

Three futures for the Korean Peninsula

David Santoro

North Korea has recently crossed important technological thresholds in its nuclear-weapon development program and has now (almost) achieved the capability to strike the US homeland with nuclear-tipped missiles, putting American cities at risk and complicating Washington's ability to defend its South Korean and Japanese allies. In response, the White House has conducted a "maximum-pressure" campaign characterized by the strengthening of sanctions and the adoption of a more assertive deterrence posture to compel Pyongyang to disarm. Some US officials have also considered using force. Of late, however, following a bold diplomatic initiative led by South Korean President Moon Jae-in during the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, and in an unprecedented turn of events, US President Donald Trump has agreed to meet with North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un sometime before the end of May.

This paper does not discuss the possible or probable outcomes of the potential upcoming Trump-Kim meeting, nor does it address what might happen next. Rather, it looks over the horizon and asks what comes *after* the longstanding standoff with North Korea ends once and for all. The paper assumes that, sooner or later, and with North Korea's nuclear-weapon program being a catalyst either directly or indirectly, major change is unavoidable on the Korean Peninsula. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to unpack what that major change might be, how it could take place, and what it would mean. In other words, this paper mulls over what the *next stage of enduring stability* might be for the Korean Peninsula, which has been divided between North and South since the end of the Second World War, with the two Koreas technically at war since the Korean War broke out in 1950.¹

This is an important exercise because, as Henry Kissinger stated shortly after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 amid growing unrest across southern and eastern Ukraine, "the test of policy is how it ends, not how it begins."² Kissinger's argument was that, to settle the Ukraine crisis, the United States and the West should start with a reflection on where they want to go, not on what their next move should be. Put simply, he stressed that asking "how does the crisis end?" mattered more than asking "what do we do next?"

How, then, does the current standoff with North Korea end? Or more accurately, what comes after? This paper discusses three possible and diametrically different futures: one where the Korean Peninsula is reunified under Seoul's leadership, one where it is reunified under Pyongyang's leadership, and one where there is peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas, as a first step toward concerted reunification. Not surprisingly, the conditions for, and pathways to, each future differ significantly, as do the outlook and prospects for enduring stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia more generally.

¹ The Korean War ended with an armistice agreement in 1953. The armistice restored much of the boundaries between North and South Korea established after the Second World War. No peace treaty was signed, however.

² Henry Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: To settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014.

Future #1: A reunified Korean Peninsula under Seoul's leadership

One possible future is a reunified Korean Peninsula under Seoul's leadership. That suggests a takeover of North Korea by South Korea, assisted by the United States, and reunification *on Seoul's terms*, which would translate into a South Korean (and US) win against North Korea. Reaching that future assumes that China and Russia, despite strong concerns, and possibly following coordination efforts by the United States and South Korea, would calculate that it was in their interests to accept or acquiesce to such a development. China, which intervened on North Korea's behalf during the Korean War, has a stake in its survival for ideological and especially geopolitical reasons: Beijing does not want a reunified Korea led by Seoul with (presumably) a US military presence on its borders, nor does it not want an influx of North Korean refugees, which is likely to occur following Pyongyang's fall. Russia, too, has ties with North Korea dating from the Soviet years and a similar geopolitical stake, albeit at a less importance than that of China, in its survival.

What are the pathways to such a future? There are two: force or absorption. Reunification by force could happen following retaliation to North Korean aggression. Pyongyang has conducted numerous provocations and sometimes outright aggressions against South Korea.³ With a more sophisticated nuclear arsenal, Pyongyang may become more aggressive, calculating that its ability to strike the United States with nuclear-tipped missiles would break the US-South Korean alliance and deter Washington from responding. Seoul and Washington may respond nonetheless and, in coordination with Tokyo, which provides a critical base of support for US forces on Japanese territory during a conflict with Pyongyang, decide to defeat North Korea completely and reunify the Peninsula.

Reunification by force could also happen following a preventive attack against North Korea, which Washington would lead, presumably with consent from Seoul and in coordination with Tokyo, and presumably over the deadlock surrounding North Korea's nuclear-weapon program. As Pyongyang is becoming capable of striking American cities with nuclear-tipped missiles, Washington has been considering disarming it preventively in recent months.⁴ If Washington did so, that could lead to a broader conflict and to North Korea's elimination and reunification of the Peninsula under Seoul.

