

## **A Neutral Reunified Korea: A Chinese View**

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## I. History and the Neutrality Option: Ends, Means, or Both?

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, simply because of its geographic location, Korea had become a battleground for big powers, not only for control over the Korean peninsula itself, but also for dominance over the Asian mainland.

At the end of World War II, Koreans hoped that their country would finally be free from foreign domination. They never expected that the Cold War would divide their country, and ignite a bloody war that is still not over officially. A line was drawn along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and that line still stands.

The end of the Cold War could have induced peaceful reunification between the two Koreas. However, as the initial euphoria about reunification among South Koreans quickly waned, the enormous cost of the German reunification gave away to a sober understanding that reunification may not happen any time soon. Yet, as recent developments indicate, a divided peninsula is not a pleasant scenario to live with. So what should be done? Should everyone just wait and watch North Korea either sliding toward implosion or muddling through or, in light of the impasse on the peninsula, try some “new” thinking?

The neutrality option for Korea is almost as old as the recognition of the peninsula’s strategic importance. As early as 1885, Yu Kil-chun published a coherent and comprehensive argument for neutrality.<sup>1</sup> And more recently, In Kwan Hwang also argued for a neutral reunified Korea.<sup>2</sup> Most of these arguments, however, took neutrality merely as the ends of reunification.

This paper intends to explore the possibility that neutrality can be *not only the ends, but also the means to achieve reunification*. By “means”, it is meant that the neutrality scenario would alleviate the fear of both the US and China (Russia and Japan too) about the shift of their strategic position, thus injecting much needed urgency into the reunification process. By “ends”,

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in In Kwan Hwang, *The United States and Neutral Reunited Korea* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> In Kwan Hwang, *ibid.*; In Kwang Hwang, “Korean Reunification in a Comparative Perspective,” in Young Whan Kihl, ed., *Korean and the World: beyond the Cold War* (Boulder, C.O: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 279-299.

it is meant that a neutral reunified Korea would best serve the interest of Korea and the four surrounding powers. Such a settlement would also decrease the likelihood of regional conflicts in this area and prevent Korea from being sucked into future conflicts.

In fact, I will argue that a neutral reunified Korea is perhaps the most workable scenario toward peaceful Korean reunification.<sup>3</sup>

## **II. Attitudes towards Korea Reunification**

While it is true that Korean peninsula is a place where the interest of the four great powers (US, Japan, China, and Russia) converges, US and China will be the two key external players in any Korean reunification process. So far, neither the US nor China have displayed much enthusiasm for reunification other than facilitating dialogues between the two Koreas to ease the tension on the peninsula. What are the rationales behind the two great powers' apathetic attitude? And how do the two Koreas themselves approach reunification?

### **(a) The United States**

The foremost reason for the US "go-slow" approach toward Korean reunification is its apprehension that reunification may mean the end of America's military presence on the peninsula, thus jeopardizing its strategic position vis-à-vis China and Russia. The overall US strategic objective in northeast Asia continues to be maintaining its current dominant position. The presence of US troops on the peninsula is one of the linchpins in Washington's power structure design for the region: it serves the dual role of keeping an eye on both China and Russia.

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<sup>3</sup> A neutral reunified Korea here refers to a scenario fulfilling at least the following requirements: (1) A reunified Korea will be a neutral state, and she will pledge to neither maintain nor seek any security alliance with any power or powers, and will not choose side in any potential conflict; (2) A reunified Korea will go through a significant de-militarization after unification, and her security will be guaranteed by a treaty between Korea and the four great powers; (3) The four power will pledge that they will forever relinquish force as an option against Korea, and that they will come to Korea's defense when Korea security is threatened; (4) In return, Korea will pledge that she will also forever relinquish force as an option against the four powers. The US troops on the peninsula can be replaced by a multinational peacekeeping force after a reunification treaty signed between the two Koreas (within a fixed timetable). The peacekeeping force would be then withdrawn when reunification was completed.

