

KOREAN REUNIFICATION: THE DREAM AND THE REALITY

CHARLES S. LEE

Conventional wisdom, both Korean and non-Korean, assumes the division of this strategic peninsula to be temporary. Officially, the Korean War still has not ended but is in a state of armistice. Popular belief also accepts as true that the greatest obstacles to Korean reunification are the East-West rivalry and the balance of power in the North Pacific. Charles S. Lee, however, argues that domestic conditions in North and South Korea actually present the more serious hurdle — a hurdle unlikely to be disposed of too quickly.

INTRODUCTION

Talk of reunifying the Korean peninsula once again is grabbing headlines. Catalyzed by the South Korean student movement's search for a new issue, the months surrounding the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul featured a flurry of unofficial and official initiatives on reunification. The students were quick to seize this emotionally charged issue as their new rallying cry, for the nation's recent democratic reforms (including a direct and seemingly fair presidential election in 1987) effectively deprived them of their *raison d'être*. By June last year, thousands of them were on the march to the border village of Panmunjom for a "summit" meeting with their North Korean counterparts.

Not to be upstaged, the South Korean government blocked the marchers with tear gas, and on July 7, announced a sweeping set of proposals for improving North-South relations, including the opening of trade between the two Koreas. Capping last summer's events was South Korean President Roh Tae Woo's October speech at the UN General Assembly, in which he called for his own summit meeting with North Korean President Kim Il Sung. In January, the North Koreans responded by agreeing to hold talks at the prime ministerial level, thus setting in motion the highest-level interaction between the two nations since the 1950-53 Korean War.

Despite all this, peaceful reunification in the near future remains as unlikely as ever. Underneath the apparent thaw on the surface lies a chilliness no less bitter than the days when civil war ravaged the Korean peninsula. Why? Why have the two Koreas failed even to coexist peacefully with each other, much less reunify? Why is the dream of reunification, a dream sacred to North and

Charles S. Lee is a candidate for the M.A.L.D degree at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He was born in Seoul, Korea and lived there until 1976. In the spring of 1988, he worked at the Seoul bureau of *The Far Eastern Economic Review* as a reporting intern.

South Koreans alike, no closer to being fulfilled now than it was in 1945, the year of the partition?

The answer is deceptively simple: the will to realize the dream has not been strong enough to overcome the realities of more than four decades of division. Further, obstacles to reunification have been growing ever more unwieldy with the passage of time and will continue to do so. Since the eve of the division, the two Koreas have evolved diametrically divergent internal dynamics. In many ways, they are truly separate and distinct nations, perhaps more so than, say, the United States and Canada or Australia and New Zealand. Peaceful reunification of North and South Korea is less obvious an outcome than commonly thought. And if ever achieved, it will surely go down in the annals of history as the exception, not the norm.

THE DREAM

Chokuk Tongil. National reunification. No other phrase stirs the collective psyche of Koreans more violently than this one. Listen to the late South Korean President Park Chung Hee:

If there was one ardent and consistent desire which our fifty million people could never forget even in our dreams, it was beyond doubt the desire to reunite the divided fatherland and achieve eventual peaceful reunification.¹

Here is what North Korean President Kim Il Sung has to say:

What is the best gift I could give to our people . . . it is the reunification of the country.²

Reunification is not just a dream. It is, professedly, a historic mission and the greatest challenge facing all Koreans.

The potency of this dream both to the north and south of the armistice line is founded on several factors. First, Korea had been a unified nation since 668 A.D. Over a millennium of shared history means all Koreans share the same language, customs, traditional attitudes and world view. Second, Koreans are one of the most homogeneous peoples in the world. A strong sense of national consanguinity, reinforced by Confucianism, promotes the notion that Korea is a large extended family. Third, many families remain separated across the border. Though time has diluted the urgency of the matter, for a people who regard the family as supreme the desire to be reunited with loved ones continues to provide a powerful stimulus for improved intra-Korean relations.

