

# THE KOREAN PIVOT AND THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER POLITICS IN NORTHEAST ASIA



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Cover photo credit: Province of British Columbia/Flickr. A South Korean soldier and a US soldier stand guard at the Korean Demilitarized Zone between South Korea and North Korea.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Korea has been a contested domain among great powers in Northeast Asia since antiquity. Today, as China reemerges, Japan reenergizes, and the United States rebalances toward Asia, the competition over Korea will likely return and become a critical issue among the contending powers. To explore the problem, this report will examine Korea's grand strategies toward great powers, discuss the future of the strategic dynamic on the Korean peninsula, explore the potential North Korean collapse scenario and its implications, and finally offer policy recommendations for the United States.

Korea is a weak power surrounded by great powers. To maintain its security and sovereignty, Korea has historically aligned closely with dominant great powers in Northeast Asia or has sought to manipulate and navigate between them. For decades, North Korea has sought to pit great powers against each other while developing nuclear weapons to maximize its autonomy and status. South Korea (also known as the Republic of Korea or ROK) has pursued more subtle strategies to maximize security and stability—bandwagoning or hedging depending on circumstances.

The full return of great power politics in East Asia could allow North Korea to better exploit the great power rivalries in the region and prevent the United States and the regional powers from cooperating to deal with Pyongyang. Furthermore, South Korea's strategy of hedging might become unsustainable, as pressure to choose between China and the United States increases. In addition to the shifting dynamics on the Korean peninsula, there is also the possibility of the North Korean regime's sudden demise.

The totalitarian nature of the Kim Jong-un regime combined with its failed economic model means that the system is likely to collapse at some point in the future. Moreover, North Korean society has been changing gradually since the famine of 1994–98 with the irreversible introduction of a pervasive black market economy and massive corruption. In the long run, one also cannot rule out the possibility of cracks emerging at the elite level, given Kim Jong-un's youth and lack of experience.

If not carefully managed by the major stakeholders in Northeast Asia, the North Korean regime's demise and subsequent unification could have potentially destabilizing consequences. Currently, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea agree in principle that North Korea should be denuclearized, that there should be no war on the Korean peninsula, and that an abrupt collapse of the Kim regime is undesirable. With North Korea's demise, a point of consensus on the Korean peninsula would suddenly disappear, leading to intensified regional contestation over Korea once again. The element of unpredictability and unintended consequences

surrounding North Korea's future further adds to the possibility that the Korean peninsula might turn into a sudden flashpoint in Northeast Asia. Serious instability or rapid change in Korea could trigger interventions by great powers, which could attempt to secure their interests on the Korean peninsula in unpredictable ways as situations on the ground change rapidly.

Therefore, the United States has an interest in formulating a strategy to reduce great power tension on the Korean peninsula over the long term. In addition, Washington should seek to subvert the Kim regime at the grassroots level and bring about regime change in Pyongyang. While any North Korean collapse scenario is likely to be a tumultuous affair, the United States cannot base its North Korea policy on the unrealistic premise that the regime, in its current state, will remain stable indefinitely or will make significant reforms. The relevant policy question is about "when" the collapse should occur, not "whether," because the Kim regime's eventual collapse is likely inevitable.

**A NORTH KOREAN COLLAPSE WILL BE FAR MORE DANGEROUS WHEN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES AND CHINA WILL HAVE BECOME MORE PRECARIOUS IN THE FUTURE.**

A North Korean collapse today might be safer and more manageable than it would be twenty years from now. A North Korean collapse will be far more dangerous when the relationship between the United States and its allies and China will have become more precarious in the future. As of now, the United States is still powerful enough in Northeast Asia to act as a stabilizer to allow the major powers in the region to settle the Korean question diplomatically. In the future, the current favorable situation might not exist. Moreover, a collapsing North Korea with far more developed nuclear and missile capabilities could pose significant danger if the Kim regime decides to crumble with a bang instead with a whimper. Long-term benefits from North Korea's demise in the near future outweigh the short-term costs.

## THE KOREAN PIVOT AND THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER POLITICS IN NORTHEAST ASIA

The United States needs a comprehensive strategy toward Korea that places the country within the context of Northeast Asia's great power politics. The strategy laid out in this report consists of four elements.

1. President Obama or the next president should rally Congress and the American public to increase the defense budget to at least 4 percent of the GDP in order to bolster the rebalance to Asia and to maintain stability and robust deterrence on the Korean peninsula.
2. The United States should have mid-level State Department officials engage in talks with North Korea. At the same time, the United States should seek to subvert North Korea and bring about regime change by covertly facilitating the black market flow of goods and information into the country to empower North Koreans at the grassroots level.
3. The United States needs to maintain strong, but strictly bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea to bolster deterrence against North Korea, balance China, and manage the region's numerous political and security issues. The United States should not pursue serious US-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation or a trilateral alliance because it would likely be dysfunctional while overly antagonizing China.
4. The United States should convince China to discuss with all relevant parties (the United States, Japan, Russia, and South Korea) and come to a rough compromise on what Korean unification means for Northeast Asia's geopolitical order, what role Korea should play in the arrangement, and how the parties involved should cooperate to achieve the desired outcome.

## INTRODUCTION

Situated at the heart of Northeast Asia, the Korean peninsula has historically been the pivot of contention whenever great power competitions emerged in the region. Chinese and Japanese political and military involvement in Korea goes back to antiquity; the Mongol invasion of Japan, the only invasion of Japan's home islands before World War II, came through Korea in 1274 and 1281; the second major conflict between China and Japan was fought in Korea between 1592 and 1598. During the modern era, three major wars, the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and the Korean War (1950–1953), broke out over the status of Korea. As China reemerges, Japan reenergizes, and the United States rebalances to Asia to compete for influence and security in the region, the Korean question will inevitably return.

Yet, compared to other Asia-related topics, discussions about the Korean peninsula's place in Northeast Asia's great power politics are relatively few and far between in the Washington policy community. Debates on the region's great power relations almost always focus on the United States, China, Japan, and occasionally Russia. When discussions pertain to the Korean peninsula, the subject is often North Korea, its nuclear weapons program, or other related antics by Pyongyang. That Korea often does not figure prominently in debates on wider great power politics is understandable, as neither South nor North Korea is a great power. Instead, the eccentricity and the brutality of the Kim dynasty in Pyongyang draw far more attention from the media and the international community. Consequently, the US public and policy circles are far less aware of Korea's place in the great power politics of Northeast Asia.

As tensions exacerbate in Northeast Asia, Korea's strategic significance will only grow. Complicating the situation is the ever-looming possibility of a North Korean collapse and Korean unification, which could introduce a new element of unpredictability into the region's already volatile geostrategic calculus. Great power contestation could eventually return to the Korean peninsula, which might once again become a cause of conflict, if not necessarily wars. To prepare for such possibilities, the United States should increase its defense spending to bolster the rebalance to Asia, put more effort into subverting and bringing about regime change in North Korea at the grassroots level, maintain robust bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea (also known as the Republic of Korea or ROK), and convince China to cooperate with the relevant parties to come up with a vision of a regional order after Korean unification.

## KOREA: A SHRIMP AMONG WHALES

An old proverb describing Korea's unfortunate geopolitical position says that "a shrimp breaks its back in a fight between whales." Even today, the two Koreas are surrounded by the world's first, second, and third largest economies (US presence in Northeast Asia, China, and Japan respectively), and Russia, which is still a great military power. To survive in such a difficult environment, Korea has traditionally aligned closely with dominant great powers in the region or has sought to manipulate and navigate between them in pursuit of security and sovereignty.

During the pre-modern era, Korea, particularly during the Joseon period (1392–1897), accommodated and aligned with China. The Sino-Korean relationship has always been uneasy, but nominally acknowledging the China-centered world order ensured Korea's sovereignty and allowed the country to maintain its culture and identity. Nonetheless, Korea has not always been a pliant tributary state. Early Korean kingdoms often challenged and went to war with far more powerful Chinese dynasties and northern tribal powers in Manchuria, such as the Tang and Sui dynasties and the Mongols, to name a few. Even under the Joseon dynasty, which was the only truly tributary state to China, Korea sought to resist Ming China's influence and went to war against the Manchus, the founders of Qing China, who had to subdue the Joseon dynasty through force.<sup>1</sup> During times of major power competitions, Korea often took a cautious, ambiguous stance, maintaining even-handed relations with competing great powers to avoid becoming caught between them, as during the periods of the Song-Liao competition (early tenth century to early twelfth century) and the Ming-Manchu power transition (seventeenth century). At other times, Korea did benefit from its relationship with China, as during the late sixteenth century when Ming China played a major role in expelling Japanese invaders from the Korean peninsula.

During the mid to late nineteenth century when Western powers and Japan became major players in East Asia, Korea, leveraging its strategic significance, attempted to pit the great powers against each other to ensure that no single state could control the Korean peninsula. While maintaining its traditional relationship with China, Korea also formed relations with Japan, Russia, the United States, and the European powers, pushing them all to balance each other. The ideal outcome that Korea hoped for during this period was that the United States, perceived to be a distant and benign power, would become the guarantor of neutrality on the Korean peninsula. The Korean buffer would then serve to separate the competing great powers in Northeast Asia and stabilize the region. Interestingly, the

<sup>1</sup> For an illumination of the Joseon dynasty's relationship with China, see Kirk W. Larsen, "Comforting Fictions: The Tribute System, the Westphalian Order, and Sino-Korean Relations," *Journal of East Asian Studies* vol. 13, no. 2, May 2013, pp. 233-57.

other regional stakeholders—China, Japan, and Russia—also hoped that the United States would play the role of a stabilizer in Korea.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, an isolationist United States refused, leaving the regional powers to fight over the Korean power vacuum. The results were the two wars fought over Korea, namely the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, which led to the loss of independence for Korea and laid the ground for Japan’s further expansion into mainland Asia.