While Russia and China accept that US military presence is a stabilizing force for now, there is little chance for them to accept the justification of US troop presence after reunification. Most likely, China and Russia are to regard a US-Korean military alliance after unification as an expansion of American hegemony that neither China nor Russia can cheerfully accept. In fact, one Russian analyst regarded a reunified Korea allied with the US as “*an Asian edition of NATO’s eastward expansion*.”<sup>4</sup> The notion that US can somehow convince Russia and China that US military presence in Korea after unification is also in Russia and China’s interest is a quixotic illusion.<sup>5</sup>

The US is more interested in preserving rather than altering the *status quo*, especially if reunification means diminishing US’s strategic position. For US, a unified Korea without alliance with Washington is unimaginable, undesirable, and hazardous to America’s global interest. A 1992 US Department of Defense document stated that: “*We must also remain sensitive to the potentially destabilizing effects that enhanced roles on the part of our allies, particularly Japan but also possibly Korea, might produce.... (The US) should seek to maintain an alliance relationship with a unified democratic Korea.*”<sup>6</sup> More recently, Secretary of Defense William Cohen reaffirmed the US position: “*US troops levels in both Japan and Korea would remain unchanged even if the Korean peninsula were peacefully reunified.*”<sup>7</sup>

A major reassessment of the US-ROK security alliance, conducted jointly in 1996 by the Rand Corporation and the Korean Institute of Defense Analysis (KIDA) concurred. The report emphasized “*Korea’s incentives to maintain close relations with the United States, even after peninsular unification*”<sup>8</sup>, despite concluding that alternatives to the present US-ROK security alliance must be found after unification. The report enlisted two key factors for its argument: China’s rapid economic growth and evolution toward a great power, plus Russia’s problematic transition to market-economy and democratic society. The Rand-KIDA study

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<sup>4</sup> Vadim Tkachenko, “The Consequences of Korea’s Unification for Russia and Security in Northeast Asia,” *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 4 (1997), pp. 23-40, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, “Hastening Korean Reunification,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 76 (March/April 1997), pp. 77-92.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *South China Morning Post*, April 8, 1997, underline added.

identified four possible future scenarios for the present US-ROK security alliance, and a neutral reunified Korea was not among them.

The other side of the US strategic calculation is US-Japan alliance. On one hand, many US analysts feel that the end of US military presence in Korea may also mean the end of US military presence in Japan (it certainly would become a more contentious issue), thus leaving the US without a strong presence anywhere in East Asia. On the other hand, some Japanese analysts not only oppose, but also are fearful of a unified Korea because of the deep animosity toward Japan among Koreans. A Japanese commentator went as far as to declare that: “*An all-out invasion of Japan by Korea is inevitable if Korea is unified....therefore, it is in Japan’s best interest to help North Korea economically so the Korean peninsula remains divided as now.*”<sup>9</sup> Another unabashed view from Japan is that the US-ROK alliance should be maintained for the sake of Japan, because “*Korea is inseparable from Japan in the Japanese mind.*”<sup>10</sup>

Simply put, it is the US’s strategic calculation and the Japan factor in the US-Japan alliance that preclude the US from taking a more flexible approach in resolving the Korean impasse. America is determined to maintain the *status quo*, keeping Korea under its own sphere of influence, and preventing Korea from slipping into the arms of China, Japan, or Russia. For Korean reunification to happen, however, the *status quo* has to be altered. The question is whether reunification has to be a zero-sum game.

#### **(b) South Korea and North Korea**

While it is true that the four powers can influence events on the Korean peninsula, they cannot dictate them. The solution to reunification, ultimately, lies among the Korean people themselves.

Seoul’s go-slow approach toward reunification was very much due to its apprehension of the enormous cost of German reunification. In 1993, the Korea Development Institute (KDI)

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan D. Pollack & Y. K. Cha, ed., *A New Alliance for the Next Century: the future of US-Korea security cooperation* (Santa Monica, C.A.: RAND), 1996, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Kenichi Takemura, quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 31, 1991, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Tetsuya Tataoka, “Scratching an Old Wound: Japan’s Perspective on Korea and its Reunification” in Thomas H. Henriksen & Kyongsoo Lho, eds., *One Korea?: Challenges and Prospects for Reunification* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1994), pp. 98-107.

