

The End of History: ‘Neojuche Revivalism’ and Korean Unification

by Victor D. Cha

Victor D. Cha is D.S. Song—Korea Foundation Professor of Government and Director of Asian Studies, Georgetown University and Senior Adviser, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C. This essay was presented as part of FPRI’s annual Asia Program conference, held in cooperation with the Reserve Officers Association on November 1, 2010 in Washington, D.C.

Abstract: This article argues that prospects for change in North Korea and, thus, reduction in threats to regional security, lay more in rising prospects for Korean unification than in scant hopes for reform inside North Korea. It identifies several factors that have made unification a more salient idea than at any time in the last decade. First, Kim Jong Il’s failing health and his youngest son’s and designated heir’s uncertain grip on succession mean greater risk of political instability in North Korea that could bring discontinuous change, including reunification. Second, it has become clear that the Six Party Talks and other diplomatic efforts will not produce denuclearization and reduction of the regional security threat posed by Pyongyang’s weapons program. Third, the current and likely future leadership in Pyongyang is incapable of reform, making regime collapse a more likely scenario and unification a more likely route to meaningful change. Fourth, the North Korean regime has become heavily dependent on Chinese support, material and political-diplomatic. Finally, thinking about how unification might occur has shifted to scenarios that are more feasible to key parties, including South Korea, the United States and Japan.

“The end of History” is a phrase made famous by Francis Fukuyama at the end of the Cold War. Then at the Office of Policy Planning at the State Department, Fukuyama employed this phrase to describe the historical progression of mankind between the forces of tyranny and freedom throughout history. In Fukuyama’s formulation, the battle culminated in the twentieth century between communism and democracy, with the

The author wishes to thank the Academy of Korean Studies Global Lab for their generous support.

collapse of the Soviet Union signaling the end of history's progression as mankind would evolve to liberal democracy as the final form of government.

We may well be approaching the end of history on the Korean peninsula. Across the conference circuit in five-star hotels in Asia as well as in the corridors of power in government capitals, the once taboo topic is now discussed more openly than ever.

Why the change? It is certainly not because the United States or the world has a newfound lust for collapsing the regime in North Korea. Far from it. The Obama administration has spurned the perceived regime-collapse motives of neoconservatives in the previous American administration. Even though its current policies—demanding irreversible denuclearization; applying financial sanctions; carrying out military exercises; and demanding a North Korean return to, and reaffirmation of, the denuclearization commitments of the Six Party talks—look hardly different from those of the Bush administration, Obama's inclinations are clearly toward dialogue and extending the unclenched fist to Pyongyang—when the time is right.

Neojuche Revivalism

The primary cause for the increased talk about unification concerns three developments, all related more to North Korea than to South Korea or the United States. The first is that Kim Jong-il is very sick. Complications from his August 2008 stroke appear present and his desired succession of power to his young son amounts to a power transition far more shaky than the one that put Kim in power in 1994.

Second, there is more talk about Korean unification now than in the past because of a growing realization that some two decades of U.S. negotiation with North Korea has not led to successful denuclearization. Many in the past would have contested this proposition, blaming Washington as much for the negotiation impasses as Pyongyang. But after Obama's outstretched hand in 2009 was slapped away by the North's ballistic missile test in April 2009 and its second nuclear test the following month, very few in Washington blame the United States anymore. In short, there is a growing realization that true, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula can only come with unification. This is not an argument against continuing diplomacy; it is merely a realization that diplomacy's aims, while remaining maximalist (full denuclearization), will really amount to a crisis containment exercise.

Third, the new and future leadership in North Korea will not be capable of reform. The recent massive Communist party rallies in North Korea provided the world's first real glimpse of Kim Jong-il's youngest son, the not-yet-30-year-old Kim Jong-un, who in late 2010 was almost assuredly named the future successor to his ailing father through his promotions to the rank of a four-star general in the army and second-in-charge of the party.

In a country of hyper-isolation and xenophobia, the so-called “young general” reportedly had a cosmopolitan upbringing. Believed to have been educated in Switzerland, he speaks some German and some English. He has a penchant for western creature comforts including NBA basketball and pop music. Democratic Party of the Republic of Korea (DPRK) propaganda praises him as a “brilliant genius,” wise beyond his years with “high-tech 21st century knowledge.” On occasion in world history, courageous leaders have brought about monumental change. Does the young Kim have what it takes to finally catapult the North Korean people out of the dark ages?