More than anything, it is the foreign powers' arbitrariness in dividing the country following the defeat of the Japanese colonial masters in World War II which cries out most loudly for the restoration of natural order as Koreans

1. Park Chung Hee, *Toward Peaceful Unification* (Seoul: Kwangmyong Publishing Company, 1976), 62.

2. Kim Il Sung, *For the Independent Peaceful Reunification of Korea* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 170.

understand it. Because the division was never what Koreans themselves wanted, intended, foresaw, or could prevent, its persistence will always haunt them with a gnawing sense of incompleteness and artificiality.

Reunification offers considerable practical advantages as well. The most obvious is diffusion of the threat of war, which has existed continuously since the end of the Korean War. Not only will this guarantee long-term peace on the Korean peninsula, it will also prevent one of the most volatile tinderboxes in the world from igniting a superpower conflagration. Further, as a direct result, Koreans will be freed from a defense burden wildly out of proportion with their need to protect themselves from foreign threats. Then too, subsequent redirection of national resources from the defense sector to the civilian one would greatly enhance the general welfare of Koreans.

Indeed, reunification would alter Korea's economic landscape beyond recognition. With a combined population of over 60 million people, Korea's internal market would be large enough to alleviate its heavy dependence on foreign markets to sustain growth (assuming that a unified Korea continues on the path carved out by South Korea). Further, the marriage of North Korea's substantial resource base with South Korea's industrial prowess would very likely make the Korean economy one of the most powerful in the world. In sum, a reunified Korea would be a secure, prosperous, and self-confident nation of international stature far greater than ever possible as a divided land.

THE REALITY

As real as the Korean dream of reunification is, truly colossal are the obstacles to its realization. In almost every practical aspect — ideological, political, economic, and military — the two Koreas are worlds apart from each other. At first, the divergence mostly stemmed from membership in the two opposing camps of the Cold War international order. Later, the variance assumed a certain inertia of its own — inertia generated internally out of internal necessity. Such a process, moreover, is ever more crystallized and refined as years pass. Reunification now must meet a double challenge: unraveling the multilateral diplomatic deadlock as well as overcoming domestic stumbling blocks.

Ideology

The chief features of ideological reality on the Korean peninsula have been the North's extreme Stalinesque communism and the South's extreme anti-communism. Both phenomena are linked intimately to the question of political legitimacy at home. So any changes in ideology portend dire consequences for the continued maintenance of political control for both regimes — though they would probably be much more serious for North Korea.

The official ideology of *juche* (self-reliance) along with Kim Il Sung's personality cult are glues that hold North Korea together. Maturation of *juche* can be traced to the Sino-Soviet break in the early 1960s and diminishing material support from China and the Soviet Union. To avoid becoming

entangled in a dispute between two friends and to motivate the populace during this difficult period, North Korean leaders began extolling the virtues of self-reliance in political and economic spheres. In Kim's own words,

Establishing *juche* means, in a nutshell, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others . . . and thus solving one's own problems for oneself on one's own responsibility under all circumstances.³

The other pillar of North Korean communism is Kim's extravagant personality cult. According to North Korean propaganda, Kim is a "peerless patriot," "the greatest military strategist the world has ever known," and "the greatest philosopher-politician in the annals of human history." All over North Korea, statues of Kim decorate parks, everyone wears Kim buttons on lapels, and Kim's childhood home at Mangyongdae has become a national shrine.⁴ This adulation of Kim in North Korea has been compared to a religious phenomenon by some outside observers.

However bizarre, the dual instrument of *juche* and the Kim Il Sung cult has succeeded in perpetuating political stability in North Korea. By ensuring uniformity of belief, discouraging independent thought, and generating passionate devotion for a superman-like leader, the regime maximizes the tightly sealed society's human and material resources with minimum resistance. And the obvious nationalistic streak embodied in *juche* can be vigorously employed as "a weapon against the government of South Korea, which [Kim] condemns as totally dependent on the United States, and therefore a puppet."⁵

The flip side of such a strategy is that it is effectively anti-reunification. For example, how would North Korean leaders continue to preach the virtues of *juche* once the populace realizes that it is South Korea, not the heroically self-reliant North Korea, which stands taller in the world today? How can Kim Il Sung continue his claim to be history's greatest universal genius when the North Korean consumer discovers that lesser South Korean leaders have managed to fill more shelves at the supermarket? Obviously, North Korea cannot afford even to open up to the South, much less unite with it.