concluded that: “*the experience of German national unification convinced a large number of South Koreans that sudden economic integration in Korea... will result in disaster.*”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Seoul under Kim Young Sam demonstrated little innovative thinking or leadership in defining its objectives and policies. That might be due to at least three factors. First was Seoul’s conviction that Kim Jong-Il was not in firm control immediately after Kim Il Sung’s death, thus it was simply unrealistic to advance any new policy to Pyongyang. This factor has diminished as Kim Jong-Il demonstrated that he is in firm control, especially of North Korea’s top brass. The second factor is that as a democratic government, Seoul cannot ignore public opinion and domestic politics. Whether because of domestic politics or deep animosity toward the North Korea regime, Seoul’s policy was rather hard-line under Kim Young Sam. Consequently, while it was widely known that there was a gap between Washington’s policy and Seoul’s policy toward North Korea, oddly enough, it was Seoul taking the hard-line, and Pyongyang perceived that Seoul was actually more menacing than Washington was. Finally, a third factor was perhaps that Seoul was still too timid to project its own ideas without Washington’s endorsement.

From North Korea’s point of view, it has very little room to maneuver, and has no other choice but to buy time and strengthen its weak bargaining position by prolonging the reunification process. Beijing’s failure to hold out of recognition of Seoul in exchange of US and Japanese recognition of Pyongyang greatly diminished North Korea’s bargaining power and made Pyongyang feel betrayed (even though it is doubtful that China could succeed in convincing the US and Japan to extend diplomatic recognition to Pyongyang.).

Therefore, while North Korea professed to champion the course of national reunification, its most pressing goal is to maintain its own survival. The primary objective of North Korean regime continues to be preventing the “absorption scenario”, as clearly stated in Kim Il Sung’s 1991 New Year speech,<sup>12</sup> because under the “absorption” reunification scenario, the leadership of North Korea will be rendered powerless in a post-reunification Korea. Unless

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<sup>11</sup> quoted in Nicholas Eberstadt (1997), *op. cit.*, p.78

<sup>12</sup> *Pyongyang Times*, Jan. 1, 1991.

some kind of safety guarantee (e.g., power-sharing) can be extended to the North Korea regime itself, there will be no significant improvement in its appetite for reunification.

### (c). China

The disintegration of the former Soviet Union made China North Korea's indispensable ally. Together with the establishment of formal diplomatic relationship between South Korea and China in 1992, "*China came to occupy the pivotal position in a new triangle.*"<sup>13</sup>

China is proud that it is the only country that currently maintains good relations with both North and South Korea.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, China is not too sure what to do with this strategic asset and its stand toward Korean reunification remains ambivalent. While China clearly believes that reunification is inevitable and a unified Korea will be far more stable than a divided one, three questions compound the Chinese leadership: Should China help the two Koreas reunify? If yes, then how? And where does China's interest lie in Korean reunification?

Some attributed China's ambivalence toward Korean reunification to China's ideological considerations.<sup>15</sup> Such an explanation is outdated because ideology has little weight in the present Chinese scale of national interest.<sup>16</sup> China does not calculate its national interest in ideological terms anymore; otherwise, China perhaps would not even recognize South Korea in the first place.<sup>17</sup> Attribution of China's ambivalence to economic consideration is also misplaced.<sup>18</sup> Although reunification will diminish South Korea's capacity to invest in China, it

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<sup>13</sup> Hong Yung Lee, in Hong Yung Lee & Chung Chongwook, eds., *Korean Options in a Changing International Order* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1993), p.5.

<sup>14</sup> Chen Qimao, "The Role of the Great Powers in the Process of Korean Reunification" in Amos, A. Jordan, ed., *Korean Unification: Implications for Northeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1993), pp.59-79.

<sup>15</sup> Chae-Jin Lee, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations* (Stanford: The Hoover Institution Press, 1996), pp. 172-173; Parris H. Chang, "Beijing's Policy toward Korea and PRC-ROK Normalization of Relations" in , Manwoo Lee & Richard W. Mansbach, eds., *The Changing Order in Northeast Asia and the Korea Peninsula* (Boulder, C.O.: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 155-172.

<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of China's national interest, see Yang Xuetong, *Zhongguo Guojia Liji Fenxi* [Understanding China's National Interest] (Tanjin: Tianjin People's Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> For a similar view on this issue from the Korea side, see Doo Bok Park, "China's Policy on the Korean Peninsula and Chinese-South Korea Relations," *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 2 (1998), pp. 35-45.

