed in China as illegal refugees.³⁷

North Korea-watchers in South Korea and elsewhere disagree about the survival chances of the North Korean state. Because accurate information about North Korea is difficult to obtain, predictions lack sound evidence. Those who foresee the Kim Jong-il regime “muddling through” base their evaluations, in part, on the coercive nature of the Pyongyang regime, which brutally suppresses opposition or dissent.³⁸

It has been pointed out that human misery and widespread famine due to grave policy errors in the Ukraine under Stalin and in China under Mao did not topple those regimes.³⁹ But North Korea in 1999 is not comparable to the Soviet Union of the 1930s or China of the 1950s. First, though recent estimates that between 20 and 43 million Chinese starved to death following the Great Leap Forward (1958-1959) entail horrific figures,⁴⁰ the death toll was only 2 to 4 percent of the population. As of April 1999, the estimated mortality rate of the ongoing North Korean famine was about 10 percent of the population.⁴¹ Second, Kim Jong-il’s government is not a revolutionary regime. Neither the “government nor the governed have the same capacity for enduring hardship that would accompany a period of revolutionary fervor.”⁴² Third, North Korea is a relatively industrialized, urban society, representing what Aidan Foster Carter has called

³⁶ Author’s interview with Jenny Jihyun Park of the Seoul-based Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement, April 13, 1999.

³⁷ See Shim Jae Hoon, “North Korea: A Crack in the Wall,” *Far East Economic Review*, April 29, 1999, pp. 10-14.

³⁸ For a gruesome account of prison camps and punishment of dissent in North Korea, see e.g. “Political Prisoners’ Camps in North Korea: The testimony of An Myong-chol, an ex-guard at a political prisoners’ camp in North Korea” (Seoul: Center for the Advancement of North Korean Human Rights, 1995).

³⁹ See Richard L. Armitage, “A Comprehensive Approach to North Korea,” Strategic Forum, Institute of National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington DC, number 159, March 1999, p. 3. Also available on the internet (<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/forum159.html>).

⁴⁰ See Linda Jakobson, *A Million Truths. A Decade in China* (New York: M. Evans, 1998), p. 69.

⁴¹ See e.g. “The Food Crisis in North Korea: Witnessed by 1694 Food Refugees,” Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement, November 1998 (<http://blue.nownuri.net/~kbsm>); Michael Laris, “UN Sees Huge Famine in North Korea,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 1, 1999; and John Pomfret, “North Koreans Who Fled Tell of Famine, Save for Elite and Army,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 13-14, 1999.

⁴² Noland, “Why North Korea Will Muddle Through,” p. 113.

“modernity without modernization.”⁴³ Fourth, North Koreans are not as isolated from the outside world as the Chinese or Soviets of forty and sixty years ago. The famine has precipitated cracks in the walls of the once hermitic nation. Escapees, who cross into China in search of food, return to North Korea with information from the outside world. News of the changes in Communist China following economic reform and even of the living standards of South Koreans is slowly seeping into the reclusive Stalinist state.

Though few signs exist of organized opposition to the Kim Jong-il regime within North Korea, reported purges in the North Korean government suggest that “Pyongyang’s elite is experiencing some instability.”⁴⁴ The alleged relocation of 2 million residents of Pyongyang and nearby cities (8 percent of North Korea’s total population) to rural areas reflects the North Korean regime’s uneasiness about possible public unrest.⁴⁵ North Korea specialist Paik Hak-song of the Sejong Institute in Seoul believes that Kim Jong-il’s speech in December 1996 provides “ample evidence that North Korea has been suffering from a divided leadership in implementing critical choices.”⁴⁶ There are also indications that the famine has started to take its toll among the privileged members of the ruling Workers’ Party. In 1998, party members and other elite groups joined the ranks of escapees foraging for food in China.⁴⁷ Unable to supply food rations since 1997, Pyongyang delegated economic authority to the provinces, telling them to fend for themselves, a decision that will surely undermine the central government’s overall authority.