Another pathway is reunification by absorption, following a collapse of the North Korean regime. Such a collapse could be indigenous. Pyongyang could fall on its own due to economic troubles or political infighting. Kim Jong-un's recent purges suggest that there are enemies of the regime who one day could spark a revolution and plunge the country into chaos, leading to its absorption by South Korea.⁵ Alternatively, North Korea's collapse could be fomented by Seoul and Washington in an overt or covert destabilization campaign, which would add to current sanctions.

What are the outlook and prospects for enduring stability in such a future? Much would depend on the road taken to get there—the pathway. In theory, if reunification resulted from an aggression by Pyongyang or its indigenous collapse, it would be regarded as legitimate, both by the South Korean, American, and Japanese publics, and internationally. Assuming their interests were safeguarded, China and Russia would have a hard time arguing that the decision to reunify were illegitimate. So would others. The use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Pyongyang, or by elements of the regime in the event of a collapse, would reinforce the idea that the US-South Korean decision to intervene was correct. If, however,

³ For a summary of North Korean provocations: <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/databases/>

⁴ Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, "White House Wants Pentagon to Offer More Options on North Korea," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2018.

⁵ Elizabeth Shim, "Kim Jong Un has purged, executed more than 300 people, spy agency says," *UPI*, Dec. 28, 2016.

reunification took place after preventive attacks or a destabilization campaign against Pyongyang, there would be criticisms from the South Korean, American, and Japanese publics, especially if that led to nuclear or WMD use by North Korea. China, Russia, and many others would denounce the decision. Some could refuse to engage with the reunified Peninsula and the United States would be regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a predatory power.

The outlook and prospects for stability would also depend on the scope and scale of the problems that Seoul (and Washington) would face post-takeover. Four problem areas stand out. First is the death and destruction toll, which could be limited but could also be massive, especially in the event of nuclear use. Second is the humanitarian crisis and refugee problem in the north, which could be overwhelming. Third is North Korea's WMD arsenal, which would need to be neutralized; most experts have assessed that this would be challenging.⁶ Fourth is the task of integrating the two Koreas politically and economically, which could range from smooth to painful but, if past (read: German or Vietnamese) experiences are any guide, is likely to be difficult, and costly.⁷

Accordingly, the outlook and prospects for stability would depend as much on the scope and scale of these problems as on the decisions Seoul and Washington make to address them, and, relatedly, their ability to gain support and assistance from other states, notably from Northeast Asia. That means Seoul and Washington would be well-served to take Chinese and Russian interests into consideration by, for instance, guaranteeing that US military presence would neither increase nor be permanently stationed in the former North Korean geographical space. Failure to do so, or a decision by Seoul to keep North Korea's WMD arsenal, for instance, would likely complicate the outlook and prospects for enduring stability.

Japan, too, would want Pyongyang's WMD arsenal to disappear and it would probably also require special assurances from Washington (and Seoul). This is because Tokyo, on the one hand, would welcome the elimination of the North Korean nuclear threat and see reunification of the Peninsula as an opportunity to resolve the abductee issue and open new economic opportunities for Japanese businesses, yet on the other, it would be concerned that, down the line, a reunified Korea under Seoul could become a strong economic competitor or, worse, that it end up siding closer to China (and Russia).

Future #2: A reunified Korean Peninsula under Pyongyang's leadership

Another possible future is a reunified Korean Peninsula under Pyongyang's leadership. That second future is the mirror image of the first. It suggests a takeover of South Korea by North Korea and reunification *on Pyongyang's terms*, which would translate into a North Korean win against South Korea and the United States. Reaching that future assumes that Washington would be either defeated in defending its South Korean ally or that, for strategic or domestic reasons, it would calculate that it was in its interests not to intervene and, instead, accept or acquiesce to such a development, despite its defense commitments to Seoul. The US-South Korea alliance, which include the presence of nearly 29,000 US military personnel in South Korea, has been in place since the end of the Second World War to deter North Korean aggression (and was part of the US network of alliances designed to ring the Soviet threat during the Cold War).

What are the pathways to such a future? As in the previous scenario, the two pathways are force or absorption. In theory, reunification by force could happen following a US (and South Korean) attack on Pyongyang. If it managed to counter the offensive and compel Washington (and Seoul) to back down and concede defeat by, for instance, conducting limited nuclear use,

⁶ Dan Lamothe and Carol Morello, "Securing North Korean nuclear sites would require a ground invasion, Pentagon says," *Washington Post*, Nov. 4, 2017.