KIM WAS VERY MUCH AN HEIR OF THE WARRIOR MYTHOLOGY BASED ON GOGURYEO OF ANTIQUITY AND VALUED MILITARY POWER ABOVE ALL ELSE; RHEE WAS A DIRECT HEIR OF THE SCHOLARLY TRADITION OF THE JOSEON DYNASTY AND VALUED EDUCATION AND THE CONCEPT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT.

After World War II, two different Koreas emerged out of the same nation. Even as the two Koreas shared a realist perspective on international relations, their strategic outlooks differed greatly. In North Korea, Kim Il-sung and his guerilla comrades created what scholar-diplomat Adrian Buzo labels a “guerilla dynasty,” a heavily militarized state embodying a warrior identity with invincible warrior king figures as leaders.<sup>3</sup> Kim also championed the ideology of *Juche* (self-reliance), which pushed back against the notion of Korea as a “shrimp among whales” and promoted an independent foreign policy for North Korea, even as it was heavily dependent on its two allies, China and the Soviet Union. In the South, Syngman Rhee and his colleagues sought to shape Korea based on the liberal democratic ideology of the United States. Rhee also wanted to embed Korea deeply in a US-centric world order and saw the United States as a “big brother” nation, even as he was fiercely nationalistic.<sup>4</sup> Kim was very much an heir of the warrior mythology based on Goguryeo of antiquity and valued military power above all

else; Rhee was a direct heir of the scholarly tradition of the Joseon dynasty and valued education and the concept of the Enlightenment. The two distinct founding traditions of the two Koreas have meant that their grand strategies have also differed accordingly.

North Korea has traditionally pursued aggressive and independent balancing strategies to maximize its autonomy and status. A balance-of-power strategy from a classical realist tradition seeks to “prevent the hegemony of any single [g]reat [p]ower,” whether it is an ally or an adversary.<sup>5</sup> During the Cold War, Pyongyang balanced the competing great powers against each other to ensure that no one great power would have too much influence on the Kim regime. North Korea used its alliances with China and the Soviet Union to balance against the United States while exploiting the Sino-Soviet split to maintain Pyongyang’s independence-oriented foreign policy and to extract political, security, and economic support from the competing allies. At the same time, North Korea, at least since the early 1970s, has been on a quest to obtain nuclear weapons, which the Kim regime perceives as the ultimate tools of self-reliant defense and power. As the Cold War ended and as the great power competition in Northeast Asia greatly diminished, North Korea found itself isolated. As the Soviet Union collapsed and as China normalized relations with South Korea, economic aid and subsidies from Pyongyang’s two allies more or less dried up, leading to a massive famine in North Korea during the 1990s, also known as the “Arduous March.” The Kim regime then attempted, but ultimately failed, to use the 1994 nuclear agreement (the Agreed Framework) to establish ties with Washington, which was supposed to replace Moscow as a source of economic aid and as a balancing force against a rising Beijing. Since the 2008 economic crisis, North Korea, taking advantage of the increasing tensions in Northeast Asia, has been seeking to revive the country’s Cold War-era strategy of pitting the great powers against each other by reaching out to Russia and Japan while redoubling efforts to advance its nuclear weapons capabilities. Pyongyang, however, is unlikely to succeed. Russia today is not as powerful as the Soviet Union was during the Cold War and is more focused on Eastern Europe than East Asia; Japan is unlikely to improve relations with North Korea without Pyongyang having much better relations with Washington—a highly improbable scenario.

South Korea has traditionally pursued subtle strategies to maximize security and stability—bandwagoning or hedging depending on the circumstances. Bandwagoning is a strategy of aligning with the most powerful state in a system. Hedging is a strategy that seeks to “hedge” a weak state’s geopolitical fortune among multiple great powers by building friendly relations with all the strong states in a system during periods of uncertainty or power transitions. During the Cold War, South Korea initially

<sup>2</sup> Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), pp. 174-175.

<sup>3</sup> See Adrian Buzo, *The Guerilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Syngman Rhee, *Japan Inside Out: The Challenge of Today* (New York: Revell, 1941), p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia UP, 1968), p. 34.

sided unequivocally with the United States when it was clearly the most powerful, if not hegemonic, state among the great powers in Northeast Asia. When US power and commitment to the region seemed uncertain after the Vietnam War and as China later began to rise as a significant power, South Korea began to hedge among the great powers in Northeast Asia. Seoul has been strengthening the US-ROK alliance while also developing friendly ties with China to avoid becoming caught in potential great power conflicts and to put pressure on North Korea. Since the great power competition in the region began to intensify in 2008, however, South Korea's strategy of hedging has been gradually coming under strain. The US-China competition has been placing pressure on Seoul to take sides over several issues, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and, recently, the South China Sea disputes.<sup>6</sup>

## FUTURE OF THE TWO KOREAS AND GREAT POWER POLITICS IN NORTHEAST ASIA

As tensions increase in Northeast Asia with the continued reemergence of China, the gradual normalization of Japan's military, and the rebalancing of the United States, dynamics on the Korean peninsula, too, could shift. The full return of great power politics in the region will prompt China to improve its relations with North Korea, allowing the latter to act in more assertive and aggressive ways; South Korea's strategy of hedging will become unsustainable, as pressure to choose between China and the United States increases.

Signs of increasing great power engagement on the Korean peninsula have been evident over the last couple of years. During the summer of 2014, for the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China, Chinese President Xi Jinping went out of his way to visit South Korea before visiting the North, partially in an attempt to gradually draw Seoul away from Washington.<sup>7</sup> Despite the recent deterioration in relations between Beijing and Pyongyang, China is now seeking again a more "normal" relationship with North Korea, according to remarks by Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Qiu Guohong in late October 2015.<sup>8</sup> Since the spring of 2014, Tokyo too has been involved in on-and-off talks with Pyongyang over the fate of the Japanese nationals abducted decades

ago.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Washington has strengthened its commitment to Seoul by sending eight hundred additional troops with new equipment to South Korea in January 2014 as part of the so-called "rebalance" to Asia while pushing Seoul to allow the US military to deploy the THAAD system and to take a clear stance against China on the South China Sea disputes.<sup>10</sup> As one commentator noted, "the whales are trying to court the shrimp."<sup>11</sup>

A more complicated dynamic around the Korean peninsula would mean that North Korea might be able to better exploit the great power rivalries in Northeast Asia, create more frictions, and prevent the United States and the regional powers from cooperating on the Kim regime. China's Xi Jinping administration seems deeply dissatisfied with the Kim regime's nuclear weapons program, continued provocations, and the execution of Kim Jong-un's uncle-in-law, Jang Sung-taek, who was considered to be friendly to China. Today, Chinese, at both the elite and public levels, are debating the future of their relationship with the Kim regime. Some of them (including Deng Yuwen, then-Deputy Editor of *Study Times*, a Communist Party journal), might even argue that China should abandon North Korea.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of the North Korean buffer to China will only grow, as the United States focuses more on East Asia and as Japan takes a tougher approach toward China. With increasing tensions in Northeast Asia, Beijing will seek to postpone the Kim regime's demise as long as possible by keeping Pyongyang on life support and will continue to tolerate the regime's antics. Indeed, in the spring of 2015, China began allowing its northeastern provinces increase their economic interactions with North Korea in a bid to improve relations with the Kim regime.<sup>13</sup> By the time a high-ranking Chinese official visited Pyongyang in October 2015 to attend the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea, the Chinese state had censored several previously tolerated words (most notably "fatty Kim the

6 Daniel R. Russel, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, recently said that South Korea should "speak out" against Chinese claims and actions in the South China Sea. See "US Calls for S. Korea to Speak out against China's Behavior in South China Sea," Yonhap News Agency, June 4, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2015/06/04/030100000AEN20150604000253315.html>.

7 Jane Perlez, "Chinese President's Visit to South Korea Is Seen as Way to Weaken US Alliances," *New York Times*, July 2, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/03/world/asia/chinas-president-to-visit-south-korea.html>.

8 "Beijing-Pyongyang Ties Improving: Chinese Ambassador," *Korea Herald*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20151029000751>.

9 "Mongolia Venue of Secret May Talks with Pyongyang over Abductions," *Japan Times*, July 20, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/07/20/national/politics-diplomacy/mongolia-venue-secret-may-talks-pyongyang-abductions/>.

10 Anthony Capaccio and Nicole Gaoutte, "US Adding 800 Troops for South Korea Citing Rebalance," *Bloomberg*, January 7, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-01-07/u-s-adding-800-troops-for-south-korea-citing-rebalance>.

11 Ari Ratner, "The Shrimp Now Has a Say in the Ongoing Struggle for East Asian Supremacy," *VICE News*, July 4, 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/the-shrimp-now-has-a-say-in-the-ongoing-struggle-for-east-asian-supremacy>.

12 Yuwen Deng, "China Should Abandon North Korea," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9e2f68b2-7c5c-11e2-99f0-001444feabdc0.html>.

13 Sang-ho Song, "Signs Emerge of China-N Korea Relations Thaw," *AsiaOne*, March 12, 2015, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/asia/signs-emerge-china-n-korea-relations-thaw>.