If North Korea is a country where Stalinism was perfected, then South Korea is a land where McCarthyism was never vanquished. South Korea was founded on anti-communism. In the early days of independence, US occupational authorities actively recruited conservatives into the bureaucracy because of their anti-communist views, even though most South Koreans resented them, suspecting that they had been Japanese collaborators. Moreover, the uncompromising anti-communist and anti-Soviet rhetoric of Dr. Syngman

3. Quoted in An Tai Sung's *North Korea: A Political Handbook* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1983), 58.

4. Ralph N. Clough, *Embattled Korea: The Rivalry for International Support* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1988), 52.

5. *Ibid.*, 55.

Rhee, the Princeton-educated independence fighter who became the first president, shocked even Americans.⁶

Nothing, however, made the South Korean leadership more anti-communist than the Korean War. For South Koreans, the North Korean attack spectacularly confirmed their already deep-seated suspicions about Kim Il Sung's intentions. At the same time, the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China came to be firmly regarded as hostile and aggressive powers, while the prestige of the United States soared. Most importantly, the war created a huge, powerful, and staunchly anti-communist military establishment in South Korea.

The military, especially under Park Chung Hee, institutionalized anti-communism in South Korean society. Hardened by the tribulations of the war, and imbued with the Cold War biases of their American trainers, the leaders of the 1961 coup launched swift purges of left or left-leaning politicians. They created an intrusive Korean CIA for national surveillance, wrote harsh anti-communist and national security clauses into law, and initiated an intense indoctrination program for the thousands of young South Korean males serving their thirty-month conscription requirements.

National security assumed top priority for the South Korean leadership and anti-communism became its gospel. Criticism of the regime was considered traitorous, and critics were branded communists and dealt with accordingly.⁷ Even current trends toward more tolerant governance have not fully uprooted this tradition, as hundreds of political prisoners continue to be detained under national security laws. In other words, the existence of a hostile North Korea is at most a fundamental source of legitimacy for South Korean regimes and at least a convenient cover for quieting dissent.

Politics

Creation of a political system — whether or not by voluntary will of its subjects — inevitably begets its loyal defenders. Aside from questions of the system's intrinsic merits, there will always emerge an elite group jealously partial to the system because its perpetuation is paramount to perpetuation of the group's elite status. With respect to the two Koreas, reunification first would have to overcome resistance from each side's political elites. This is not a minor detail.

In North Korea, the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) holds a monopoly on political power. Through a complex array of national, provincial, and local organizations, the KWP implements party policies, indoctrinates the populace, and facilitates communication between policy makers and citizens. Membership is highly exclusive — only about 10 percent of the population, or about 2 million people, are members.⁸ Selection is based primarily on mastery

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

7. Clough, 38-39.

8. Donald Stone MacDonald, *The Koreans: Contemporary Politics and Society* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1988), 166-67.

of the official ideology and absolute loyalty to the party. The party provides the sole avenue for attaining upward mobility and power in North Korean society.⁹

At the apex of the party is the thirty-three member politburo. Its core members are first-generation communists who fought the Japanese in Manchuria alongside Kim Il Sung himself.¹⁰ The politburo makes all policy decisions and directly oversees the party bureaucracy; the politburo, in turn, ultimately answers to Kim.¹¹

As in other communist countries, North Korean elites receive preferential treatment despite egalitarian ideology.¹² They have better access to food and other consumer goods. They live in bigger houses. Their children get the best education and the best jobs. In short, the system is good to them and they know it. They also know that a different system that is likely to emerge in a union with the South would not be nearly as cozy. Why would they want to change a good thing? Perhaps they do not.