<sup>18</sup> Chae-Jin Lee (1996), *op. cit.*, pp.172-173; Chang (1993), *op. cit.*; Nicholas Eberstadt (1997), *op. cit.*.

is unlikely that redirection of South Korea's investment to the North in the future will have too much impact on a larger Chinese economy. In fact, by the time of Korean reunification happening at least fifteen to twenty years from now, China's economy will perhaps be in a position to actually contribute to Korea's post-unification construction.

The truth is that China has no incentive to facilitate Korean reunification based on the current US-ROK intention to maintain an alliance after the unification. In that case, China's security situation would then be even worse than the status quo. China still regards the buffer between itself and US as a prize won by tremendous sacrifice, and China will not give it up without getting something in return. Unless China can be guaranteed that its strategic position will not deteriorate after reunification, China will continue to support the *status quo*.

Chinese analysts remain suspicious of US intentions toward China. They suspect that the US has drawn a "thin red line" around China, from Korea/Japan, to Taiwan, to the Philippines, and maybe even Vietnam. With the Taiwan issue remaining unresolved, Chinese analysts believe that any further relative strategic gain on the part of the US vis-a-vis China will diminish China's leverage vis-à-vis Taiwan.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, while China deems tension across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel potentially explosive, a divided Korea is less threatening to China than a unified Korea with US troops. The uncertainty about a reunified Korea's orientation frightens Chinese policy makers far more than the *status quo*. After interviewing a number of Chinese officials and analysts from various military and civilian research institutes, Garret and Glaser concluded that China is not concerned with a unified Korea's ideological orientation but with its security orientation.<sup>20</sup>

For most Chinese analysts, a reunified Korea maintaining an alliance with US poses a greater challenge to China's security than a divided Korea. (This is if the US decides to contain China, which some Chinese believe this is already the case). Under this scenario, a potential strengthening of US position after Korean unification is undesirable and unacceptable to China.

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interviews by the author in Beijing from Oct.-Dec. 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Banning Garrett & Bonnie Glaser, "Looking across the Yalu: Chinese assessment of North Korea," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (1995), pp. 528-545.



Given such a scenario, China's ambiguity towards Korea reunification is a convenient compromise without many options.

China's ambivalence toward Korean reunification is thus based more on China's security concern than on anything else. Because a reunited Korea may still maintain a military alliance with the US, China feels that it is to her advantage to maintain the *status quo*, instead of having to face a unified Korea with US troops even closer to China. From a different perspective, China, like the US, reached the same conclusion that reunification under the potential zero-sum scenario is ominous to its national security.

### **III. Flaws among the Present Policies and Possible Cure**

The policy of keeping the Korean peninsula divided as long as possible is simply unwise and unsustainable. Indeed, there are significant flaws among the current policies.

#### **(a). US**

First of all, it may not be in US or Japan's interest to keep Korea divided, because the US may eventually have to face a strong Korean nationalism backlash. Evidence indicates that the US is increasingly perceived as everything that turns against the grain of Korean nationalism since the mid-80s, especially among younger and more educated groups.<sup>21</sup> In a 1995 survey among South Koreans, the US was the least liked country, behind Japan and North Korea.<sup>22</sup> Another 1995 survey among South Korean broadcast journalists indicated that only 17% of the younger group regarded the US as an ally or friend.<sup>23</sup> Such a trend, though not alarming yet, should at least attract some attention from US policy makers, because it is those young and educated elite that will shape Korea's future. If the trend continues, American will be increasingly regarded as simply using Korea for its own interest.

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<sup>21</sup> Gi-Wook Shin, "South Korean Anti-Americanism: a comparative perspective," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 8 (August 1996), pp. 787-803.

<sup>22</sup> *Kyodo News Service/Japan Economic Newswave*, Aug. 10, 1995, poll conducted by Mass Communication Research Institute, from March 25 to April 10, 1995.

Second, US troops' presence on the post-reunification Peninsula may well become a contentious issue among Koreans. As events happened elsewhere (such as Philippines) indicated, once the imminent danger disappears, native population will become far less tolerant of the presence of foreign troops on its soil. If US presence on the peninsula were to cut loose under a similar circumstance, US may end up in losing not only its strategic position, but also a great deal of good feeling from the local population.