The so-called Arch of Reunification erected in 2001 in Pyongyang, North Korea. Source: David Stanley/Flickr.

third”) that mocked Kim Jong-un on Chinese social media.<sup>14</sup> China might still take minor actions to express displeasure or attempt to pressure North Korea. Nevertheless, Beijing is unlikely to push far enough to cause Pyongyang to change its behavior out of the concern that the Kim regime might destabilize or lash out. North Korea might then take advantage of China’s policy of tolerance to act more assertively and aggressively.

Such a scenario would mean that dealing with North Korea’s nuclear weapons program would become even more difficult than before. Every country in East Asia would like to see a denuclearized North Korea, but Beijing, which can technically do the most to squeeze Pyongyang, will be even more reluctant to take concrete and meaningful steps. Moreover, even if Washington, Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo are able to make progress on denuclearization with the Kim regime—a highly improbable scenario—the North Koreans are only likely to opt for a temporary freeze of their nuclear weapons program at best and are unlikely to give it up completely. With the return of great power politics in full force in Northeast Asia, Pyongyang will have further room to continue its pursuit of more advanced nuclear and missile capabilities as great power cooperation on North Korea stalls.

14 David Wertime, “Chinese Censors Are Giving North Korea a P.R. Makeover,” *Foreign Policy*, October 12, 2015, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/12/chinese-censors-give-north-korea-kim-jong-un-a-public-relations-makeover/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm\\_term=\\*Editors%20Picks&wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/12/chinese-censors-give-north-korea-kim-jong-un-a-public-relations-makeover/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=*Editors%20Picks&wp_login_redirect=0).

For its part, South Korea could likely find it increasingly difficult to maintain its strategy of hedging between the United States and China, as the two great powers pressure Seoul to take sides over contentious issues, such as the THAAD system and regional conflicts. Given Pyongyang’s increasing nuclear and missile capabilities, Washington will continue to pressure Seoul to join the US-led missile defense system in Northeast Asia. THAAD could do much to help protect South Korea and US troops on the Korean peninsula against the North’s missile threats. Seoul, however, is reluctant to allow the system’s deployment on the Korean peninsula out of the concern that China-ROK relations might deteriorate. While THAAD does not threaten China’s nuclear second-strike capability, Beijing perceives the deployment of the system as a political move by Washington to bring Seoul into an anti-China coalition and as a way to forge greater US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation. Seeking China’s cooperation on North Korea, South Korea will do all it can to avoid the deployment of THAAD on the Korean peninsula. Eventually, however, Seoul might be forced to make concessions toward expanding US missile defense capabilities or even join the system in order to maintain a strong US-ROK alliance, creating potential problems in Sino-ROK relations.

Washington will also continue to push for better relations between Seoul and Tokyo, but any bilateral breakthrough between the two capitals is unlikely in the near future due to history (e.g. comfort women) and territory (Dokdo/Takeshima dispute) issues. Instead, the United States could

seek to coordinate its Northeast Asian allies in a loose trilateral setting with Washington at the center. Since 2008, trilateral cooperation between the three countries has been moving forward, albeit at a gradual and inconsistent pace, to include joint military drills.<sup>15</sup> The United States, Japan, and South Korea also agreed to a memorandum of understanding, if not an agreement, on trilateral military intelligence sharing at the end of 2014.<sup>16</sup> Whether Beijing-Seoul relations will deteriorate if the trilateral cooperation between Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington increases further remains to be seen.

IF SEOUL COMES TO BELIEVE THAT STRATEGIC HEDGING TOWARD BEIJING IS NO LONGER WORKING, HOWEVER, SOUTH KOREA COULD DECIDE TO SEEK MUCH BETTER RELATIONS AND CLOSER SECURITY COOPERATION WITH JAPAN.

For now, the Xi Jinping administration is pursuing engagement toward South Korea's Park Geun-hye administration, which has also taken advantage of Beijing's charm offensive for the purpose of strategic hedging and pressuring Pyongyang. Through engagement, China would like to gradually weaken the US-ROK alliance, while South Korea would like to use its relationship with China to pressure North Korea to talk and make concessions on a wide range of issues, including the nuclear issue. If China becomes far more assertive or attempts to pressure South Korea to take a step away from the United States, however, Seoul could gradually find itself in a tough spot in which South Korea will have to choose between China and the US-ROK alliance. If forced to abandon strategic hedging and choose, Seoul, under the current circumstances, will most certainly choose Washington over Beijing, given the strength of the US-ROK alliance and South Korea's increasing distrust and concerns with regard to China. According to a recent survey, nearly 60 percent of South Koreans would prefer the United States as the partner in the future compared to about 30 percent for China. In

15 For example, see Bruce Klingner, "Washington Should Urge Greater South Korean-Japanese Military and Diplomatic Cooperation," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, September 24, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/washington-should-urge-greater-south-korean-japanese-military-and-diplomatic-cooperation>.

16 Myo-ja Ser, "Korea Enters in Intelligence Pact," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 27, 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2998962>.

particular, approximately 75 percent of the millennials would prefer the United States as the future partner.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a 2014 survey reported that approximately two-thirds of South Koreans see China as having become a military threat to South Korea because of Beijing's increasing assertiveness with regard to the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas.<sup>18</sup>

One byproduct of South Korea's abandonment of strategic hedging in favor of balancing China could be an improvement in relations with Japan. For now, Seoul is refraining from establishing serious bilateral security cooperation with Tokyo, given that such an effort could be eyed with serious concerns in Beijing and would also have negative domestic repercussions. One should note, however, that despite Seoul's tough rhetoric, such as calling on Tokyo to have a "correct understanding of history," South Korea has not pursued any concrete policy initiative that might lead to serious security complications with Japan.<sup>19</sup> For example, Seoul refused to take a common stance with Beijing on Tokyo's revisionism on Japan's wartime history (preferring to deal with the issue bilaterally), took a relatively restrained position toward Tokyo's reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution in 2014, and did not criticize the recent passage of security bills for expanding the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' mandate.<sup>20</sup> Seoul has also signaled a move toward a "two-track" approach toward Tokyo, hoping to decouple the inflammatory history issues from more concrete security and economic issues.<sup>21</sup> Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye recently held their first bilateral meeting in early November on the sidelines of a China-Japan-ROK trilateral summit.<sup>22</sup> Despite its rhetoric, South Korea, for now, is keen to maintain its delicate position between China and Japan. If Seoul comes to believe that strategic hedging toward Beijing is no longer working, however, South Korea could decide to seek much better relations and closer security cooperation with Japan.

With further deterioration of Northeast Asia's security dynamics, the situation on the Korean peninsula might come to resemble that of the Cold War era. With the full return of great power politics, Pyongyang could have an

17 Jiyoung Kim, John J. Lee, and Chungku Kang, *Measuring a Giant: South Korean Perceptions of the United States*, Asan Institute for Policy Studies, April 20, 2015, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/measuring-a-giant-south-korean-perceptions-of-the-united-states/>.

18 "66 Pct of S. Koreans View China's Rise as 'Military Threat': Poll," Yonhap News Agency, June 24, 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2014/06/24/90/0301000000AEN20140624003000315F.html>.

19 Seung-woo Kang, "Seoul Condemns Tokyo's Denial of History," *Korea Times*, February 21, 2014, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/dr/116\\_152049.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/dr/116_152049.html).

20 Whan-woo Yi, "Seoul Likely to Adopt Two-Track Policy on Japan," *Korea Times*, September 22, 2015, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/09/120\\_187285.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/09/120_187285.html).

21 "Trilateral Summit," *Korea Herald*, August 17, 2015, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/09/120\\_187285.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/09/120_187285.html).

22 Justin McCurry, "Japan and South Korea Summit Signals Thaw in Relations," *Guardian*, November 2, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/02/japan-south-korea-summit-thaw-in-relations>.

opportunity to bring back its past strategy of pitting the great powers against each other while pursuing nuclear weapons. South Korea could find its strategy of hedging in jeopardy and might eventually find itself in a coalition against China. Washington and Beijing, as the United States and the Soviet Union did during the Cold War, will likely attempt to ensure that the Korean peninsula does not become a dangerous flashpoint in their competitive relationship. This scenario is likely—if North Korea remains intact.

## THE NORTH KOREAN COLLAPSE SCENARIO

The totalitarian nature of the Kim regime, combined with its failed economic model, makes it highly likely that the system will eventually collapse. Some may counter that predictions about the regime's collapse have proven wrong before. This logic is flawed because the fact that an event has not happened yet does not mean that it will never happen. Moreover, North Korean society has been changing gradually since the famine of 1994–98 with the introduction of a pervasive black market economy and the rise of massive corruption.<sup>23</sup> These trends are irreversible and are likely to lead to the Kim regime's collapse at some point in the future.

There are at least a couple of ways in which an authoritarian state can collapse. Authoritarian regimes could collapse when political control is relaxed and dissent grows unchecked. The most prominent example is the Soviet Union where Mikhail Gorbachev liberalized its political system. As the state refuses to crack down on dissidents, demands of the masses grow ever larger until the system collapses in its entirety. Authoritarian regimes can also collapse because the state is simply unable to control the growing protests. Such was the case in Syria and Libya during the Arab Spring during which the Assad and Gaddafi regimes could not suppress the protests, which eventually morphed into armed rebellions.

Of these possibilities, the one in which North Korea allows dissent and opens up politically in any meaningful way is highly unlikely. While the country's economic situation is unsustainable in the long-run, the Kim regime fears that it might collapse as a result of opening and that the ruling elites might be punished. According to Andrei N. Lankov, one North Korean bureaucrat said: "The human rights and the like might be a great idea, but if we start explaining it to our people, we will be killed in no time."<sup>24</sup> Other North Korean officials have noted: "What has happened to the

former East German party and police officials?"<sup>25</sup> Given the uniquely brutal and extensive nature of North Korea's totalitarianism, such sentiments are only rational.