Though an immediate collapse of the North Korean state is not probable, its chances of survival in the short-to-middle term – the next five to fifteen years – are slim. The economic

⁴³ Adian Foster-Carter’s talk at “Asia Update” workshop, arranged by Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, May 5, 1999.

⁴⁴ David Reese, “The Prospects for North Korea’s Survival,” (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998) Adelphi Paper 323, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Shim Jae-yun, “NK Conducts Massive Relocation of Residents,” *Korea Times*, April 3, 1999. The article is based on a report compiled by South Korea’s National Intelligence Service to the National Assembly’s Information Committee. According to the report, 2 million city residents had been relocated to rural areas since January 1999.

⁴⁶ Paik Hak Soon, “Problems and Prospects for North Korea’s Transformation in 1990s” (Sungnam, Korea: The Sejong Institute, 1998), p. 64. However, in an interview with the author, Paik Hak Soon did not agree to predictions that the Pyongyang regime is on the verge of collapse, nor did he see evidence of that happening. “North Korea’s army is disciplined,” he pointed out (author’s interview with Paik Hak Soon in Seoul, March 22, 1999).

⁴⁷ See Shim Jae Hoon, “North Korea: A Crack in the Wall,” *Far East Economic Review*, April 29, 1999, pp. 10-14.

crisis is so severe that the economy cannot be sustained without outside help.⁴⁸ But aid alone will not revive it. Besides, international aid organizations are becoming weary of Pyongyang's refusal to allow wider monitoring of where the food aid ends up. The support of donor states will dwindle if the North does not initiate meaningful economic reform.⁴⁹ Extensive reform is necessary, but the Kim Jong-il regime fears – with good reason – that reform will lead to its demise. As David Reese writes, “Once significant reform is underway... it is difficult to envisage the circumstances in which he [Kim Jong-il] or his regime could remain in power.”⁵⁰ Reform will inevitably bring an influx of new ideas, along with economic and political influences that would erode the present leadership's authority and legitimacy. The more North Korea opens up, the less control the present totalitarian regime will have over its citizens and the easier it will be for North Koreans to compare their lot with that of their compatriots in the South. South Korea, with a per-capita GDP at least six times larger than that of North Korea, poses a viable threat. When the Beijing leadership embarked on its open door policy and economic reforms, the Chinese Communist Party had no reason to fear that others would come in and run their country. The North Korean Communist Party does.

Though promoting dialogue with North Korea is more constructive than risking war with hostile posturing, President Kim Dae-jung's government is leading South Koreans to believe that the Kim Jong-il regime will change and open up. According to a US official who has observed political and military events on the Korean Peninsula for decades, “it is dangerous to build up the hope and expectation of peacefully co-existing states.”⁵¹ In his view, the prospect of war is too

⁴⁸ See e.g. Shim Jae Hoon, “Welfare State: The floods are over, but Pyongyang is hooked on aid,” *Far East Economic Review*, May 27, 1999, p. 24.

⁴⁹ Pomfret, “U.S. Team Reports Korean Starvation,” *International Herald Tribune*, August 8, 1999; Reese, “The Prospects for North Korea's Survival,” p. 24.

⁵⁰ Reese, p. 14.

⁵¹ Author's interview in Seoul with United States official who has spent decades observing political and military events on the Korean Peninsula, April 22, 1999.

horrific to contemplate as a serious option in any discussion of future scenarios, even among high-ranking South Korean military officers.⁵²

Despite President Kim Dae-jung's pledge that South Korea does not intend to absorb North Korea, economic reform in North Korea, along with outside influences, would ultimately lead to absorption on some level. A more open North Korean society, with an economy dependent on foreign trade and investment, would increasingly resemble that of South Korea. The *raison d'être* of two Korean states, representing opposing ideologies and systems, would diminish. As in Germany, the more prosperous party would have to shoulder the burden of unification. Kim Dae-jung's three-stage unification proposal, which pursues a confederation of two Korean states, is "unrealistic in terms of the expectations it gives rise to."⁵³

The Crucial External Actors: the US and China

Though Kim Dae-jung's policy calls for Koreans to resolve unification, it also encourages the major powers to help ease tensions in the Korean peninsula. President Roh Tae-woo laid the foundation for this strategy during his years in power (1988-1993). Roh's Nordpolitik, similar to Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, led South Korea to establish diplomatic relations with several former enemies, most importantly the former Soviet Union (1990) and the People's Republic of China (1992). Together with the United States, on whom South Korea relies militarily, and Japan, its former colonizer, with whom Seoul normalized relations back in 1965, Russia and China have a stake in the future of the Korean peninsula. As throughout its history, Korea must calculate its future in terms of the strategic position it occupies among the most powerful nations on earth.

