Post-Unification Korea: Capitalizing on Opportunity

Major Larry Sullivan
United States Air Force

Political division on the Korean peninsula cannot be sustained indefinitely. The United States should prepare for the day when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) no longer exists, and the South Korean government is responsible for all the land and population south of the Yalu River. A rapid, contested and unnecessarily haphazard filling of the power vacuum left by a collapse of the Kim regime and subsequently the DPRK, could threaten long-term strategic relationships and impede more favorable options for the United States and its regional partners. Although the timeline and mechanism are uncertain, the DPRK regime is likely to fall and a calculated response will set the tone for U.S. relations in the region for decades. Rapid execution of a coherent reconstruction plan and leadership in winning a regional "aid-race" versus China

will help establish a politically and economically secure reunified Korea supporting America's long-term strategic interests in the region.

Historically, China, Japan, and Russia have made imperial claims on the Korean landmass. Most recently, the Korean Peninsula was occupied by Japan from 1910 until the end of World War II. Subsequently, the U.S. and Russia split the peninsula until the Korean War fortified the current boundary. With this background, it is understandable that foreign exploitation is still fresh in the minds of Koreans, and they will likely resist any efforts at territorial impingement by their neighbors should a humanitarian crisis in the North precipitate internal change. As such, Assistant Professor Robert Kelly of Pusan National University in Korea writes, "Korean unification will likely be messy, rapid, and chaotic,"[1] and for these reasons, the United States should prioritize on post-unification plans.

Germany provides the most recent example of reunification; however, one that should not be used as a model. German reunification was a long and costly process, yet it is likely to be more difficult for the Koreas. The disparities between North and South Korea are more severe than between the German states, with some estimating a 40% depopulation of the north and a trillion dollar price tag.[2] Similar to the collapse in goverence in Iraq 2003, without proper attention paid to post-unification planning, elements of the Korean situation could suffer the same consequences. Political conflict and human suffering resulted in Iraq and the same is likely to follow a North Korean collapse. The challenge of establishing a new government for a failed state, combined with millions of starving and internally displaced Koreans, could be overwhelming. Unfortunately, the South Korean government is not making the necessary preparations for reunification, essentially deferring this responsibility to the United States.[3]

Recent history in Iraq and Afghanistan shows a U.S. lack of preparedness for post-conflict efforts critical to the stability of newly liberated states. However, the lessons learned from these operations have made the U.S. uniquely prepared to deal with post-conflict challenges of cleanup and reconstruction. So what has America learned? According to Derek Reveron, a noted security theorist, "Contemporary security challenges often require whole-of-government solutions and regional cooperation."[4] Additionally, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated, "The U.S.'s ability to kick down the door must be matched by its ability to clean up the mess and rebuild the house afterward."[5] The solution, as demonstrated in Iraq, is a detailed inter-agency, inter-governmental, and non-governmental approach coordinating strengths of each organization and agency.

The U.S. military force required to take part in this coordinated approach is not the force currently deployed in South Korea. Nor is it a force the U.S. has trained and ready to deploy.[6] While postured for a force-on-force engagement, the U.S. needs an equal focus on the post-unification effort. The proper U.S. capability mix would resemble the Iraqi Coalition Provincial Authority with an initial emphasis on embassy country teams.[7] Additionally, Provincial Reconstruction Teams currently deployed in Afghanistan provide an example of an appropriate capability.[8] Each organization deploys a team of country specialists, security forces, law enforcement, legal, public, and civil affairs experts; representing a viable building block necessary to establish order and lay the groundwork for long-term stability. The cultural expertise required for successful reconstruction or country teams does not develop overnight, thus the U.S. must begin preparations now. Teams should be comprised of regional experts who have in-depth knowledge of local political and government processes, cultural nuances, and the unique hardships characteristic of the populace, among other things. These teams should plan a response targeted both locally and nationally to coordinate the efforts of all the participants in relief and recovery.