According to Lankov, however, young Kim Jong-un, North Korea's current leader, might have incentives to pursue risky reforms, since he has to stay in power for decades, unlike his father who was already in his 50s when he became the supreme leader.<sup>26</sup> The Kim regime is pursuing the "byungjin line," which seeks to achieve two incompatible aims: nuclear weapons and economic development.<sup>27</sup> As part of the policy, the regime is experimenting with minor economic "reforms" aimed at giving individuals more control and adding more market-driven salaries, even as the regime has become more brutal politically.<sup>28</sup> Many of the reforms, however, could carry significant political risks and are likely driven (at least partially) by the desire to accommodate and bring the already-sprawling unsanctioned private market activities under state control. In fact, after the December 2013 execution of Jang Song-taek, who was reportedly considering Chinese-style economic reforms, the North Korean regime in 2014 issued an internal decree warning the country's elites to "[a]bandon the Chinese dream."<sup>29</sup> The on-going economic adjustments in North Korea more likely reflect the Kim regime's increasing loss of control over the country's economy, not the regime's desire to truly reform. For example, Pyongyang was more or less forced to legalize \$50 portable media players last year. Ordinary North Koreans often use the devices to view illegally obtained media from the outside world. The legalization happened not because the Kim regime has become more liberal, but because the regime had failed to adequately crack down on the possession of the devices and wanted to find a way to regulate their use.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, given the forces behind the North Korean system, which holds itself together with the ideology of Juche, one young, inexperienced leader beholden to his father's men is unlikely to be able to drastically change the direction of North Korea. Therefore, the Kim regime will eventually fall, but probably not by voluntarily easing its control of the system and opening up.

25 Quoted in Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, op. cit., p. 115.

26 Giles Hewitt, "North's Nuclear Threat Mounts in Isolation," *Japan Times*, October 27, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/27/asia-pacific/norths-nuclear-threat-mounts-in-isolation/>.

27 So Yeol Kim, "Byungjin Lives as Kim Seeks Guns and Butter," *Daily NK*, April 1, 2013, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catId=nk01700&num=10453>.

28 Eric Talmadge, "North Korea's Creeping Economic Reforms Show Signs of Paying off," *Guardian*, March 5, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/05/north-korea-economic-reforms-show-signs-paying-off>.

29 "Exclusive: North Korea Decrees, 'Abandon the Chinese Dream!'," *New Focus International*, June 2, 2014, <http://newfocusintl.com/exclusive-north-korea-decrees-abandon-chinese-dream/>.

30 James Pearson, "The \$50 Device That Symbolizes a Shift in North Korea," *Reuters*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/us-northkorea-change-insight-idUSKBN0MM2UZ20150327>.

23 J. J. O'Donoghue, "'North Korea Confidential' Shows How Citizens Flirt with Consumption in Their Everyday Lives," *Japan Times*, April 4, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/04/04/books/north-korea-confidential-shows-citizens-flirt-consumption-everyday-lives/>.

24 Quoted in Andrei N. Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), p. 115.



North Korean soldiers looking across the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Source: Expert Infantry/Flickr.

The factor that might lead to the fall of the Kim regime is North Korea's pervasive black market economy. With the end of the Cold War, Soviet and Chinese aid more or less dried up, partially contributing to the outbreak of a massive famine in North Korea between 1994 and 1998, leading to somewhere between 240,000 and 3,500,000 deaths out of a total population of about 22 million at the time.<sup>31</sup> During this period, North Korea's state-run food distribution system collapsed, leaving ordinary North Koreans to survive on their own by engaging in black market activities, which are now widespread and are even utilized by North Korean government officials to reap their own private profit. According to a survey of North Korean refugees conducted by Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard, "nearly half of respondents said all of their income was derived from private business activities at the time they left the North."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the country's economy is gradually becoming beholden to dollars and yuans rather than North Korean wons. As of 2015, "Pyongyang has become a de facto dollar-using economy, while border regions and economic zones such as the Rajin-Sonbong area are

almost a yuan-using one."<sup>33</sup> Although the Kim regime is aware of the pervasiveness of the black market and related practices, the North Korean state is unable to crack down on the informal system, since doing so could lead to public outrage and an economic collapse.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the regime's 2009 attempt to uproot private market activities by implementing currency revaluation that decimated the savings of many North Koreans sparked rare incidents of protests in Pyongyang.<sup>35</sup>

One particular consequence of the black market phenomenon has been that North Korean millennials, the so-called "black market generation," are more independent-minded, entrepreneurial, and feel far less bound to the state than previous North Korean generations. The formative experiences of the millennials are the famine of the 1990s and the experience of pioneering ways to survive without any help from the state.<sup>36</sup> According to one millennial defector, her generation is "not really worshipping the Kim regime sincerely [but

31 Becky Evans, "North Korean Parents 'Eating Their Own Children' after Being Driven Mad by Hunger in Famine-hit Pariah State," *Daily Mail*, January 28, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2269094/North-Korean-parents-eat-children-driven-mad-hunger-famine-hit-pariah-state.html>.

32 Heesun Wee, "How Millennials Are Shaking North Korea's Regime," *CNBC*, November 15, 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/102146454>.

33 "N. Koreans Rely More on Dollar, Yuan in Black Market: Source," Yonhap News Agency, February 10, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2015/02/10/45/0301000000AEN20150210006500315Fhtml>.

34 Andrei N. Lankov, "N Korea and the Myth of Starvation," *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/n-korea-myth-starvation-2014319124439924471.html>.

35 Sang-hun Choe, "North Korea Revalues Its Currency," *New York Times*, December 1, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/02/business/global/02korea.html>.

36 Wee, "How Millennials Are Shaking North Korea's Regime," op. cit.

is] just pretending.”<sup>37</sup> At the same time, North Koreans today know more about the outside world than ever before, with South Korean DVDs and USBs flooding North Korea’s black market and falling into the hands of ordinary North Koreans, including members of the military.<sup>38</sup> These trends are happening completely out of the North Korean state’s control, are irreversible, and do not bode well for the future stability of the Kim regime.

In the long run, one also cannot rule out the possibility of cracks emerging at the elite level, given Kim Jong-un’s youth and lack of experience. There have already been possible indications of power struggle among North Korean ruling elites, with one incident leading to the execution of Jang Sung-taek and another reportedly almost leading to Kim’s assassination.<sup>39</sup> Kim Jong-un has also executed seventy top-level officials since he came to power, while his father, Kim Jong-il, executed about ten during his first few years in power.<sup>40</sup> Since late 2011, approximately 20 to 30 percent of North Korea’s top officials and 40 percent of top military officers were “replaced,” according to South Korea’s National Intelligence Service.<sup>41</sup> As a result, several North Korean officials stationed in foreign countries have been seeking asylum to escape Kim Jong-un’s reign of terror.<sup>42</sup> One might be tempted to argue that these incidents represent the young leader’s confidence and successes in consolidating his power, but a truly secure leader would not need to purge so many top officials who are needed to run a state. In a highly centralized political system run by a relatively small group of top officials, the mass purges could bring about systemic instability. The purges also do not guarantee Kim’s consolidation of power and might in fact endanger it. Many among North Korea’s ruling elites might fear that they could be next in line to be executed or “replaced” and might decide to make dangerous and destabilizing moves against the regime or even the leader himself to prevent such outcomes. Last but not least, given that young Kim has had only about three years of experience with North Korean politics before becoming the supreme leader, one might ask whether he truly understands the consequences of his actions. As one high-level defector noted, while Kim Il-sung was a charismatic and respected leader and Kim Jong-il ruled with both carrots and sticks, Kim Jong-un “is only using

the stick,” as he lacks the same level of legitimacy and experience that his father and grandfather had.<sup>43</sup>

All these factors mean that the North Korean regime is fundamentally flawed, but predicting when the regime might collapse is impossible. Regime change/collapse has been notoriously unpredictable throughout history. Jimmy Carter said on December 31, 1977 that Iran was “an island of stability.”<sup>44</sup> A week later, on January 7, 1978, the Iranian revolution began. At one point during the 1980s, Robert M. Gates, along with most other Russia experts, believed that the Soviet Union would never collapse during his or his children’s lifetime.<sup>45</sup> The Soviet collapse then occurred within a decade of his observation. Most observers believed that the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East were secure and tightly policed—until the Arab Spring happened.<sup>46</sup> The common theme from these cases is that regime collapses often occur even before analysts realize that they might be possible. Only with hindsight, can one point out why these uprisings happened at the time of their occurrences. The demise of the Kim regime too “will come in an unexpected manner and moment rather than in a predictable fashion,” as ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se put it, and will likely occur much sooner than anticipated.<sup>47</sup>

**KIM JONG-UN HAS ALSO EXECUTED SEVENTY TOP-LEVEL OFFICIALS SINCE HE CAME TO POWER, WHILE HIS FATHER, KIM JONG-IL, EXECUTED ABOUT TEN DURING HIS FIRST FEW YEARS IN POWER.**

Moreover, if history counts as one of the better, if not perfectly accurate, tools for making speculations, the process of North Korea’s collapse will likely be rapid and violent, as Robert D. Kaplan and Abraham M. Denmark note.<sup>48</sup> During both the revolutions of 1989 and the Arab

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Carney, “Inside the Black Market of the World’s Most Repressive Regime,” *ABC News*, July 28, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-28/north-korea-black-markets/5629736>.