⁵² *Ibid.* According to the official, an often-repeated phrase describing the chance of war as "small, 20 percent or less" is misleading. He likened the possibility of war breaking out on the Korean peninsula to a situation in which "a person is told that the plane that he is about to board runs a 20 percent risk of crashing. It's a small risk, but how many people would want to board that plane?"

⁵³ Author's interview in Seoul with United States official who has spent decades observing political and military events on the Korean Peninsula, April 22, 1999.

Ever since Pyongyang threatened to quit the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1993, the nuclear issue has dominated the concerns of external powers about the Korean peninsula. South Korean foreign policy makers and American diplomats in Seoul frequently say that Washington devotes too little attention to Korea, unless there is a crisis impending.⁵⁴ But it is well to remember that until 1945 virtually nothing was known about the “Hermit Kingdom,” as foreigners called Korea. The American Secretary of State, preparing for a meeting to decide the future of Korea, in August 1945, reportedly asked his aide to please tell him where Korea was.⁵⁵

Washington’s official view of Korean unification is much the same as Beijing’s, Moscow’s and Tokyo’s: the two Koreas should resolve their differences voluntarily and peacefully. But to what extent the four major players would actually welcome or even accept Korean unification is open to debate. At the moment, with unification still a far-off goal, none of the external powers has voiced any opposition to the idea of Korean unity. In reality, each would attach certain conditions to future scenarios.

Advocates of Kim Dae-jung’s comprehensive engagement policy consider Washington’s increasing contacts with Pyongyang promising. Numerous South Korean scholars have pointed out that Pyongyang desperately needs economic assistance. It would be easier for the North Koreans to align with the United States and milk Washington for dollars than to accept financial help from their archenemy, South Korea. Kim Dae-jung’s camp trusts that Washington will remain steadfast in its commitment towards Seoul and not allow Pyongyang to drive a wedge between the United States and South Korea, though they admit that North Korea will certainly try. Opponents of Kim Dae-jung see his policy as precarious, liable to create friction between Washington and Seoul.

Washington’s interest in the Korean Peninsula is part of its overall Asia-Pacific regional strategy. The United States is primarily concerned with maintaining stability in Northeast Asia and ensuring nuclear nonproliferation in the region. US troops in South Korea are linked to the

⁵⁴ Author’s conversations with South Korean diplomats, South Korean Foreign Ministry officers and U.S. diplomats in Seoul in March and April, 1999.

⁵⁵ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, p. 5.

American forces in Japan. From Washington's point of view, the withdrawal of American soldiers from Korean soil could destabilize East Asia. Few observers see this as a plausible scenario, though several ideas regarding the future status of U.S. troops have been floated in public. One option in a unified Korea would be to keep all American soldiers south of the thirty-eighth parallel. Another would be to call them peacekeeping troops; and a third, to remove most American combat troops from Korean soil, maintaining only American logistical facilities and service personnel south of the thirty-eighth parallel.

North Korea has steadfastly demanded the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the peninsula. However, as early as 1988, North Koreans hinted at the possibility of accepting a "phased withdrawal" of U.S. forces,⁵⁶ and in 1999 a South Korean official said that the North Koreans had indicated that they would accept foreign soldiers as "peacekeeping forces."⁵⁷ South Korean President Kim Dae-jung caused a stir in April 1999 by saying that he does not care whether US troops are withdrawn or not as long as the Americans are part of a peacekeeping force in Korea.⁵⁸