In addition to addressing socio-economic and cultural concerns, what to do with the 1.3 million-man North Korean military, the largest and most influential organization in the country, will present a challenge similar to what the U.S. faced in Iraq, 2003. The United States' mishandling of the Iraqi army as a result of the De-Ba'athification policy set the conditions for an insurgency, pushed the country toward civil war, and initiated a regional strategic set-back the U.S. has yet to recover from.[9] The strategic situation surrounding the Korean peninsula will likely not allow for years of delay to develop an effective reconciliation effort. The U.S. has the opportunity to stop history from repeating itself, but preparation is a prerequisite for success.

This preparation includes developing a detailed plan to address security of the border and nuclear weapons and material, immediate humanitarian aid, and stabilization and nation building. In securing the border, regional diplomatic preparation and transparency will be paramount to allay neighbor country fears of imperial expansion. Pre-existing bilateral agreements and comprehensive objectives for post-unification force posturing will facilitate movement of military units toward the Chinese and Russian borders and nuclear storage areas, yet this must be done delicately without unnerving China, Russia, and Japan.[10] These efforts will prevent the situation from descending into an ungovernable crisis and set the conditions for a coordinated reconstruction plan. An effective response on the peninsula will have a direct impact on the regional and global outcomes.

The balance of power, specifically economic and military, in the region could begin to shift immediately upon the collapse of the North. Decisions made in this environment will impact the redistribution of power and long-term strategic positioning for everyone involved. As evidenced by the newly unified Germany, the country shifted away from a declining economic model and aligned with the strongest regional and global structures. To assume that a unified Korea would be any different would be erroneous. The newly reunified Korea, based on geographic proximity and the influence of an economically vibrant China, may distance itself from western free-market principals.[11] Lately, China's most effective foreign policy tools include buying influence and exporting corruption by leveraging its currency reserves to develop favorable trade relationships.[12] This has been China's tactic in Africa, southwest Asia, and recently in Europe by offering to assist debt-laden European Union nations.[13] The U.S. should expect China to exert its influence in the reunified Korea and attempt to marginalize or balance western economic power. Militarily, China would be justified in groaning about U.S. strike aircraft and armored divisions close to the border lacking an apparent mission. However, China's willingness to tolerate these forces should evaporate as conditions on the peninsula stabilize.[14]

The U.S. may be faced with a strategic decision; an attempt to maintain the status-quo in spite of regional and domestic pressures to withdraw, or craft a strategy that addresses the new reality. In support of the status-quo, the argument for hegemonic peace claims a single world power is the most stable international structure and the U.S. should strive to retain that role as long as possible.[15] Carl Haselden, in his article *The Effects of Korean Unification on the US Military Presence in Northeast Asia*, argues that it will be in the interest of the U.S. to maintain a military presence on the peninsula, and that "perceived regional stability would lead to a call for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The groundwork needs to be laid now for maintaining a US presence after unification in order to fulfill our national interests."[16]Maintaining the status quo via our current basing would show the U.S. will not abandon the region. On the other hand, staying there may be destabilizing and unsupportable based on regional pressures, China's continued growth, and a shrinking U.S. defense budget. So, what is the best course of action to maintain presence in East Asia as pressure mounts to shrink America's military footprint?

There is a single elegant solution to both the short and long term problems: the same force and capability, if the U.S. chooses to build and deploy it, accomplishes both missions. The ability to quickly stabilize the north and speed economic integration and recovery is also the most direct route to strengthening and securing America's economic and diplomatic partnership with the reunified Korea. The U.S. should start a competition to "out-friend" Korea and blunt China's actions to gain influence in the weakened state. The costs of investment could be offset by a dwindling military presence and overshadowed by the economic benefits of a stronger trading partner. Korea's neighbors, fearful of China's hegemonic rise, should be encouraged to see this as an opportunity to balance power and gain influence. The impetus to help, analogous but preferential to a budding naval arms race, will be present on all sides and the US would be well-advised to coordinate the escalation and ultimately win the "aid race." [17] A healthy and vibrant Korea benefits the U.S. strategic vision better than military presence alone. The execution of the Marshall Plan in post-war Europe set the conditions for European countries to grow into peaceful trading partners allied against a burgeoning regional hegemon. The U.S. should look at Korean unification as an opportunity to revisit those successes by fostering regional economic cooperation.