Recently, more American analysts are questioning the necessity of US troop presence in a reunified Korea.<sup>24</sup> In a poll conducted among retired and active duty US military officers asked their views concerning a US military presence on the peninsula. An overwhelming majority responded that a US presence is essential today, desirable and supportable under most confederation scenarios. However, when asked about the possible role of US forces on the peninsula after the reunification, slightly more than half believed that US forces would have no role to play on a post-reunification peninsula. Moreover, most questioned the strategic necessity and political support for further US troops' presence on the post-reunification peninsula.<sup>25</sup>

Somehow, the US has to plan ahead about what to do with its military presence on the peninsula after the reunification.

#### **(b). South Korea**

Seoul's traditional reunification policy based on a zero-sum calculation is deeply flawed because it is against one of the cardinal rules of diplomacy: "*In victory, magnanimity.*" A magnanimous mentality from Seoul would not only alleviate the humiliation of the North

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<sup>23</sup> Seong Hyong Lee, "Generation Gap in South Koreans' Perceptions of the United States: a case of broadcast journalists," in Eui Hang Shin & Yun Kim, eds., *Korea and the World: Strategies for Globalization* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 141-147.

<sup>24</sup> Edward A. Olsen, "Korea's Reunification: Implication for the US-ROK Alliance," in Thomas H. Henriksen & Kyongsoo Lho, eds. (1994), pp. 98-107; Chalmers Johnson, "Rethinking Asia," *National Interest*, (Summer 1993), pp. 20-29.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph A. Cossa, *The Major Powers in Northeast Asian Security* (Washington, D.C.: INSS, National Defense University, 1996), pp.24-25.

Korea regime and its people, thus facilitating reconciliation in the crucial early stage of reunification, but also add much needed flexibility to Seoul's diplomacy.

President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" is certainly a far cry from policies under previous administration. Yet there is another issue to be tackled. While a gradual approach toward reunification is most sensible, for the go-slow approach to work, it would be desirable for North Korea to gradually reform its decimated economy as China did. This strategy requires Kim Jong-Il to be relatively open-minded, and to receive sufficient incentives and assurances from the outside world (especially through China) for North Korea to reform.

Regarding the first part of the assumption, there are very few signs that Kim Jong-Il is prepared to take much risk in order to rescue his country and regime. The economic gap between South and North will most likely widen instead narrow, and this could only mean bad news. As one analyst put it: "*While it is technically possible that the South Korean economy can grow faster than the North's needs, the further apart the two economies get, the greater the cost of brining the North to parity with the ROK.*"<sup>26</sup>

Another factor that needs to be taken into account by Seoul is demographics. It is widely known that the South Korean population is rapidly aging. By 2025, the ratio of retiree/worker in South Korea will be 1:7.6, almost doubling the ratio of 1:13.4 in 1990. Such a rapidly aging population will put tremendous pressure on South Korea's economy by itself alone, leaving less resource for rescuing North Korea. In addition, the ongoing famine in the North will not only kill a proportion of North Korea's current working force, but also kill a large proportion of North Korean children, part of the future working force for a united Korea. Among those who survive the present famine, a large proportion will be retarded, both physically and mentally. These retarded children will not be part of the working force, but rather be a burden. Consequently, the longer unification takes, the more difficult it will be for South Korea's economy to deal with the immense cost.

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<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt (1997), *op. cit.*, p.82.

Even the most optimistic view about reunification reckons that an accelerated reunification process will take more than ten years to complete. If the reunification process can start early, a substantial arms reduction program can be implemented on both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. With North Korea spending 25-30% of its budget on its military, a conventional arms reduction program, or even a mild demobilization program, would provide a significant relief to its desperate economy. A North spending less on its military will not only be less dangerous, but also be economically more viable, thus greatly reducing the cost of reunification.

Reform inside North Korea will most likely be due to Chinese persuasion. Without an assurance from Seoul that a reunified Korea will be a neutral and friendly state, China has little incentive to facilitate reunification. Even if China decides to pressure (which China has repeatedly refused to) and persuade North Korea to reform, it is highly unlikely that China can convince North Korea regime unless North Korea's security can be guaranteed by political assurance and economic support backed by US and South Korea. In order to make North Korea willing to reform, the outside world have to make North Korea feel secure.