<sup>39</sup> Se-jeong Chang and Myo-ja Ser, “Attempt to Kill Jong-un Took Place in 2012: Source,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, March 14, 2013, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2968561>.

<sup>40</sup> Tong-Hyung Kim, “Seoul: North Korean Leader Has So Far Executed 70 Officials,” *Washington Post*, July 9, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/seoul-north-korean-leader-executed-70-since-taking-power/2015/07/09/4c86b812-25fb-11e5-b621-b55e495e9b78\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/seoul-north-korean-leader-executed-70-since-taking-power/2015/07/09/4c86b812-25fb-11e5-b621-b55e495e9b78_story.html).

<sup>41</sup> “Over 40% of N.Korean Brass Replaced in Purges,” *Chosun Ilbo*, July 15, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/07/15/2015071500951.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/07/15/2015071500951.html).

<sup>42</sup> “N. Korean Officials Abroad Seek for Asylum: Source,” Yonhap News Agency, July 2, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2015/07/02/0401000000AEN20150702002200315.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Tom Phillips, “Costly and Complicated—Why Many Koreans Can’t Face Reunification,” *Guardian*, October 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/09/why-many-koreans-cant-face-reunification>.

<sup>44</sup> Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> Aditya Chakraborty, “Prepare to Be Pummeled by the Political Predictions,” *Guardian*, April 13, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/13/brain-food-political-forecasting>.

<sup>46</sup> F. Gregory Gause, III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring,” *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Kim, “Minister Says Unification Will Come as a Surprise,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 26, 2015, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=3000089>.

<sup>48</sup> Robert D. Kaplan and Abraham M. Denmark, “The Long Goodbye: The Future North Korea,” *World Affairs* vol. 174, no. 1, May–June 2011, pp. 12–13.

Spring, the most repressive states were the ones that collapsed in violent manners. During the Arab Spring, the most repressive states—Syria and Libya—degenerated into violent civil wars. During the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, the one state that saw a violent revolution was Nicolae Ceausescu's Socialist Republic of Romania, which was ideologically similar to North Korea. Ceausescu was a great admirer of the totalitarian ideology practiced by Kim Il-sung and modeled Romania's political system based on Juche.<sup>49</sup> At the end of 1989, the Ceausescu regime collapsed within a mere eleven days, more than a thousand people died, more than three thousand people were injured, and the Ceausescus, who had built a personality cult around themselves for decades, were executed after a show trial by the end of the revolution. If a North Korean collapse occurs, it will likely be a messy affair.

In the end, North Korea's collapse will likely result in a unified Korea. Many young South Koreans feel ambiguous about unification. Most are not opposed to unification per se but would prefer to see it occur when they are financially prepared. A 2014 survey revealed that about 72 percent of South Koreans in their 20s are "interested" in unification as opposed to about 92 percent in those in their 60s and above.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, opposing unification is still tantamount to political suicide for South Korean politicians.<sup>51</sup> Regardless of how some young South Koreans may feel, the ROK government will opt for unification if North Korea collapses. China, as revealed by the WikiLeaks a few years ago, will likely not oppose Korean unification because China fears a hostile South Korea more than a unified Korea.<sup>52</sup> Korean unification, however, could have potentially destabilizing and dangerous consequences for Northeast Asia.

## UNIFIED KOREA: WHERE EUROPE'S PAST COULD BECOME ASIA'S FUTURE

The brinkmanship strategy pursued by the Kim regime and its internal contradictions mean that there is always a risk of a sudden North Korean collapse or even a second Korean War. Both scenarios would be severely destabilizing and could create massive problems for all the players involved in Northeast Asia. Will North Korea, which is heavily armed and is continuously improving its nuclear and missile technology, collapse with a bang or with a whimper? How will the global community deal with a humanitarian crisis

49 Philip Iglauer, "Envoy Sees Ceausescu Regime in NK," *Korea Herald*, May 18, 2014, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140518000428>.

50 Jiyoung Kim, Karl Friedhoff, Chungku Kang, and Euicheol Lee, *South Korean Attitudes toward North Korea and Reunification* (Washington, DC: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2015) p. 30, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-korean-attitudes-toward-north-korea-and-reunification/>.

51 Tania Branigan, "Korean Unification: Dreams of Unity Fade into Past for Young South Koreans," *Guardian*, May 27, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/27/south-north-korea-unification>.

52 Simon Tisdall, "WikiLeaks Row: China Wants Korean Reunification, Officials Confirm," *Guardian*, November 30, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/30/china-wants-korean-reunification>.

in an underdeveloped failed state? How will China deal with a unified Korea allied to the United States? Will a unified Korea become a more assertive power? These are just a few of the questions that the world will have to deal with if a North Korean crisis spirals out of control. Hence, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea generally agree that North Korea should be denuclearized, that there should be no war on the Korean peninsula, that an abrupt collapse of the Kim regime is not desirable, and that instability on the peninsula should be minimized. Despite these shared interests, the five powers have difficulty coordinating due to their different priorities. China, in particular, is more focused on maintaining stability than on pressuring North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. At the other end of the spectrum, the United States has been willing to impose tough sanctions and other measures to pressure North Korea to give up its nuclear program. Still, because of the unpredictable nature and unforeseeable future of the Kim regime, all major powers in Northeast Asia have been relatively cautious in dealing with the two Koreas. Paradoxically, North Korea is a source of both stability and instability in the region, and the Kim regime's collapse and unification of the two Koreas could have seriously destabilizing consequences.

To understand why a sudden change on the Korean peninsula might lead to instability for all of Northeast Asia, one needs to understand the importance of buffer states or regions. As historian Robert Kagan puts it, "great power wars often begin as arguments over buffer states where spheres of influence intersect."<sup>53</sup> Too often, observers of international politics focus primarily on great powers but devote comparatively less time on buffer states or regions. A buffer in geopolitical terms is usually an area that exists in between two or more great powers/blocs and often serves as a defensive barrier or exists for some other security purpose. Geopolitical buffers throughout history have included Poland (between Prussia/Germany and Russia/the Soviet Union), Mesopotamia/Iraq (between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire and between Turkey and Iran and Saudi Arabia and Iran today), Eastern Europe (between Austria-Hungary and Russia), Ukraine today (between the European Union and Russia), and, of course, Korea (between China, Japan, and Russia). Great powers often started wars over buffer areas throughout history. Ottoman Turks and Safavids fought over Mesopotamia, which Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia today are fighting a proxy war over. The flashpoint of World War I was in Eastern Europe, which is back in the spotlight today with the flare-up of the Ukrainian crisis. China, Japan, Russia, and the United States have all fought their own wars over Korea, which remains a dangerous flashpoint as with other buffer zones. Yet, the Washington policy community and the public usually pay more attention to North Korea and its eccentricity than to the Korean peninsula's place in Northeast Asia's great power relations.

53 Robert Kagan, "The United States Must Resist a Return to Spheres of Interest in the International System," web blog post, Order from Chaos: Foreign Policy in a Troubled World, The Brookings Institution, February 19, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/02/19-united-states-must-resist-return-to-spheres-of-interest-international-system-kagan>.

Of the many conflict zones in East Asia, the Korea peninsula is the most dangerous for three reasons. First, Korea, as a geographically strategic pivot, has historically been the flashpoint between the contending powers in Northeast Asia. Second, as is often the case with buffer zones, how events on the ground in Korea might unfold is a completely unknown question. What will happen to North Korea? When and how will it fall? No government, not even the one in Pyongyang, has control over the answers to any of these questions. The element of unpredictability and unintended consequences surrounding North Korea's future drastically increases the possibility that an inadvertent series of events might escalate out of control for other major powers involved on the Korean peninsula, as policymakers scramble to improvise their responses on a minute-by-minute basis. Third, the two Koreas (the North being a heavily armed state with nuclear and missile capabilities and the South being a significant middle power) are not just any buffer states but are also "swing states" that can influence the overall balance of power in Northeast Asia. South Korea has a population of approximately 50 million, while North Korea has one of approximately 25 million, making the combined population of a unified Korea approximately 75 million.<sup>54</sup> The South in its own right is also a middle power with significant economic and military might. Therefore, the United States, China, and Japan all have significant stakes in the future of the Korean peninsula.

Even if a united Korea successfully emerges as an accepted unit in the regional system, many issues, including the rationale of the US-ROK alliance, China-ROK, and Japan-ROK relations, will likely continue to be wrangled over and be calibrated over time to produce true stability on the Korean peninsula. To begin with, the removal of North Korea as the element that all regional powers have a rough consensus on means that regional contestation over Korea will likely intensify. The very fact that a unified Korea will likely be more stable and predictable than North Korea means that the regional powers could be far more active in dealing with the Korean peninsula. China, for its part, would share a land border with a unified Korea, which will likely remain allied to the United States. Beijing, for the moment, is tolerating the US-ROK alliance as long as its primary aim is deterrence against Pyongyang. If the Kim regime disappears as the most important, if not the only, justification for the mutual security treaty, Chinese policymakers will begin to question and challenge the rationale of the alliance. From China's perspective, the US-ROK alliance could be directed at only one other country if North Korea no longer exists. A unified Korea might also become a more assertive and outward-looking state in the region, complicating its security dynamics. Hence, the Kim regime's demise and Korea's unification would eliminate a great source of danger and instability but would also end up creating an entirely different security problem for Northeast Asia. Without the current consensus on North Korea, which also serves as a

somewhat independent buffer friendly to neither China nor the United States and its allies, the Korean peninsula could become a major point of friction within the overall framework of US-China and China-Japan relations.