The collapse of the DPRK is inevitable, and although the timeline cannot be forecast, the ensuing chaos and strategic opportunities, both on the peninsula and regionally, are predictable and exploitable. The U.S. should use the hard-earned lessons from recent conflicts to train and equip an organization that can quickly stabilize North Korea and speed the economic and political reintegration critical to a unified Korea's development. Rapid execution of a coherent reconstruction plan and leadership in winning an "aid-race" will strengthen economic and political ties with Korea, reduce the need for unsupportable military presence, and foster regional economic cooperation to counterbalance China's growing influence while stabilizing the region. The opportunity to achieve these goals will be fleeting and unrealized unless the U.S. prepares now.

---

[1] Kelly, Robert E. "*Asian Security*." *worldpress.com.* Sept 2010. http://asiansecurityblog.wordpress.com/2010/10/22/post-unification-de-population-of-north-korea/ (accessed Sept 1, 2011).

[2] Kelly, "*Asian Security*"

[3] Wimberly, James. "The Korean Reunification Taboo." *The Reality Based Community.* May 25, 2010. http://www.samefacts.com/2010/05/international-affairs/asia (accessed Sep 2, 2011).

[4] Reveron, Derek S. *Exporting Security.* Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010.

[5] Gates, Robert M. "The National Defese Strategy: Striking the Right Balance." *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 52 (2009): 3.

[6] Caldwell, William B., and Reveron, Derek S., "Beyond the Tenth Year in Afghanistan: Security Force Assistance and International Security,"www.fpri.org, September 2011. The collective international experience in Afghanistan must inform future thinking about the roles and missions of the U.S. military. U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Martin Dempsey pointed out in the Army Operating Concept that, "future Army forces require the capability to conduct security force assistance and civil military operations (such as military support to governance, rule of law, and institutional capacity building) in a multinational environment with partners and among diverse populations to support allies and partners, protect and reassure populations, and isolate and defeat enemies." While we practice this daily, we

continue to redefine the configuration and employment of conventional assets to build the capacity of Afghanistan's security sector. We must capture the lessons and deliberately incorporate them into U.S. thinking and doctrine.

[7] http://seoul.usembassy.gov/

[8] http://prtghazni.blogspot.com/

[9] *Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 1 De-Ba`Athification Of Iraqi Society* http://www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20030516_CPAORD_1_De-Ba_athification_of_Iraqi_Society_.pdf

[10] Using the relationships in the 6 party talks, the US should advise each member nation, less the DPRK, of our intentions and solicit their inputs and expertise while reinforcing our exclusive claims to providing military capacity in support of Korea. The US has the preponderance of non-Korean forces on the peninsula, will have OPCON for military action should this occur before 2015 and is the obvious choice for assuming these roles. South Korea may desire to maintain a nuclear capability, but should remain party to the NPT base on external influence.

[11] Long, William J. *The Challenges of a Post-Reunification Korea: Lessons from Reconciled Civil Conflicts.* Korea, Center for Strategic & International Studies, Los Angeles: USC Korean Studies Institute, 2010.

[12] Maj Phuong Bach, VIETNAM PEOPLE's ARMY, interview with author Sept 2011

[13] Jane's Intelligence Weekly, "Booming Sino-African Relations Serve Common Interests," September 13, 2011.

[14] Kim, Youngho. "The Great Powers in Peaceful Korea Reunification." *International Journal on World Peace*, 2003: 3-15.

[15] Sweat, Terry Boswell and Mike. "Hegemony, Long Waves, and Major Wars: A Time Series Analysis of System Dynamics, 1946-1967." *International Sustems Quartely*, no. 35 (1991): 124.

[16] Haselden, Carl E. "The Effects of Korean Unification on the US Military Presence in Northeast Asia." *Paramaters*, no. Winter 2002-2003 (2003): 120-132.

[17] Marcus, Jonathan. "China extending military reach." *BBC NEWS Asia-Pacific.* June 14, 2011. http://www.bbc.co.uk/nees/world-asia-pacific-13761711 (accessed Sept 15, 2011).