If Seoul recognizes that a neutral reunited Korea will provide the right incentive for the US and China to act together, then it is likely that some mutual understanding can be reached between US and China through Seoul. Following such an understanding, Beijing thereafter would have more incentive to persuade North Korea to adopt a gradual reform program by offering safety guarantees to the North backed by both the US and South Korea. With economic reform and more participation in North Korea's economy by South Korean companies, communication will increase and the two sides can get to know the other side's intention more clearly. Meanwhile, the US can take a more conciliatory stand toward the North, instead of repeatedly threatening the North with force over nuclear and missile issues. Only then, would it be possible for North Korea's regime to conclude that reunification will not be a dire conclusion after all, because they will be guaranteed a share of power after reunification.

Unfortunately, so far, it seems that most South Korean policy makers have not yet utilized this possibility. A plausible explanation for this is that Seoul has yet to realize that

South Korea's national interest may not coincide with US global interests all the time, and sooner or later, South Korea must take its own initiatives on the reunification issue.

**(c). China**

China's present detached policy is perhaps shortsighted because the policy is also based on the assumption that the North Korean regime can maintain its livelihood indefinitely.

China is in a unique position to play a significant role in shaping Northeast Asia for the next century. It is both in China and other parties' interest to convert China's present strategic position into a lasting legacy instead of letting it slip away. By trying to speedup the reunification process, China can hope to maintain friendly relations with a reunited Korea. If, however, China remains aloof, it is likely that Korean nationalism might turn against China once Korea achieved reunification in the absence of Chinese assistance. Nationalism in Korea has always been quite strong, and there is no guarantee that it will not turn against China despite the cultural bond between the two countries.

By supporting the course of a neutral reunified Korea, China can serve its own interest as well as that of Korea and other neighboring powers. By refraining from the impulse to pull a unified Korea under the influence of China, China will not harm the interest of the other three big powers (especially the US). By doing so, China can forcefully repudiate the argument that China is the threat to be contained.<sup>27</sup> By playing a more active role in the Korean reunification process and not drawing Korea into her sphere of influence after the reunification, China can reach better accommodation with the US, Japan, and Russia.

Another factor worth pointing out is that the longer the division of Korea continues, the more likely that North Korea's siege mentality will deepen, and the less likely it will trust anyone, including China. That scenario would be very unsettling: it would not only devalue China's strategic asset, but also make everyone worse off because it would be extremely

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Bernstein & Ross H. Munro, "The Coming Conflict with America," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (March/April 1997), pp. 18-32.

difficult to convey any good intention to the North regime. Without a good mediator, reconciliation and reunification would be extremely difficult to achieve.

In fact, there are increasing signs that the relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing is growing uneasy, and that Beijing's influence on North Korea is getting tenuous. On this account alone, Beijing needs some new thinking soon.

#### **IV. The Feasibility and Desirability of a Neutral Reunited Korea**

The crucial player in a reunification-via-neutrality scenario is, undoubtedly, South Korea. Only Seoul can convince both the US and China to compromise their maximum interest: for the US, the maximum gain is a reunified Korea with US troops; while for China, it is a reunified pro-China Korea. Obviously, the logic compromise is that Korea would be neutral. The view among some US military officers and civilian specialists, together with China's possible realization that a neutral Korea is the best possible outcome, indicated that such a middle ground does not sound as outlandish as it seems.

The current strategic calculation of the US and China on Korean reunification resulted in a typical Prisoner's Dilemma game, in which both player's best strategy is defection (i.e. non-cooperation, see Fig. 1), even though there are incentives for them to cooperate.<sup>28</sup> While there are several options to reach cooperation in this game, one easy way is to find an outside "enforcer" of cooperation in the game.<sup>29</sup> South Korea, naturally, should be the "enforcer" of cooperation in this scenario.

(Figure 1 about here)

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30 (January 1978), pp. 169-214. Also see Harris R. Wagner, "The Theory of Games and the Problem of International Cooperation," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77 (June 1983), pp. 330-346; Charles Lipson, "International Cooperation in Security and Economic Affairs," *World Politics*, Vol. 37 (October 1984), pp. 1-23.