China, on the other hand, does want to see U.S. troops on its doorstep (along its northeastern border in Manchuria) and would resist the emergence of a unified Korea with U.S. troops present.⁵⁹ In the words of Beijing University professor Zhang Xiaoming, "China would not tolerate the domination of the region by any hostile power."⁶⁰ He added that China should oppose the continued presence of the U.S. armed forces after unification, because their presence could lead to the domination of that area by one power, and thereby threaten China's national security. Alluding to the Korean War (1950-1953) when Mao Zedong sent Chinese troops to help North Korea face off South Korean troops fighting alongside U.S.-led United Nations forces, Zhang notes: "History has taught China a great lesson."⁶¹

⁵⁶ Son Key-young, "Seoul Not Ready to Debate Refining Role of USFK," *Korea Times*, April 16, 1999.

⁵⁷ Author's interview with senior South Korean official at the South Korean Foreign Ministry in Seoul, April 23, 1999. See also Lee Chang-sip, "Pyongyang proposes USFK Remain as Peacekeeping Force," *Korea Times*, April 7, 1999.

⁵⁸ Son Key-young, "Seoul Not Ready to Debate Refining Role of USFK," *Korea Times*, April 16, 1999.

⁵⁹ Author's interviews with two Chinese officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, June 14, 1999.

⁶⁰ Zhang Xiaoming, "The Korean Peninsula and China's National Security: Past, Present, and Future," *Asian Perspective* (Seoul: Kyungnam University), vol. 22, no. 3, 1998, p. 260. Zhang Xiaoming, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the Institute of International Relations, Beijing University.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

Another threat to China's national security, according to Zhang Xiaoming, would be German-style reunification of the Korean peninsula (absorption of one part by the other).⁶² Though not stated publicly by officials of the People's Republic of China, the continued division of Korea is Beijing's first choice.⁶³ For this reason, the Chinese leadership agrees with South Korean President Kim Daejung's policy of doing everything possible to avoid a collapse of the North Korean state, and continues to provide desperately needed grain and oil to Pyongyang. Chinese assistance has helped to avert a much greater crisis in North Korea.

Despite Beijing's desire to continue the *status quo* in Korea, the two Communist nations no longer enjoy the close Sino-North Korean friendship, "cemented in blood."⁶⁴ Beijing's clout in Pyongyang has dwindled to a minimum since the Chinese established diplomatic ties with Seoul in 1992, infuriating Pyongyang. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has no personal ties with the Chinese leaders as did his father, the late Kim Il-sung. And Beijing has not hidden its frustration at the refusals of Kim Il-sung or his son to introduce meaningful economic reforms.

One crucial unknown variable in the Korean equation is the answer to the question: What would Beijing actually do if the collapse of a North Korean regime led either to war or to unification more or less on the South's – and implicitly America's – terms?

The state of Chinese-Taiwanese relations will be decisive in determining Beijing's actions. In any event, the Taiwan question threatens to create serious friction in East Asia. Whether or not Kim Jong-il's regime collapses, the Seoul government will confront a delicate dilemma if the Taiwan question escalates, even to a so-called limited military confrontation that involves U.S. forces. Seoul would be under extreme American pressure to take sides, which could lead to "explosive anti-American sentiment"⁶⁵ among the populace. The former South Korean Ambassador to Washington, Dr. Kim Kwung Won, predicted that some South Korean policy

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁶³ Author's interviews in Beijing in June 1999 (fn 59); see also Marc Lanteigne, "Shadow Dancing: Seeking Cooperation on the North Korean Problem," *Pacific Focus* (Inchon South Korea: Inha University), vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 66-67; and Reese, "The Prospects for North Korea's Survival," p. 75.

⁶⁴ Zhang, "The Korean Peninsula and China's National Security," p. 262.