⁷ Subin Kim, "Korean unification costs would exceed \$2.7 trillion: Researcher," *NK News*, March 6, 2015.

Pyongyang could push its luck, strike key targets in South Korea, and take it over militarily, bringing the Peninsula under its control.⁸

Reunification by force could also happen after an attack by North Korea against South Korea. Pyongyang could get away with striking, invading, and taking over the South if Washington calculated that its interests were better served by inaction rather than by risking that Seattle or Los Angeles be struck by North Korean nuclear-capable missiles if it acted.

Another pathway is reunification by absorption, following a collapse of the South Korean regime. While considerably less likely than Pyongyang's fall, Seoul's fall cannot and should not be dismissed. Such a collapse could be indigenous. Democracy, which is still new and has been traditionally fragile in South Korea, could break down, plunge the country into disarray, and give Pyongyang an opportunity to reunify the Peninsula. Alternatively, Pyongyang could foment the collapse of South Korean democracy in an overt or covert destabilization campaign.

What are the outlook and prospects for enduring stability in a future where the Korean Peninsula is reunified under Pyongyang? In that scenario as in the first, much would depend on the pathway. In theory, if reunification resulted from an attack by Washington (and Seoul) or from an indigenous collapse of the South Korean regime, it could be regarded as legitimate. China and Russia, which would welcome the ousting of the United States from the Korean Peninsula, could see it that way. Many others—especially Japan—would not, however, because North Korea is—and always has been—considered a rogue state that engages in illegal activities, notably WMD development and proliferation. Relatedly, if Pyongyang resorted to nuclear/WMD use, the odds are that it would receive a considerable share of the blame. Meanwhile, if reunification took place following a preventive attack or a destabilizing campaign by Pyongyang against Seoul, there would be an international outcry, especially if these attacks included nuclear or WMD use. China, Russia, Japan, and many others in the international community would denounce the decision and many would refuse to engage with the newly reunified Peninsula.

As in the first scenario, the outlook and prospects for the newly reunified Korea would depend on the scope and scale of the problems that Pyongyang would face in post-takeover. Except for the neutralization of a WMD arsenal, Pyongyang would be confronted with the same problem areas as Seoul and Washington if the situation was reversed: the death and destruction toll, a humanitarian crisis, and the task of integrating the two Koreas politically and economically. The magnitude of these problems is likely to be higher, however, because Pyongyang, being both weaker than Seoul and heavily militarized, is more likely to resort to higher levels of violence to reunify the Peninsula. In the event of a takeover of the Peninsula by Pyongyang, therefore, the death and destruction toll is likely to be high and the humanitarian crisis severe. Moreover, leading the integration of the two Koreas is likely to be extremely challenging for Pyongyang, given how backward the North is in comparison to the South.

Accordingly, the outlook and prospects for enduring stability in that scenario would depend on Pyongyang's ability to gain support and assistance from China and Russia, not only to manage the problem areas just mentioned, but also to keep other powers at bay. That means Pyongyang would need to make nice, and possibly conclude special assistance and defense arrangements, with Beijing and Moscow.

In these circumstances, Tokyo would find itself alone in a highly hostile environment and would, for good reasons, fear an attack or an invasion. While that may drive them to seek a tighter deterrence relationship with the United States, Japanese officials could be tempted to resort to self-help and develop an independent nuclear arsenal, especially given that Washington would have just demonstrated its inability (or unwillingness) to prevent Pyongyang from defeating the

⁸ John K. Warden, "North Korea's Nuclear Posture—An Evolving Challenge for US Deterrence," *Proliferation Papers*, No. 58, March 2017.

South (a US ally) and taking over the Korean Peninsula.

Future #3: Peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas

A third possible future is peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas. That suggests the development of good relations and a *modus vivendi* between North and South Korea through the establishment of a federation or confederation on the Peninsula, ideally as a first step toward concerted reunification. Reaching that future would translate into a win-win for Pyongyang and Seoul (and could result from an attempt by both capitals, and potentially others, to resolve the deadlock surrounding North Korea's nuclear-weapon program). It assumes that the North Korean and South Korean governments (and public opinion in the South) undertake profound changes in attitudes and beliefs about each other and that they overcome and forgo the traditional zero-sum thinking they have held since the 1950s. Another assumption is that major powers, notably the United States and China, give North and South Korea space to engage in such a reconciliation.