<sup>29</sup> In fact, much of the discussion of international cooperation existed precisely because there is no central government in international relations. That is, the international system is a state of anarchy.

The feasibility of a neutral reunited Korea certainly depends upon the conviction that some mutual strategic understanding can be achieved among the big powers, especially between the US and China. While Sino-US relations have improved substantially since the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis,<sup>30</sup> there is still lingering doubt between the two powers. Even though the two powers believe that a cooperative relationship (or at least a non-confrontational one) is beneficial to both, they have no tangible sense on how far the relationship can go. The scenario of a neutral reunified Korea provides the US and China with a great opportunity to achieve a sense of mutual understanding and trust unattainable by rhetoric alone.

Such understanding between the US and China could have a profound impact on the whole Asian-Pacific region. By demonstrating the willingness to accommodate China's concerns, the US can mollify the Chinese leadership's fear of being contained. And by demonstrating China's benign intentions, China can ease US fear about China as a "future enemy". Such an understanding will make future cooperation between the two powers more likely.

Equally important, a neutral reunified Korea not only can achieve Korea's long cherished national goal, but also can make a reunified Korea a more significant player in international affairs, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. A neutral Korea with its larger economy and a bigger population, can indeed become a desired vital broker among great powers (for instance, mediating in the Russia-Japan northern territory dispute or the Japan-China Diaoyu Island dispute), and project its influence without arousing fear in the region.

Korea has to realize that any alliance with one or two particular powers is destined to arouse objection and even fear from other powers, resulting in a typical "security dilemma",<sup>31</sup> and thus does not serve long term Korea's interest at all. One day, Korea may again face an age-old dilemma: choosing side in a conflict among big powers. History must have taught

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<sup>30</sup> This article was written before the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and Lee Teng-hui's "state-to-state" comments. These recent events only strengthen the argument of this article.

Korea that such a situation is not always pleasant, and that only a neutral reunited Korea can offer a lasting solution to this dilemma. Like an apple fought over by the four powers, the best way for Korea to prevent future conflict on the peninsula is to make the apple unreachable for any power by being a neutral state backed by international treaties.

Despite that Korean peninsula is the only place in the world where the security interests of the four major powers intersect, and the region's economic dynamism and increasing integration, there is still no comprehensive multilateral security framework for this area in the making. A neutral reunified Korea backed by a treaty between a reunified Korea and the four surrounding powers can change all that, and make Northeast Asia a "peace-ground" instead of a battleground.

The destitute economic conditions and the famine in North Korea should inject a sense of urgency to reunification. Seoul should try to encourage mutual understanding among the great powers as soon as possible, and convince them that a reunified Korea will not harm anyone's interest. By cultivating an understanding among the great powers, the Korean people can then expect all the powers, especially the US and China, to play a more active role in pursuing Korea's long-treasured goal.

On an optimistic note, President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" may precisely lead to such a direction. In essence, to achieve peaceful reunification, North Korea has to be offered a "package deal" which it cannot refuse. While things will not be easy, President Kim Dae-jung has taken the first step: he does understand that Seoul, not Washington (at least not Washington alone), should decide the fate of the Korean nation,<sup>32</sup> a notion voiced by an astute American observer of Asia years ago.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For a seminal theoretical treatment on the "security dilemma", see Robert Jervis (1978), *op. cit.* Also see Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50 (October 1997), pp. 171-201

<sup>32</sup> "Top National Security Official Urges U.S. to Adopt Seoul's Policy on N. K.," *Korea Herald*, March 12, 1999

<sup>33</sup> Chalmers Johnson (1993), *op. cit.*, p. 22



**Figure 1: The Prisoner's Dilemma Game of Korea Reunification.**<sup>34</sup>

US \ China	Cooperation	Non-cooperation
Cooperation	<b>(3, 3)</b> <b>A Neutral Reunified Korea</b>	<b>(1, 4)</b> <b>A pro-China unified Korea</b>
Non-cooperation	<b>(4, 1)</b> <b>A unified Korea with US troops</b>	<b>(2, 2)</b> <b>status quo and division of Korea</b>

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<sup>34</sup> Note the payoff structure of the game perfectly captured the strategic calculation of the two powers. For instance, payoff to a player when both do not cooperate is better than the payoff of being a “sucker” (one cooperates while the other does not).