Probably not. His youth is not the issue. After the Korean war, Stalin picked Kim Il-sung, the first leader of North Korea at the tender age of 33. Kim Jong-il began climbing the Party ladder at 30 years old, and was anointed as the successor to his father at age of 38. For the Kim family dynasty, picking them young is the natural requisite for forty to fifty years of continuous rule.

No, the real problem is the system itself. Even if the young Kim is enlightened, there are three obstacles. Despotism regimes like North Korea cannot survive without ideology to justify their iron grip. And the ideology that accompanies the son's rise appears to look backwards rather than forwards. I call it “neojuche revivalism.” This constitutes a return to a conservative and hardline “juche” (self-reliance) ideology of the 1950s and 1960s—harkening back to a day when the North was doing well relative to the democratic South. Neojuche revivalism is laced with “songun” (military-first) ideology which features the North's emergence as a nuclear weapons state (Kim Jong-il's one accomplishment during his rule). This revivalist ideology leaves absolutely no room for opening because it blames the past decade of poor performance on “ideological pollution” stemming from experiments with reform.

True reform in a post-Kim Jong-il era would require the courage to loosen the very political instruments of control that allow the regime its iron grip on the people. The dilemma the young Kim faces is that he needs to reform to survive, but the process of opening up will undeniably lead to the end of his political control. This was perhaps the most important lesson of the end of the Cold War for North Korea.

Even if Kim Jong-un were an enlightened leader who has the courage to attempt such reform, he would be dealing with a generation of institutions and people that are the most isolated in North Korean history. The generals, party officials, and bureaucrats of the Cold war era were far more worldly than those of the post-Cold war era. Kim Il-sung's generation was able to travel freely to Eastern bloc countries. Kim used to vacation with Erich Honecker and Nicolae Ceausescu. By contrast, Kim Jong-il's generation saw Ceausescu executed, and observed that the Chinese communist party almost lost power in Tiananmen square. The generation of leadership the young son will inherit sees nothing comforting about the outside world.

The revolution in North Korea died long ago but the young son will be forced to cling to the outdated ideological principles that worked during the

cold war. It is no coincidence that Kim Jong-il has had frequent visits in the past two years to factory towns that used to be the center of North Korea's mass worker mobilization (Chollima) movements of the 1950s. It is no coincidence that NKEconWatch's website, which has the best Google earth imagery of the North, has reported the rebuilding of chemical and vinylon factories which were the heart of cold war-era Pyongyang's now decrepit economy.

Neojuche revivalism is untenable in the long term. Mass mobilization of workers without reform can only work with massive inputs of food, fuel, and equipment which the Chinese will be increasingly relied upon to provide. Beijing seems content to backstop its communist brethren for the time being. But donor fatigue will eventually set in. Beijing officials confide that the regime would last only a year without the Chinese life-line.

This is why people are talking about unification today. If this sounds too pessimistic, just imagine the following scenario:

- The North has given up its nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and chemical stockpiles as its development-oriented leadership realize that this is the price for integration into the Asian, and world economic, network.
- North Koreans are operating \$6 billion light water reactors jointly provided by the United States, Japan, Russia, Republic of Korea, and China.
- Washington and Tokyo have normal political relations with ambassadors busily at work in Pyongyang.
- Seoul is providing conventional electricity across the DMZ to North Korean power grids.
- Russia is running gas lines to Japan and South Korea through the north.
- The Four Powers have signed a peace treaty ending the Korean war.
- Japan is providing ten billion dollars in assistance for major public works projects supported by international financial institutions.

Today, does anyone think that this scenario is possible without unification?

The Final Phase of Unification Discourse

We are now in the final phase of discourse on unification. The current talk of unification arguably constitutes Korea's "End of History"—the final stage of six decades of unification discourse.

The first iteration took place during the Cold War years when the predominant narrative was unification by force (pukch'in t'ongil or s'ngong t'ongil). This was a classic, offensive realist, zero sum view of the problem. Unification could only come through victory of one side over the other. The two Koreas were locked into a relative power competition (one in which the

North did not fare too poorly in the early cold war years) and inter-Korean dialogue was dominated by, what former Columbia University professor Samuel Kim famously referred to as, the politics of competitive delegitimation.