Bureaucratic elites in South Korea have an equally high stake in maintaining its political system. About three out of every 200 South Koreans, or almost 650,000 people, work for the government. Civil servants enjoy fairly high status and considerable public respect — a lingering effect of the Confucian view of the scholar-bureaucrat.¹³ But reunification would mean the duplication of many administrative functions and therefore, loss of rather plum jobs for many bureaucrats. After all, a nation only needs one president, one minister of foreign affairs, one minister of finance

Of further significance is that ex-officers have been represented prominently in the upper levels of the South Korean bureaucracy since the military took power in 1961. This military presence inevitably has given the bureaucracy a strong anti-communist bias. Equally important, with the military leaders' emphasis on rapid economic development, the bureaucracy has become one of the most ardent proponents of export-oriented capitalism. Indeed, the record shows that the South Korean bureaucracy has sided consistently with the government in limiting the democratic process in the name of national security and economic growth.¹⁴ It is not unreasonable to assume that the South Korean bureaucracy would be intensely opposed to a reunification formula that either calls for accommodation of communist ideology or compromises the capitalistic economic recipe.

Economy

Perhaps in no other area does the fundamental difference between the two Koreas manifest itself more clearly than in their economies. Consistent with

9. An, 38.

10. Ibid., 39.

11. Ibid., 46.

12. Clough, 58.

13. Macdonald, 132. During the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), scholar-bureaucrats, called *yangban*, constituted a nominally non-hereditary nobility class. They earned their status by passing a state-administered examination which tested the knowledge of Confucian classics. It was the chief means through which the state recruited new talents for governance.

14. Clough, 44.

their respective ideologies, the means of production and resource distribution are controlled by the government in communist North Korea, while they are largely controlled through market mechanisms in capitalist South Korea. Whereas the North Korean economic system tends to be driven by broader ideological and political imperatives of the governing elites, the South Korean economic operation tends to confine itself to purely economic considerations of the general population. Not surprisingly, neither side finds the other's system easy to swallow. Rather, they are the most vocal critics of each other.

As in most areas of North Korean life, the ideology of *juče* dictates the nation's economic reality. Economically, *juče* calls for a disproportionate emphasis on the development of heavy industry rather than consumer-oriented industry.¹⁵ North Korea sees industrialization and mechanization as the cornerstone of a self-reliant economy and defense.¹⁶ To this end, North Korean leaders resort to incessant exhortation of the virtues of *juče* and centralization to mobilize the masses. According to some North Korea observers, "[t]he vision was a man shorn of individualism and self-egoism, willing to commit all of his energy, wisdom and creativity to the marching call of the party, and prepare to engage in self-sacrifices for the sake of something larger than himself."¹⁷

There is a limit to this form of motivation, however. When growth inevitably slows down (as was the case after 1960) due to growing complexity of the economy and depletion of surplus resources, and no marked improvement in people's lives seems evident, morale sinks, and productivity suffers. Popular demand for more bread and butter (or rice and kimchi) no longer can be ignored. Leaders must choose between pursuing essentially the same plan, with a minimum allowance of decentralization and material incentives, or changing their strategy entirely by diverting more resources to the consumer-oriented sector.

So far, the North Korean leadership seems to have chosen the first alternative. Why? Because economic liberalization (meaning expanded trade and acquisition of advanced technology) most likely would expose the populace to more foreign influence and would challenge the credibility of *juče* and the Kim Il Sung cult. Since this credibility is absolutely critical to North Korea's political stability, an economic opening risks political disaster. In North Korea economic concerns have never preceded political imperatives.¹⁸

South Korea, on the other hand, has been held up as a model of an export-oriented capitalist development strategy. Under the military's firm helmsmanship, the nation plunged into a program of rapid industrialization and economic growth. In successive five-year plans, the government adopted monetary, fiscal, and trade policies to promote exports of manufactured goods ranging from clothes in the 1960s to computers in the 1980s. It devalued

15. Hong-Koo Lee and Chong-Wook Chung, "Dialectics of Unbalanced Growth: The Case of the Two Koreas," in *Korean Unification Problems in the 1970s*, ed. Chong-Shik Chung and Hak-Joon Kim (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1980), 57.

16. An, 118.

17. Lee and Chung, 58.

18. Clough, 90.

the *won*, gave preferential loans and tax benefits to export manufacturers, and exempted tariffs for raw materials used in export production. As a result, real gross national product (GNP) grew by an average of almost 10 percent a year from 1963 to 1976.¹⁹ Exports jumped from \$30 million in 1960 to \$30 billion in 1985.²⁰

Although the government plays a large and crucial role in the South Korean "economic miracle," most industrial production is by private firms. Competition between small, family-owned companies is fierce and contributes to efficiency. The meteoric rise in national wealth also has created a growing class of entrepreneurs and giant conglomerates known as *chaebol* (e.g., Hyundai and Samsung). Business is now not only a very profitable field, but also a respectable profession. (In the past, Confucian influences accorded commerce low esteem).