⁶⁵ Rhee Tong-chin, "South Korea between China and the United States," *Korea Times*, March 17, 1999.

makers might, in such a situation, be tempted to curry favor with Beijing, and belittle the importance of the Seoul-Washington defense treaty. “That would be very dangerous. We should be clear-headed about our long-term interests. Without the United States there can be no balance of power that we can depend on,” Kim Kyong Won said. He believes that if the Taiwan issue does not deteriorate, Korean unification could be managed in a way acceptable to the Chinese leadership. And if it does deteriorate? “The situation could become very ugly,” Kim answered.⁶⁶ Along these same lines, Professor Paik Jin-hjun of Seoul National University said that South Korea’s “possible equal distance diplomacy toward the United States and China is nothing more than a ‘fantasy’.”⁶⁷ Although South Korea needs to maintain a close partnership with China, Professor Paik stressed that Seoul’s unification diplomacy is based on a strong Seoul-Washington alliance.

The Involuntary Bystanders: Russia and Japan

Russia has strategic interests in developments on the Korean Peninsula, but is unable to exert significant influence.⁶⁸ Moscow has not officially expressed disappointment at being excluded from four-party talks (among the Koreans, US and China) to negotiate a formal peace treaty between the two Koreas. But clearly the move did not please them. To quote Gennady L. Isaev, political counselor at the Russian Embassy in Seoul: “In our view, Russia is a great power and an important player when it comes to the future of Northeast Asia. How can you talk about solving security issues in this part of the world without including Russia?”⁶⁹ A senior South Korean diplomat’s observation of Russia’s role in the unification issue is also telling: “The Russians will demand to be a part of whatever happens on the peninsula which, in their favorite diplomatic

⁶⁶ Author’s interview with Kim Kwong Won in Seoul, April 26, 1999.

⁶⁷ Son Key-young, “Equi-Distance Policy to US, China Unrealistic,” *Korea Times*, May 1, 1998. The article was referring to Professor Paik Jin-hyun’s presentation at the symposium “US-Korea Relations on the Eve of the 21st Century Asia-Pacific Era,” in Seoul.

⁶⁸ See e.g. Reese, “The Prospects for North Korea’s Survival,” p. 13.

⁶⁹ Author’s interview with Gennady L. Isaev at the Russian Embassy in Seoul, April 28, 1999.

style, will mean that they will insist on a six-nation conference. And why not comply? It will be in our [South Koreans'] interest in the long-term to have the Russians as an element of equilibrium with China."⁷⁰

Pyongyang was enraged at Gorbachev's decision in 1990 to establish diplomatic ties with Seoul, in return for a \$3 billion economic cooperation loan from the South Koreans.⁷¹ Early in 1990, when the Soviet press criticized the dictatorship and isolation of North Korea, more than 8,800 North Korean students and technicians, including 500 in China, were called home for ideological reorientation.⁷² Gorbachev's assertions that rapprochement between Moscow and Seoul "will enhance the unification of Korea that the Korean people have hoped for" and that "we are trying our best to provide an environment in which unification can take place"⁷³ did not go down well in Pyongyang. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Moscow's decision to discontinue aid to Pyongyang precipitated North Korea's economic collapse. When Beijing joined Moscow to demand payment for goods in hard currency, Pyongyang was forced to try and "find accommodation with the US."⁷⁴

Since 1994 Moscow has made concerted efforts to improve relations with Pyongyang. But North Korea's former benefactor wields next-to-no clout over Kim Il-sung's decision-making. Like China, Russia does not want to see a US-dominated unified Korea. It will politically ally itself with Beijing against Washington on issues concerning the peninsula. In the long run, however, some Russians feel that a unified Korea would be Moscow's partner. Gennady Chufirin, deputy director of the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies, said in 1992 that a unified Korea "may contribute positively to the state of international relations because Korea would become a natural

⁷⁰ Author's interview with senior South Korean diplomat in Seoul, April 26, 1999.

⁷¹ For a detailed account of the Soviet Unions' decision in 1990 to establish diplomatic ties with South Korea, see chapter 9 ("Moscow Switches Sides") in Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*. Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was given the task of breaking the news to Pyongyang. He reportedly described his encounter with North Korean officials as "the most difficult, most unpleasant talk of my life" (p. 213).