This is not to say that another conflict over Korea is inevitable. The future is never predetermined, and Northeast Asia today has its own particular attributes. First, South Korea today, unlike during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and in the immediate aftermath of World War II, is no longer a shrimp but is a middle power with significant economic and military capacity. South Korea, which will likely inherit the entire Korean peninsula, can fend for its own security and sovereignty to some degree and will not be easily pushed around by great powers, adding to Northeast Asia's stability. Second, Seoul is in a peculiar, but somewhat benign position of being allied to Washington, which is also allied to Tokyo. As a result, South Korea, for the moment, can develop friendly ties with China and alienate Japan without facing immediate, dangerous consequences because both Seoul and Tokyo are allies of Washington. As long as this ambiguous and strange US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship continues, it helps mitigate the US-China and Japan-China security competition on Korea. Third, the Korean peninsula consists of only one nation. Many buffer regions around the world, such as Eastern Europe and Mesopotamia, had been and continue to be boiling pots of competing nationalities, tribes, and religious sects, making these areas highly unstable and difficult to manage for great powers. The fact that there is only one nation on the Korean peninsula reduces the chance of events on the ground spiraling out of control due to nationalistic impulses (although whether North and South Koreans will get along in a single state remains to be seen). Finally, US military power still remains dominant compared to that of any other state in Northeast Asia and will remain so for a while. Europe and Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were multipolar. The military dominance of the United States and its allies will help bolster stability in Northeast Asia for some time to come. Even if another conflict over Korea might not be inevitable, however, the US policy community should think carefully about the Korean peninsula and its future within the context of entire Northeast Asian geopolitics, instead of focusing excessively on North Korea and its antics.

## KOREA IN US FOREIGN POLICY: A LYNCHPIN OF PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

Korea has been part of the US grand strategy in East Asia since the Korean War. As a treaty ally, Seoul was an integral part of Washington's attempts to contain communism in the region. Yet, the Cold War has been over for more than two decades. Beijing is a rising power in a region

<sup>54</sup> "Korea Opportunities," *Economist*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/02/daily-chart-18>.



South Korean and US soldiers parading during a Memorial Day ceremony organized by United States Forces Korea. *Source:* Expert Infantry/Flickr.

considered the most important in the world in strategic terms by scholars and policymakers alike.<sup>55</sup> The United States and its allies, however, do not have the same kind of extraordinarily antagonistic relations with China as Washington and its allies did with Moscow during the Cold War. The relationship between the United States and China is far more complicated. Washington seeks to manage Beijing's rise by balancing, but also by pursuing robust trade ties and cooperation with China. South Korea itself does not seek to balance China and is nervously hedging between Washington and Beijing. Nevertheless, the importance of the Korean peninsula in maintaining stability in Northeast Asia and in protecting vital US security interests in the region has not changed.

Stability on the Korean peninsula will be important in any effort to bring about a stable equilibrium in Northeast Asia and balance China. Serious instability or rapid change in Korea might trigger interventions by great powers, which could attempt to secure their interests on the Korean peninsula in unpredictable ways as situations on the ground change rapidly. Such a course of event could potentially escalate and lead to a crisis, which would be detrimental to all parties involved. Therefore, the United States has an interest in minimizing great

power tension and conflicts on the Korean peninsula. Washington should also seek to neutralize Pyongyang's nuclear/missile program, which is a source of instability in the region and will pose increasing threats to the United States and its allies if its missile and nuclear capabilities advance further. Using advanced nuclear capabilities as a shield, North Korea might also launch even more daring provocations.

In addition, regime change through grassroots-level subversion and unification should be the prime objectives in US policy toward North Korea. On the surface, a policy of regime change would achieve the goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula but seems to contradict the need to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula. The Kim regime, however, will likely collapse anyway at some point in the future. The United States cannot base its North Korea policy on the unrealistic premise that the regime, in its current state, will remain stable indefinitely or will reform. The relevant policy question, then, has to do with "when" North Korea's collapse should occur, not "whether."

From a broader regional context, an early demise of the North Korean regime would be better for Northeast Asia's stability than a later one. Ten or twenty years from now, the relationship between the United States and its allies and China will likely be far tenser and perhaps more precarious than it is today, as a more powerful China seeks to dislodge US presence and influence out of the western Pacific to establish hegemony in the region. Under such

<sup>55</sup> See Paul C. Avey, Michael C. Desch, James D. Long, Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney, "The FP Survey: Ivory Tower," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/03/the-ivory-tower-survey/>.

circumstances, the importance of the Korean peninsula will grow, and the competition over Korea will intensify as well. Twenty years from now, a North Korean collapse could potentially be dangerous—far more so than a North Korean collapse today would be. As of now, the United States is still powerful in Northeast Asia and would be able to act as a stabilizing force to allow the major powers in the region to discuss, manage, and settle the Korean question diplomatically. In the future, the current favorable situation might not exist.

Moreover, a collapsing North Korea with far more developed nuclear and missile capabilities in the future could pose a significant danger to the United States if the Kim regime decides to crumble with a bang instead with a whimper. Hence, if one views the North Korean issue from a broader regional context and from a long-term perspective, long-term benefits from the Kim regime's demise in the near future outweigh the short-term costs. A policy of regime change is also not about unnaturally forcing the regime's demise but is about accelerating what is almost inevitable. While Washington has few options in dealing with Pyongyang and certainly has no military option, the United States should seriously commit to the goal of regime change and explore practical means to achieve the objective.

## A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY FOR KOREA

The United States needs a comprehensive strategy to simultaneously achieve stability on the Korean peninsula and bring about regime change in North Korea. The strategy laid out in this report consists of four elements.

1. Increasing the defense budget to at least 4 percent of the GDP in order to buttress the rebalance to Asia and to maintain a robust military presence and capability on the Korean peninsula for stability and deterrence.
2. Pursuit of grassroots engagement toward North Korea by covertly facilitating the black market flow of goods and information into the country to empower ordinary North Koreans and to weaken the regime.
3. Maintenance of strong, but strictly bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea to mitigate the security dynamic in the region and to better manage regional relations and crises.
4. Convincing China to discuss the regional order after Korean unification and beyond with the United States, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.

### Increasing Defense Spending

The United States needs to increase its defense budget to at least 4 percent of the GDP in order to bolster the rebalance to Asia and to ensure stability and deterrence on the Korean peninsula. US defense spending for the fiscal year 2016

will probably be approximately 3.5 percent of the overall GDP—a low level by historical standards.<sup>56</sup> The fifty-year Cold War average was significantly higher at approximately 6.3 percent.<sup>57</sup> In 2011, the Obama administration announced the so-called “pivot” or the “rebalance” to Asia, a shift that actually began under the last years of the George W. Bush administration, to focus more on the Asia-Pacific region in terms of resource allocation and of level of involvement. US government officials and experts, however, believe that sustained low levels of defense spending could jeopardize the rebalance and other security commitments around the world.<sup>58</sup> President Obama or the next commander-in-chief should rally Congress and the American public to ensure that US defense spending does not fall below 4 percent of the overall GDP. Four percent is a level that many experts, including former-US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and former-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen, agree is the minimum required for the United States to maintain its global commitments.<sup>59</sup> Maintaining a robust level of defense spending would also require revitalization of the US economy and introduction of entitlement reforms.

### A Strategy toward North Korea: Grassroots Engagement

Any strategy toward North Korea must achieve two seemingly contradictory objectives. First, the United States should pursue a strategy to reduce North Korea's destabilizing actions so as to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula. Second, Washington should seek regime change and denuclearization in Pyongyang. The current policy of “strategic patience” achieves neither. This completely unrealistic policy calls for the Kim regime to undertake “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement” before being allowed to improve relations with the United States.<sup>60</sup> The policy is dangerous because it does not put a serious stop to North Korea's nuclear and missile developments while pushing the regime to initiate more and more provocations to bring the United States to talks. A different approach that might be able to achieve stability, regime change, and denuclearization on the Korean peninsula is grassroots

56 Karoun Demirjian, “House Republicans Seek to Override NDAA, despite New Bill in the Works,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/10/29/house-republicans-seek-to-override-ndaa-despite-new-bill-in-the-works/>.

57 Thomas Donnelly, “Romney Defense Spending Proposal a Return to Normal,” *Weekly Standard*, May 10, 2012, [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/romney-defense-proposal-return-normal\\_644346.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/romney-defense-proposal-return-normal_644346.html).

58 Chi-dong Lee, “USFK Intact, Asia Pivot Potentially in Jeopardy,” *Yonhap News Agency*, March 5, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2014/03/05/78/0401000000AEN20140305000600315F.html>; David Adesnik, “FPI Bulletin: Defense Experts Testify on Damaging Impact of Sequestration,” *Foreign Policy Initiative*, February 13, 2015, <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/fpi-bulletin-defense-experts-testify-damaging-impact-sequestration>.

59 Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Seeks Record Level in 2009 Budget,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/03/washington/03cnd-military.html>.

60 Myung-bok Bae, “Time for a Different Tack,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, November 26, 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2997781>.

subversive engagement. The strategy aims to “engage” North Korea diplomatically to achieve a degree of stability but also seeks to instigate regime change by covertly empowering ordinary North Koreans by assisting their black market activities and exposure to the outside world as much as possible.

THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HELP THE ALREADY-VIBRANT PROCESS BY COVERTLY FUNDING AND ASSISTING THE SPRAWLING ILLICIT TRADE THAT FLOWS IN AND OUT OF NORTH KOREA FROM CHINA’S BORDERS, PARTICULARLY WITH REGARD TO THE GOODS THAT WOULD BRING OUTSIDE INFORMATION OR FACILITATE THE GROWTH OF THE COUNTRY’S INFORMAL MARKET ECONOMY.