As in the North, increased economic self-reliance was one of the South's primary economic development goals.²¹ Granted that South Korea remains more vulnerable to external circumstances, its economy surpasses that of the North in many ways. Unlike Pyongyang, the streets of Seoul are awash with Reebok shoes and Goldstar stereos. Unlike the North Korean worker, the assembly line worker in the Hyundai auto plants in Ulsan can expect substantial pay raises on a semi-regular basis (albeit through strikes). Unlike North Korea, considered one of the least creditworthy countries in the world, South Korea is considered one of the most creditworthy. In sum, South Koreans more than ever can be sure of the higher merits of their economic system *vis-à-vis* North Korea's. Rather than compromise this economic success in pursuit of reunification, many South Koreans increasingly may not mind holding out and watching the North Korean system collapse under its own weight.

Military

Militarily, the two Koreas are as hostile to each other as any two adversaries in the world. Inevitably, in both countries the military has become "the largest cohesive vested interest in their states."²² This preponderant influence creates its own organizational dynamic that seeks to enhance, enlarge, and expand itself.²³ The only way to justify such action, though, is by continuing to stress the perceived threat and hostility from one another — quite contrary to a relaxation of tensions and eventual reunification.

North Korea is one of the most highly militarized societies in the world. Probably no other industry is as large as defense. It is estimated that North Korea has over 800,000 full-time military personnel, or nearly 4 percent of

19. *Ibid.*, 74.

20. Macdonald, 188.

21. Clough, 80.

22. Gregory Henderson, "Korea: Militarist of Unification Policies?," in *The Two Koreas in East Asian Affairs*, ed. William J. Barnds (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 138.

23. *Ibid.*

the population.²⁴ Another 260,000 reservists are ready to be mobilized on thirty days' notice. The Workers' and Peasants' Red Militia keeps all other men eighteen to forty, and women eighteen to thirty years old, in perpetual military training. Conscription begins at age sixteen. Every year, up to 20 percent of GNP is spent on defense.²⁵ Consequently, North Korea has built up a largely self-sufficient arms industry which is also active in weapons exports to Third World countries. Finally, the whole nation has virtually become a giant fortress, with many important factories and military bases built underground.²⁶

The military is an inseparable part of North Korean reality. As some observers have pointed out, the military in North Korea is essential to reinforce the legitimacy of the regime. Through mass mobilization, it helps to inculcate the values of "loyalty, absolute obedience to the party and the leader, the willingness to sacrifice and revolutionary brotherhood" in the minds of the people.²⁷ And since a large military establishment requires a menacing enemy, the threat of aggression by an imperial United States and its "puppet" regime in South Korea is constantly played up: the ultimate mission of the military is said to lie in completing national liberation of all Korea by driving out American imperialists from the South and freeing the people from class oppression.²⁸ This is hardly a rhetoric conducive to peaceful reunification.

South Korea is no pacifist either. It has some 600,000 full-time military personnel and eight reserve divisions.²⁹ Conscription of up to two and a half years is mandatory for all males between the ages of eighteen and thirty. It spends 6 percent of GNP on defense which means, in absolute terms, more total expenditure than the North because of the South's much larger GNP.³⁰ Like North Korea, South Korea has sought to increase self-reliance in the defense sector. By the early 1980s, it was meeting about half of its own armament needs, especially in the light weapons category (ammunition, rifles, machine guns, anti-aircraft guns). Though South Korea is a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, it has a thriving nuclear power program and probably has acquired the technical knowhow to produce nuclear weapons.³¹

Most significantly, this vast military establishment plays a pivotal role in South Korean politics. Since Park Chung Hee's coup of May 1961, no civilian politician has held power without military consent. Perhaps more importantly, ex-officers continue to occupy senior- and middle-level government positions. Because their chief duty was the defense of the nation against the North Korean military threat, these policy-makers in general "give a high priority

24. Macdonald, 244.

25. *Ibid.*, 243.