⁷² Ilpyong J. Kim, "The Soviet Union/Russia and Korea: Dynamics of 'New Thinking'," in Young Whan Kihl, *Korea and the World. Beyond the Cold War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 92.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.88.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

ally of Russia in opposing the revival of Japanese militarism.”⁷⁵ Historical logic informs Chuftrin’s assertion because Russia, alongside the Japanese, exercised direct power in Korean affairs during the 1890s. In 1896 the last king of the Chosun dynasty fled Japanese ministrations to the Russian legation in Soeul, and spent a year there.⁷⁶

Like the United States, Japan wants to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula, though Tokyo – like Moscow - is not in a position to influence developments.⁷⁷ Tokyo worries increasingly about a possible North Korean military threat; especially if the Pyongyang regime resorts to violence as it collapses. The Japanese were shocked by Pyongyang’s decision in August 1998 to test-fire – over Japanese territory – the first of a two-stage missile (Taepo Dong-1) which can carry conventional or nuclear warheads. Then again, were the Kim Il-jong regime to collapse without conflict, Japan would feel pressure from the South Koreans to provide massive economic assistance for the North’s reconstruction.

Japan’s position toward North Korea is, in the words of one Japanese observer of Korean affairs, “difficult to explain because Japan has no defined strategy toward North Korea.”⁷⁸ For Japan the 1990s have generally been a decade of soul-searching regarding its security arrangements.⁷⁹ Pyongyang is eager to establish diplomatic relations with Tokyo for economic reasons, but the Japanese government has little room to maneuver in the face of increasingly negative public opinion toward North Korea, especially since the 1998 missile test. In addition, the alleged kidnappings of several Japanese citizens by North Korean agents in the 1970s remains a contentious issue. Even the pro-Pyongyang organization Chongryun, made up of ethnic Koreans living in Japan, has seen its membership decrease in the 1990s by 50 percent.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93. Kim cites a paper Chuftrin presented at a conference in Seoul in September, 1992. Chuftrin also alludes to a unified Korea becoming a natural ally of Russia, “if history is any guide,” in Gennady Chuftrin, “Russian Interests in Korean Security in the Post-Cold War World,” in Andrew Mack, *Asian Flashpoint. Security and the Korean Peninsula* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1993), p. 36.

⁷⁶ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, pp. 122-123, 141.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Reese, “The Prospects for North Korea’s Survival,” p. 72.

⁷⁸ Comments made by Mori Chiharu, Seoul Bureau Chief of *Yomiuri Shimbun* and long-time Korea-specialist, as a panelist at conference, “The United States and the Two Koreas at the Crossroads,” in Seoul, March 26, 1999.

⁷⁹ For more on Japan’s endeavors to find a new role for itself, see e.g. Akira Iriye, *Japan & the Wider World. From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Longman, 1997).

⁸⁰ Reese, “The Prospects for North Korea’s Survival,” pp. 72-73. In 1990 Chongryun had 224,000 registered voters. By 1997 the number had dropped to 110,000.

Pyongyang relies heavily on this organization for remittances, which have dwindled from 475 million dollars in 1990 to about 47 million dollars in 1997.⁸¹

Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula (1910-1945) constitutes an underlying tension in Tokyo's dealings with both Koreas, though to a lesser extent with South Korea following Kim Dae-jung's visit to Tokyo in 1998. The trip was a watershed event because the Japanese emperor and prime minister offered a written apology for Japan's atrocities as a colonial power.⁸² Seoul and Tokyo established diplomatic relations in 1965, when South Korean leader Park Chun-hee was eager to obtain investments to realize his ambitious industrialization plan. Tokyo paid some \$800 million in grants and soft loans as compensation for its colonial sins.⁸³ Today, Japan is South Korea's second largest trading partner, after the United States.

Japan and Pyongyang began talks to normalize relations in 1990. This was a result of South Korean President Roh Tae-woo's 'Nordpolitik' policy, launched in 1988, which aimed to improve Seoul's relationship with its former enemies, and encouraged neighboring countries to improve their ties with North Korea. But Pyongyang and Tokyo were also stunned by news of the Roh-Gorbachev summit in San Francisco in June 1990, and they decided to effect their own rapprochement, to counterbalance Seoul's diplomatic activities.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Pyongyang was already in desperate need of economic assistance, though its lifeline from Moscow had not yet been cut.