Two types of engagement strategies toward North Korea are possible: elite-level engagement and grassroots engagement. The more state-centered, elite-level engagement would involve measures, such as radio broadcasts, diplomatic interactions, cultural and educational exchanges, and cooperation on economic projects, although such initiatives are politically impossible to implement given the current state of US-North Korea relations. The grassroots approach bypasses North Korea’s official channels and instead empowers ordinary North Koreans directly and covertly through the country’s robust black market network and its traders with smuggled currencies, media materials, and other outside goods.

Elite-level engagement faces many problems and is unlikely to work. To begin with, the North Koreans selected by the Kim regime for cultural and educational exchanges would likely be from the upper echelons of North Korean society, would already have some knowledge about the outside world, and would be those who are the most trusted within the regime and have a significant stake in maintaining the status-quo in the country. This is often the case with

many leaders and officials from authoritarian states. Many have had education and experience in Western countries, but most do not turn out to be reformers. Indeed, Kim Jong-un himself spent his teenage years in Switzerland. Cooperation on economic projects is problematic as well because the North Korean state would use much of the revenue earned to prop up the regime. Radio broadcasts could be effective at some levels but would be considered serious provocations by Pyongyang and could potentially invite destabilizing countermoves by the North.

Grassroots engagement, on the contrary, is about bypassing the Kim regime to covertly and directly empower ordinary North Koreans in order to undermine the regime by taking advantage of the fact that Pyongyang has been gradually losing control of North Korean society and economy. North Koreans today are more entrepreneurial, participate in black market activities (which the country’s economy depends on), and have access to outside goods. Wealth and information are power. The United States should help the already-vibrant process by covertly funding and assisting the sprawling illicit trade that flows in and out of North Korea from China’s borders, particularly with regard to the goods that would bring outside information or facilitate the growth of the country’s informal market economy. Covertly infusing dollars would also contribute to the informal system. In addition, as noted by Andrei Lankov, supporting South Korea’s large defector community is important, since North Korean defectors send letters and money to their family members and relatives and also communicate with them using mobile phones.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, the United States should have mid-level State Department officials engage in talks (for the sake of talks) with North Korea and offer minor periodic economic rewards to feign “good will.” The purpose of the talks would be to keep the Kim regime occupied and to minimize the possibility that the regime might make aggressive moves to force talks or lash out at Seoul in dangerous ways. The economic concessions, if absolutely necessary, should be bare minimal, just enough to keep Pyongyang at the table, but no more, because large concessions would help strengthen the Kim regime while hurting North Korea’s black market economy. The ultimate aim of grassroots engagement would be to make the regime increasingly dependent on ordinary North Koreans economically, not the other way around. Under the current circumstances, any diplomatic dealings with North Korea will come under attack from Congress and will consume political capital for any administration. Hence, mid-level officials, instead of senior officials, should be in charge of the talks to allow the United States to feign a degree of “seriousness” to the North Koreans in a sustainable manner without placing too much political capital in jeopardy.

61 Andrei N. Lankov, “The North Korean Paradox and the Subversive Truth,” *Asian Outlook*, American Enterprise Institute, March 3, 2009, <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-north-korean-paradox-and-the-subversive-truth/>.

The other options for seeking regime change, aggressive sanctions and invasion, could upset the status-quo on the Korean peninsula in dangerous ways. More sanctions are possible and could potentially be effective, as argued by Bruce Klingner.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, constricting sanctions could push a desperate North Korea to lash out in a dangerous manner and could even lead to attacks or provocations. While the Kim regime is entirely rational and is not suicidal enough to start another war on the Korean peninsula, miscalculations on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) are always possible. Resulting crises could then escalate and potentially turn into more serious conflicts, the worst-case scenario being another war on the Korean peninsula. A large-scale war could inflict serious human and economic damage on South Korea, given Seoul's proximity to the DMZ. Even if the very competent ROK forces defeat their North Korean counterparts, the North Korean military could end up inflicting significant damage on the Seoul metropolitan area with artillery and possibly nuclear weapons (even if they are rudimentary). Invading North Korea could also bring similar results. Any regime change or collapse scenario in North Korea is likely to be messy, but Washington should pursue a strategy that does not signal hostile intent toward Pyongyang in order to minimize the chance that the Kim regime will collapse while militarily lashing out against South Korea. In this sense, grassroots engagement is the best of the bad options available, although whether this strategy (or any other strategy toward North Korea) will work is unclear.

### Alliances with Japan and South Korea: Keep Them Bilateral

In order to manage the shifting geopolitical dynamics and potential crises in Northeast Asia, the United States needs to maintain strong bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea. The alliances serve to bolster deterrence against North Korea, balance China, contain the region's numerous political and security issues (including the ones between Japan and South Korea), and leave Seoul in its ambiguous position between Beijing and Tokyo, contributing to the overall stability in the region. Nevertheless, the United States, at least for now, should avoid pushing for closer security cooperation between Japan and South Korea.

The current state of frosty relations between Japan and South Korea is in a way beneficial. While the two countries are not allies in the strictest sense, they are also not about to go to war against each other because both of them are allied with the United States. Hence, Seoul, at least for now, can afford to alienate Tokyo without serious security implications while still being able to develop warm relations with Beijing. This situation, as absurd and uncomfortable as it may seem, helps mitigate the traditional China-Japan competition over Korea. As long as Seoul is tightly allied to Washington, Japan has less

reason to worry about a China-ROK relationship becoming a serious threat to the island nation's security. At the same time, Beijing has less reason to worry about the emergence of a hostile Japan-ROK alliance.

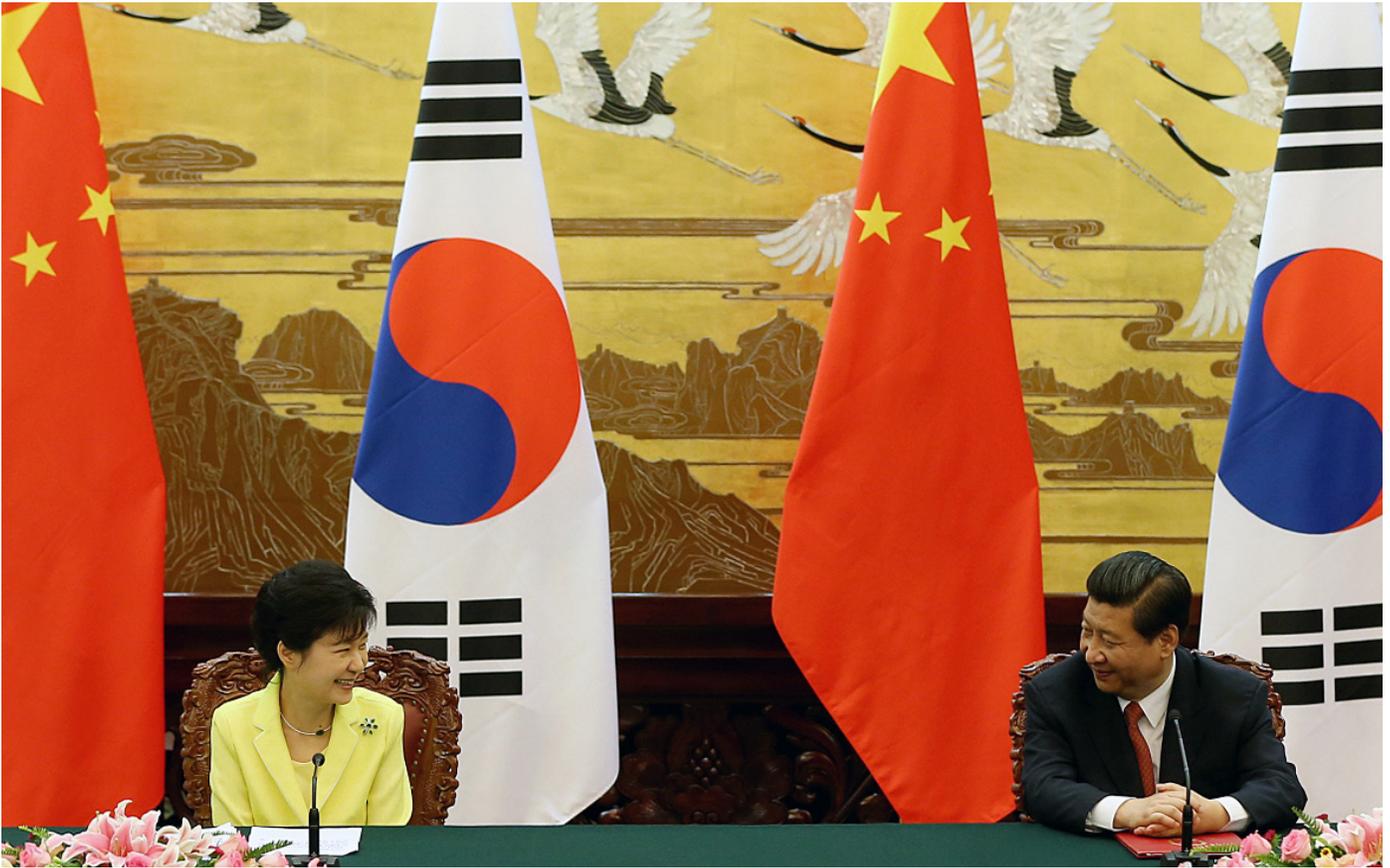
For now, the United States should not pursue any serious trilateral security cooperation, such as a region-wide missile defense system, with Japan and South Korea. Although inadequate for countering China's large nuclear arsenal, a region-wide missile defense system could do much to protect South Korea and US troops on the Korean peninsula against North Korean missiles. A trilateral format, however, could raise serious concerns in China, which fears that Seoul could become part of what Beijing (however incorrectly) perceives to be a US-led containment policy. Perceptions matter, and the net effect could be serious deterioration of the overall security situation in Northeast Asia.<sup>63</sup> There may come a time when China becomes a far more powerful and aggressive power than it is today. Under such a circumstance, forming a trilateral coalition to balance Beijing might become necessary and might even form naturally, as Seoul and Tokyo slowly gravitate toward each other against a common threat. As of now, however, China still has a long way to go before being able to challenge US influence in Northeast Asia. Any serious trilateral security cooperation between Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington would be premature and could accelerate the deterioration of the security situation in Northeast Asia vis-à-vis China, particularly because of Korea's geostrategic importance. Even if the target of such trilateral cooperation were North Korea, Chinese leaders would likely perceive the move as directed against them or at least having the potential to be directed against them in the future.