26. Clough, 102.

27. Young C. Kim, "The Political Role of the Military in North Korea," in *North Korea Today: Strategic and Domestic Issues*, ed. Robert A. Scalapino and Jun-Yop Kim (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1983), 138.

28. *Ibid.*, 141-142.

29. Macdonald, 232.

30. Clough, 174.

31. *Ibid.*, 100.

to internal security, tend toward worst-case analyses of North Korea's military capabilities and intentions, and react with suspicion toward views of North Korea less hard-line than theirs."³² From the military point of view, accepting any other opinion would be tantamount to shooting its own foot.

PROSPECTS

Reunification is clearly not in the interest of either regime despite its long-term advantages for the Korean people. Having been conditioned by over forty years of mutual distrust, competition, and confrontation, the leadership in both Koreas now believes that pursuing policies most beneficial to their own interests, not reunification, is their primary objective. Past efforts at reunification were doomed from the start because neither regime ever had any intention of sacrificing an iota of privilege it enjoyed as a separate entity. Records show that both sides have manipulated reunification policies in the past to suit their internal political needs rather than to increase the chances for reunification.

Significant changes may be in store, however. Observing that past reunification efforts have been elite-directed phenomena and that the obstacles discussed above are, by and large, not the creation of the masses, popular sentiment and pressure very well could alter the dismal situation someday. At least in South Korea, the recent student demonstrations under the banner of reunification seem to presage a genuine popular desire to see progress made toward the goal. Buoyed by their newly gained sense of political power, more and more people now seem willing to pressure the government to adopt a fresh approach to the problem. This is especially true with the younger generation, perhaps because their hatred of North Korea tends to be less virulent than their parents' by virtue of not having lived through the trying days of the Korean War.

Even among the older generation, the anti-American sentiment that recent US trade pressure has fostered may someday lead to a re-examination of their anti-communist world view — a view that is essentially American in origin. If anti-Americanism is one manifestation of Korean nationalism, South Korean sympathy is bound to shift away from their Yankee "big brothers" to their North Korean blood brothers.

On a grander level, too, there are catalytic forces at work. Chief among them is the ever burgeoning might of the South Korean economy. The rapidly ballooning wealth of the South has not only injected its people with a new sense of self-confidence, but also has earned them international respect and admiration that the North can only envy. At least in one arena of competition — diplomatic — South Korea seems to be winning by a wide margin. Most ominous from the North's point of view, a continued trend in this direction threatens to turn the Korean peninsula into another Germany: it is a distinct possibility that within the foreseeable future, South Korea will so overwhelm-

32. Clough, 46.

ingly outperform the North economically that Seoul's long shadow will cloud Pyongyang's skyline.

The recent political resolution in South Korea should strengthen its hand even more. What democratization has done is effectively to rob the North Korean propagandist of his most valuable card against his southern counterpart. More legitimacy for the South Korean regime means that no longer do Kim Il Sung's attacks on the "military fascists" enjoy the same pungency as they once did. Today, his dream of inciting a pro-North revolution in the South seems more far-fetched than ever. The South Korean regime is here to stay, and sooner or later the North Korean leadership will be forced to come to terms with it in a more realistic manner. The price of inaction may be too heavy to bear even for ultra-spartan North Korea.

The case is becoming all the more urgent because both China and the Soviet Union — North Korea's two chief allies — as well as its many other communist friends, are not so discreetly jumping on to the South Korean economic bandwagon. China's thriving trade with South Korea is now an open secret. Mainly facilitated through Hong Kong, the volume of trade between China and South Korea in 1988 is estimated to be 3 billion dollars.³³ China prefers South Korea to Japan for economic assistance, because it finds Japanese technology too sophisticated for most of its fledgling industries. More and more, the reform-minded Soviet Union also seems eager to expand trade with South Korea with an eye toward eventually securing a helping hand in the development of vast, resource-rich Siberia.