Such a scenario clashes significantly with the current realities of the Korean Peninsula. Seoul and Pyongyang are all too familiar with the idea and its logic, however. The South and North Korean leaders first subscribed to it in the "July 4 Joint Communiqué" of 1972. Subsequently, other measures paralleling or extending the rationale behind this accord include the 1991 "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Cooperation, and Exchange Between North and South," the 1992 "Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," and the "June 15 North-South Joint Declaration" of 2000. Reference to the goal of establishing peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas also appears in multilateral documents, such as the "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks" of 2005.

What are the pathways to such a future? There is only one: negotiations. The emergence of a *modus vivendi* between the two Koreas, and a *fortiori* of concerted reunification of the Peninsula, can only be achieved through slow, incremental change and, therefore, a sustained and in-depth dialogue and negotiation process. Therefore, while peaceful coexistence may be one of the next stages of enduring stability on the Korean Peninsula, it is likely to take a long time to get there, and in any case longer than the scenarios envisioned in the two previous sections.

The outlook and prospects for enduring stability of a future characterized by the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas would depend on the general and specific requirements of the arrangement concluded by Pyongyang and Seoul (and the norms that govern bilateral political relations at the time). For instance, would that arrangement exist in the form of a confederation or a looser type of federation? Traditionally, South Korea has preferred the former, while North Korea has favored the latter.⁹ Moreover, would Pyongyang and Seoul have reunification be as a goal? In other words, would they regard peaceful coexistence as an end-state or a stepping stone to achieve a reunified Korea? While North and South Korean proposals for reconciliation have always included reunification of the Peninsula as a goal, and while any future arrangement is likely to do the same, there is no longer any guarantee that it does or that reunification through negotiations would be achievable in the foreseeable future given how much the two Koreas have drifted apart, especially over the past two and a half decades.

Notwithstanding these important considerations, enduring stability of a Pyongyang-Seoul *modus vivendi* would depend on several factors. First is the willingness of the two governments to accept and treat each other as equal legal entities and trusting partners over the long term, especially given that disagreements on both major or minor bilateral issues are likely to occur as negotiations advance. Second, if reunification were a goal, enduring stability would depend on

⁹ Namkoong Young, "Similarities and Dissimilarities: The Inter-Korean Summit and Unification Formulae," *East Asian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Autumn 2001, pp. 59-80.

the ability of the two governments to find agreement on a specific “formula” or “comprehensive institutional structure” to reunify the Peninsula and to conduct dialogue and take concrete actions to advance political, economic, social, cultural, and even military integration to get there. Third, because under no circumstances could there be peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas without the replacement of the 1953 armistice agreement signed between the United States (as head of the United Nations Forces), China, and North Korea by a permanent peace treaty, respect by Pyongyang and Seoul for the letter and spirit of that treaty would be paramount. Practically, that suggests there would need to be, among other things, implementation of inter-Korean confidence-building measures and major threat reduction activities, agreement from Pyongyang to constrain and eventually rollback its nuclear/WMD arsenal, and, relatedly, a reassessment of the purpose, scope, and scale (and perhaps even utility) of, on the one hand, the US-South Korea alliance, the United Nations Command, the Combined Forces Command, and other subcommands and, on the other, North Korea’s military arrangements with China (and Russia).

The bottom line is that, to succeed over the long term, peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas would require a fundamental transformation of current inter-Korean strategic and political relations and the associated relations that Pyongyang and Seoul have with major powers, notably the United States and China. Tokyo, in that scenario, would likely find itself in a situation close to the one described in the first—a reunified Peninsula under Seoul’s leadership. In theory, Japanese officials would welcome the development of peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas if that meant that the North were no longer a threat (and that its WMD arsenal were eliminated) and that the abductee issue could be resolved and Japanese businesses could have new opportunities on the Peninsula. Yet Japanese officials would also fear that the two Koreas become a strong economic force that would ultimately compete with Tokyo or, worse, that both increasingly gravitate closer to China over time.

Conclusions

The three scenarios described in this paper are in no way the only possible outcomes for the next stage of enduring stability on the Korean Peninsula. Many others can and should be envisioned. Nevertheless, a takeover of the Peninsula by South Korea (and the United States), a takeover by North Korea, and the advent of peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas as a first step toward reunification appear to cover the broad spectrum of possibilities.

This paper has provided only a brief description of each scenario, as a starting point. More work is needed to flesh out the benefits, risks, and costs of each, as well as the potential variations in development. This is an essential initiative because it will help policymakers decide what they should do *today* to reach the most desirable outcome, and avoid the worst.