Furthermore, Seoul, for the moment, is hedging with regard to Beijing's rise and is reluctant to pursue serious security cooperation with Tokyo. Unless South Korea feels far more threatened by China and until hedging fails, serious Japan-ROK bilateral security cooperation is unlikely to materialize due to domestic politics. Even if a trilateral alliance were to be cobbled together, it would be dysfunctional, as Seoul and Tokyo have manifestly different ways of dealing with China; Seoul seeks to hedge, while Tokyo seeks to balance. Moreover, any US attempt to force reconciliation by pushing Japan to make more apologies and by pushing South Korea to come to terms with them will likely backfire. Such an attempt could cause domestic blowbacks in both countries and make the current situation even worse, including for the two bilateral alliances.<sup>64</sup> In the end, the security strategies of Japan and South Korea will have to align for the two nations to overcome their past and truly reconcile. For now, the US government should utilize its bilateral ties to urge

<sup>62</sup> Bruce Klingner, "Debunking Six Myths about North Korean Sanctions," *Daily Signal*, December 22, 2014, <http://dailysignal.com/2014/12/22/debunking-six-myths-north-korean-sanctions/>.

<sup>63</sup> For more on how perception and misperception affect international politics, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1976).

<sup>64</sup> For an exploration of this issue, see Jennifer M. Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008).



South Korean and Chinese Presidents hold a press conference during the first South Korea-China summit in Beijing in 2013. *Source:* Republic of Korea/Flickr.

Seoul and Tokyo to refrain from taking any further action that would lead to even more deterioration in relations and ensure that no crisis between the two capitals escalates.

Washington's bilateral alliances in Northeast Asia should not simply be about deterring Pyongyang and balancing against Beijing but should also be about managing and stabilizing the entire region and developing a framework for strategic stability with China. A trilateral US-Japan-ROK alliance would be even better for deterrence and balancing, but such a development could sharply polarize and exacerbate the already deteriorating security situation in the region, as it would be divided into two inflexible camps. Such a situation would very much be a return to a Cold War-like period and, given East Asia's fiery nationalism, could be even more dangerous than the Cold War itself. Instead, for now, the bilateral alliances should be used as tools for the United States to embrace and manage the entire region as an integrated and flexible system.

### **Great Power Cooperation on the Regional Order after Korean Unification and Beyond**

All major parties involved in Northeast Asia should discuss and come to at least a rough compromise and consensus with regard to what Korean unification means for the region's geopolitical order, what role Korea should play in the order, and how the parties involved should cooperate to achieve the desired outcome. Most importantly, the United States should convince China to discuss the issues with all relevant parties.

Bringing China on board to discuss Korean reunification-related contingencies will be difficult, as Beijing cares much about Pyongyang's sensitivities on the issue. To convince China, Seoul and Washington should form a unified front and communicate to Beijing that its interests during and after the process of reunification will be better protected only if China is part of the discussion, since such an event will likely occur with the South absorbing the North.

If Beijing does decide to join, initial discussions should focus on how to deal with a potential North Korean collapse, which would undoubtedly be a humanitarian disaster. Moreover, there are concerns with regard to how the great powers should deal with North Korea's massive military. Will there be a civil war among the North Korean army factions? Will they attempt to resist the outside forces? If so, would they resist by conventional or unconventional means? How should the international community secure North Korea's stocks of weapons of mass destruction, which include nuclear, chemical, and biological varieties? How can the great powers coordinate the logistics of these operations? Without some idea about how to deal with North Korea's collapse, Beijing and Washington and its allies will be unprepared to deal with what will likely be an extraordinarily complex contingency.

While the interests of the relevant powers after Korean unification are speculative at best and are subject to change as events unfold on the ground, one issue that is sure to be discussed in case of unification is the future of

the US-ROK alliance. The historic rationale for the alliance has been the North Korean threat. Without the Kim regime, Beijing would consider the security treaty to be either obsolete or aimed at containing China and could attempt to pressure South Korea to distance itself from the United States or even dissolve the alliance. Given that Tokyo fears Seoul aligning with Beijing, Japan will likely want the alliance to remain. South Korea, too, will seek to maintain the security treaty as a form of insurance, even as Seoul expands its cooperation with Beijing in other areas. The United States will also want to maintain its presence on the Korean peninsula to ensure regional stability and to balance China. Reconciling the interests of these two camps will be difficult.

In theory, one possible option for resolving great power conflicts over buffer areas, such as Korea, Iraq, and Eastern Europe, is turning them into neutral entities, unaligned with any great power. Yet, history shows that the neutrality option often, if not always, fails in practice, particularly if the buffer areas concerned are of significant strategic value. If a buffer area were to be neutral, how will it maintain its status? Will there be a credible guarantor? If not, how can a great power trust that other great powers will not attempt to draw a buffer entity with significant strategic value into their orbits and fill the vacuum? What if a neutral buffer state or region decides to choose sides? These concerns guarantee that great powers will inevitably struggle over strategic buffer areas. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the United States was perceived in East Asia as a relatively benign actor, did not have large bases and troops stationed in the region, and might have been able to act a guarantor of Korean neutrality. Today, the context is different because, as Henry Kissinger puts it, “the United States is not so much a balancer as an integral part of the balance.”<sup>65</sup> The United States has antagonistic relations with North Korea, is in competition with China, and has an active troop presence in the region. There can be no credible guarantor of Korean neutrality today. A neutral Korea after unification without US presence will only exacerbate the security competition between the great powers involved in Northeast Asia.

Therefore, any vision of the regional order in Northeast Asia after Korean unification should be about finding ways to maintain but reconfigure the US-ROK alliance in a manner that reduces China’s threat perception of the arrangement. One way to do so might be that the US forces around the Seoul area be moved further south. No US troops should be present in northern Korea. An alternative option might be to withdraw most of the ground troops from the Korean peninsula while maintaining or even bolstering US air and naval presence. Given that South Korea’s army is large and highly capable, a large number of US ground troops might not be necessary for South Korea’s defense posture, although the United States should retain a small contingent of ground troops for symbolic purposes and should continue to provide intensive

air, naval, and C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) support. Removing all US forces from Korea is not preferable, since doing so might tempt Beijing and unnerve Seoul and Tokyo. Another way to mitigate the US-ROK alliance might be for the United States to not push for serious security cooperation between Japan and South Korea (unless the two countries decide to cooperate voluntarily) and not pressure South Korea to join the US-led regional missile defense system (although Seoul should always be welcome to join the system on a voluntary basis). The United States and South Korea should also ensure that the OPCON (the combined wartime command of the US-ROK alliance) transfer occurs in a unified Korea. If the combined forces command remains, US forces would be de facto facing off against their Chinese counterparts at the Yalu River border. Such an arrangement would be considered too threatening to Beijing. The specifics of recalibrating the US-ROK alliance will be much debated after Korean unification, but the relevant governments, universities, and think tanks should begin robust discussions and explore different ideas now to reduce uncertainties and to address China’s concerns.

## CONCLUSION

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During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an isolationist United States refused to become directly involved in Northeast Asia. The result was a series of conflicts that began with the contestations over Korea, eventually leading to an Asia-wide war and, finally, the attack on Pearl Harbor. Today, the United States is deeply involved on the Korean peninsula, but the Washington community focuses too much on the North Korean issue. Instead, the United States should treat the Korean peninsula, not as a stand-alone issue, but as an integral component in Northeast Asia’s great power politics. Late-South Korean President Park Chung-hee noted that “whenever Korea becomes a battlefield for the powerful, the peace and security of East Asia are at stake. In this sense, Korea holds the key to peace in East Asia.”<sup>66</sup> The US-ROK alliance might not be “the” lynchpin but is certainly “a” lynchpin in the region. Although the US-Japan alliance has historically been the cornerstone of US strategy in Asia, South Korea is just as important due to its status as an increasingly significant middle power and, more importantly, its strategic geography. This is particularly relevant today with the reemergence of China, revitalization of Japan, and the rebalance of the United States, while North Korea is a time bomb that no nation is prepared to deal with. History tends to repeat itself (or rhyme, as noted by Mark Twain), and the Korean question will return in one form or another. Only by having a better understanding of Korea’s place in the context of wider Northeast Asian great power politics will the United States be able to continue to maintain stability and peace in a region where vital US interests are at stake.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 232.

<sup>66</sup> Chung-hee Park, *To Build a Nation* (Washington: Acropolis, 1971), p. 136.

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