Coupled with the general lowering of tension between the superpowers, the international atmosphere cannot be any cozier than this for South Korea. Conversely, things look very grim indeed for North Korea. Although the North thus far has been able to hinder its allies' moves toward full accommodation of South Korea, its leverage seems to be waning rapidly. The nearly full participation of Eastern bloc countries in last summer's Seoul Olympics and Hungary's recent opening of a permanent diplomatic mission in Seoul are cases in point.

Clearly the tide of events is pounding away at North Korea's footing from all directions. Domestically, the North's leadership must grapple with the awkward dilemma of boosting the rapidly sapping morale of the masses without jeopardizing its political legitimacy. Internationally, the nation desperately needs to find a way to avoid being labeled as the premier oddity of the twentieth century political order. If North Korea wants to stay afloat, its leaders will have to adopt a new strategy. In the long run, they will probably relax their tight grip on society and allow a modicum of openness because the alternatives are permanent stagnation and isolation.

In the short run, however, North Korea may decide to turn ever more inward to safeguard its internal "purity" by reinforcing its threatened political foundation and by squeezing out the last bit of the masses' resources. The critical factor is how succession to Kim Il Sung will be resolved once the

33. "South Korea Goes for Gold," *The Economist*, 17 September 1988, 36.

Great Leader, who is seventy-seven, is gone. If Kim Jong Il, the Great Leader's son, manages to hold on to power in his own right, the likelihood of radical change diminishes substantially. By slowly but surely extending the cult of personality to his entire family — dead and alive — the elder Kim has greatly enhanced the younger Kim's claim to political legitimacy within the current arrangement. For President Kim Jong Il not to exploit this would be self-defeating to say the least.

But if Kim Jong Il loses this claim to legitimacy, the chances for a more moderate course for North Korea increase substantially. Because any leader who is unrelated to the Kim family will not be able to exploit the cult of personality without a loss of credibility, he will have to legitimize his rule in some other fashion. Judging by the experiences of the Soviet Union and China, one of the best ways to shore up support for a regime that immediately succeeds a state headed by a charismatic leader is to heap criticism on the previous regime and reverse policies. Hence, a more ideologically flexible, more open and outward-looking North Korea is an inevitable outcome given time.

In this context, provided no military conflicts erupt, improved intra-Korean relations might emerge. For even if Kim Jong Il fulfills his father's dream by creating a first socialist dynasty in North Korea, someday he too will pass away. And another war on the Korean peninsula seems highly unlikely as long as the United States stays committed to the defense of South Korea. Meanwhile, South Korea's own defense capability is building up steadily.

When North Korea finally emerges from its ice-age politics, tension with South Korea should lessen considerably. South Korea has already made it clear that it is willing to provide economic assistance to the North, going so far as suggesting to help pay off Pyongyang's foreign debts.³⁴ Still, it would be a mistake to assume that increasing interaction should culminate automatically in reunification. Given the constraints mentioned in the foregoing discussion, peaceful coexistence and cross-recognition of the two Koreas by all of the major powers which have stakes in the matter (the Soviet Union, China, the United States, and Japan) seem a much more likely outcome than reunification. Reunification will occur only when the vast gulf separating the two Koreas in ideology, politics, economics, and military has been bridged. But such a convergence is sure to take time. A very long time.

The final variable in this analysis is the great powers' attitude toward Korean reunification. Korea's strategic location as the only spot in the world where the interests of the world's four biggest powers cross paths dictates that none of these powers would welcome any changes disadvantageous to their interests.³⁵ Most crucially, as long as the worldwide East-West rivalry continues, neither camp would appreciate a reunited Korea allied with the other side.

34. Mark Clifford, "Reaching Out: South Korea Tries to Forge Economic Links With the North," *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 November 1988.

35. Macdonald, 273.

Another major concern to all four powers is how a single, reunified Korea will employ its combined and still potent military force.³⁶ The Korean military establishment, though smaller, is likely to remain intact even after reunification, because Korean history is not the kind that encourages martial frailty. The reunification process, then, will most certainly involve outside powers. Perhaps one way to neutralize them is to neutralize Korea. As in the Austrian case, the great powers could simultaneously release the two Koreas from their respective camps, if and when the Koreans themselves want it and are ready for it. But just as the decision to split Korea in the first place was not their own, this decision is not for Koreans to make.

36. Ibid.