But rounds and rounds of talks led nowhere. One obstacle was North Korea's refusal to permit international inspection of its nuclear facilities. Other points of disagreement involved the amount Japan should pay to compensate for the damage it caused during its colonial rule of Korea (1910-1945). Must Japan pay compensation for "losses suffered by the Korean people" in the decades following 1945? In other words, should Japan be held responsible for the division of

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Kevin Sullivan, "In a First, Japanese Leaders Apologize to Kim for Occupation in Korea," *International Herald Tribune*, October 10, 1998.

⁸³ Reese, "The Prospects for North Korea's Survival," p. 72.

⁸⁴ For a detailed account of the relationship between Japan and North Korea during the past decade, see e.g. Hong Nack Kim, "Japan and North Korea: Normalization Talks Between Pyongyang and Tokyo," in Young Whan Kihl ed., *Korea and the World*, pp.111-129.

Korea? Should Pyongyang provide information about a missing Japanese woman, believed to have been kidnapped by North Korean agents in 1978?⁸⁵ The first breakthrough in seven years occurred in December 1999 when a Japanese delegation headed by former prime minister Tomiichi Murayama visited Pyongyang. The two countries agreed to continue negotiations on normalizing relations, as well as hold separate humanitarian talks on the possibility of Japanese food aid and the possible whereabouts of the missing Japanese citizens.⁸⁶

North Korea's 1998 ballistic missile test prompted the Japanese to take more forceful measures to strengthen its security and step up efforts, with US assistance, to implement a theatre-missile defense program (TMD).⁸⁷ Though Seoul has thus far declined to acquire TMD technology, it may do so in the future. The North Korean missile firing seriously undermined "Beijing's crusade against theatre missile defense."⁸⁸ Washington and Tokyo insist that the TMD system is meant for defense against a possible attack by Pyongyang. But the TMD program angers Beijing, which claims that the technology will be transferred to Taiwan, bolstering the island's defense capabilities. Beijing also fears that deployment of the TMD system will lead to an arms race in Northeast Asia.⁸⁹ Neither fear is groundless.

Conclusion

The external powers – China, Japan, Russia and the United States – have different priorities vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula, though all pay lip service to the goal of peaceful unification. In fact, in stark contrast to the process that led to the demise of Communism elsewhere, the surrounding powers do not want to see North Korea collapse. Each is trying to stabilize North Korea one way

⁸⁵ A Japanese woman, Taguchi Yayeyo, is believed to have been kidnapped by North Korean agents in 1978 and detained in North Korea ever since. The North Korean agent who blew up a Korean Air Lines plane in 1987 has identified photos of Taguchi Yayeyo as her Japanese language instructor, known as Li Un-hye in North Korea (Kim, "Japan and North Korea: Normalization Talks Between Pyongyang and Tokyo," p. 120).

⁸⁶ Doug Struck, "Kidnapping Charge Delays Détente," *International Herald Tribune*, December 4-5, 1999.

⁸⁷ See e.g. Jun Kwan-woo, "Pyongyang's provocations fuels Tokyo's arms buildup," *Korea Herald*, April 3, 1999; and Lanteigne, "Shadow Dancing: Seeking Cooperation on the North Korean Problem," pp. 64-65.

⁸⁸ Gill Bates, "China's Korea Quandry," *Far East Economic Review*, February 18, 1999. Bates is director of the Brookings Centre for Northeast Asian Policy Studies in Washington DC.

⁸⁹ See e.g. "China Welcome's Korea's Decision Not to Join TMD," *Korea Times*, June 9, 1999.

or another. North Korea's favorable external environment, according to North Korea specialist Hak Soon Paik, will be the foundation on which North Korea can build a framework for survival.⁹⁰

Implicitly, none of Korea's neighbors are enthusiastic about a unified Korea. China's stance will be crucial for any concrete unification plans. Beijing will not accept a unified Korea with US troops, nor a unification that takes place solely on South Korea's terms. Therefore, China will continue to prop up the Kim Il-jong regime. But aid alone will not keep Kim Il-jong in power indefinitely.

North Korea is an enigma. Scenarios about the future of North Korea abound, but they generally fall into three categories.⁹¹ The first involves the country imploding, the second has it "muddling through"⁹² and the third, most alarming, scenario envisions the Pyongyang government lashing out in desperation at South Korea (or elsewhere), possibly with the intention of negotiating substantial economic aid after a surprise attack on Seoul. Implosion could start with a coup or an uprising of civilians who have lost all hope of survival. In spite of severe repression, it is impossible to tell where the "breaking point" for the North Korean people, or its leading military officers, may be.⁹³ Inner disintegration would trigger massive refugee flows, and perhaps civil war. The "muddling through" theorists, including Kim Dae-jung, believe that North Korea will continue to be the "great survivor of our times."⁹⁴ They predict that Kim Il-jong will maintain his tight grip on power and gradually implement limited economic reforms.

The North Korean system is in terminal crisis. Kim Il-jong is totally preoccupied with survival. His present strategy of piecemeal reform and dependence on foreign aid will not suffice in the long run. But if he does opt to reform, he will lose his power. The legitimacy of the Communist regime would erode in tempo with the opening of the country. The more influence

⁹⁰ Paik Hak Soon, "North Korea's Unification Policy," in Kwak Tae Hwan, ed. *The Four Powers and Korean Unification Strategies* (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University Press, 1997), p. 125.

⁹¹ See e.g. Lanteigne, "Shadow Dancing: Seeking Cooperation on the North Korean Problem," pp. 51-52.

⁹² "Muddling through," is a popular term when referring to North Korea's future, e.g. Noland, "Why North Korea Will Muddle Through."

⁹³ Lanteigne, "Shadow Dancing: Seeking Cooperation on the North Korean Problem," p. 58.

⁹⁴ Aidan Foster-Carter, "Sunshine or Sunset," *The World Today* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs), vol. 55, no. 3 (March 1999), p. 11.

from South Korea, the more difficult it will become to justify the existence of two Koreas. The “threat from the South” would no longer be a rallying point.

South Korean President’s Kim Dae-jung’s pursuit of a Korean confederation – the peaceful coexistence of two separate Koreas -- is constructive in terms of its attempt to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula. Without question, it also promotes an investment environment the South Korean economy needs to reconstruct and mend the serious systemic flaws uncovered by the Asian financial crisis. But Kim Dae-jung’s three-step unification formula is unrealistic because it presupposes the continuing survival of the North Korean regime and entices the South Korean population to await the peaceful coexistence of two Korean states with ideologically opposing systems. It fails to prepare South Koreans for the sacrifices the ultimate absorption of North Korea would entail.

As the popular film “Swiri” seeks to point out, the South Korean government’s declaration that it will not seek unification by means of taking over the North has not led to a change of mindset in Pyongyang. The North Korean military is still being trained to go to war if necessary to fulfill the paramount goal of unification. More than two generations of Koreans have been brought up in entirely different circumstances. To quote the film’s North Korean commando group leader: “How could you South Koreans who have been brought up on hamburgers possibly understand that your brothers in the North are starving?”

As far as is known, not only South Korean citizens, but also the South Korean government would be ill prepared to cope, if the thirty-eighth parallel boundary suddenly ceased to exist, as the Berlin Wall came down.⁹⁵ Kim Dae-jung and his proponents repeatedly stress the need for patience in planning unification, but it is unclear whether they have the luxury of time.

⁹⁵ In an interview with Don Kirk of the *International Herald Tribune*, researchers at the Unification Institute in Seoul, a government think tank, said they were working on contingency plans for the possibility of a flood of refugees pouring south if North Korea collapses. “But we are not serious about such planning,” said Choi Jim Wook, a research fellow at the institute. Those who have studied the problems North Korean defectors face in South Korean society, question how the South will be able to absorb thousands of North Koreans when they still have not found a way to deal with the 751 North Koreans who have defected since the Korean War (“North Korean Defectors Find Not Much to Cheer in the South”, *IHT*, February 6-7, 1999).