The discourse then evolved to one dominated by aspirations of absorption. This coincided with the end of the cold war and the success of South Korea's *nordpolitik*, normalizing relations with the Soviet Union first in 1990 and then with China in 1992. As the gaps between the South Korean economy and the North's became insurmountable, moreover, Seoul's confidence grew that they could swallow up the smaller North if needed. Koreans witnessed Germany's unification and came to believe that they could accomplish the same in managing Korea's fate.

The third phase of unification discourse coincided with two events. First, there was the "Germany trickle-down" effect. After the initial euphoria of German unification, Koreans became acutely aware of the difficulties and complexities of uniting the two countries economically, politically, and socially. They learned quickly that these difficulties would be exponentially more acute given the even wider socio-economic gaps between the two Koreas compared with that of the two Germanies. Second, Korea was hit by the liquidity crisis of 1997–1998. These resource constraints bounded the view of unification. What had once been seen as possible, was now seen as impossible. Unification was considered too expensive, too dangerous, and too uncertain. This did not mean that Koreans disavowed unification. But it did mean that they would like to push unification as far into the future as possible.

The policy manifestation of this view of unification was, of course, the sunshine policy. Precisely because unification was considered too expensive and difficult, the best course of action was then to seek engagement with the North, try to help reform their system, and eventually effect a "soft landing."

What is the new paradigm?

What does this new and final phase of unification discourse amount to? We cannot be altogether certain but unification seems to embrace several elements.

First, this new discourse is based in *pragmatism* more than ideology. As stated above, the embracing of unification does not stem from a desire to collapse the regime, but from pragmatic concerns about the potential instability of the leadership in Pyongyang. It also stems from a rational realization that the only true solution to tangible problems like nuclear weapons, terrorism, and the conventional military threat is through unification.

Second, this new discourse is not a return to *pukch'in t'ongil*, but is more *internationalist*, transparent, and open in its nature. Past Korean views of unification were very parochial. Koreans never wanted to discuss unification with any other parties for fear of external intervention by other powers in

determining Korea's fate. The new view, however, understands that while unification is for Korea, there is a pragmatic acknowledgment that Koreans will indeed need help from the outside world to effect a successful transition. This is why discussions on unification today are very open and transparent, without the insecurities and "mind-your-own-business" attitudes of the past. ROK leaders want to discuss unification with the world because they want the UN security council, the European Union, and other world members on their side when the day comes. In this regard, reaching out to the world now to talk about unification constitutes an effort to socialize the world to how Koreans want unification to happen. This is a far cry from previous Korean attitudes about unification.

This socialization process also extends to Korea's generation in their 20s and 30s. These younger, smart, and more affluent Koreans grew up under one decade of sunshine policy and, therefore, hold negative (if any) views on unification, which they have been taught for years to believe was too dangerous, dirty, and difficult. Now these youth are being encouraged to think, prepare and talk about unification in a way that was discouraged during the sunshine policy decade.

Third, the new unification discourse is based more on *ideas* than on raw power. In other words, *pukch'in t'ongil*, unification through force, was about relative power. But the new view says that what will eventually bring unification is not use of force but the power and prevalence of ideas. These ideas relate to freedom, democracy, individual opportunity, and entitlement to human dignity. Once these notions start to seep into society, the game is basically over.

Finally, the new unification discourse is about *opportunity* more than about threats. The previous views saw unification as too expensive and dangerous. Unification was, therefore, a threat to the region and to the lifestyles of affluent Koreans. But the new view expounds unification as perhaps the greatest opportunity in the postwar era for the world and for Koreans. Properly prepared for, unification could become the biggest positive-sum game in Asia for all parties. The end of the Cold War threats, e.g. nuclear and missile, will all lead to positive dividends for the region. Unification properly prepared for will also result in net productivity gains higher than the costs associated with knitting the two countries back together. This is a positive and proactive view of unification, not a defensive and negative view.

The result is that unification is now an "in my lifetime" concept. It is no longer something that Koreans should push off for generations if an opportunity arises to grab Korea's destiny.

'In my lifetime'

The final discourse on unification, described above, is not naïve. It harbors no false expectations that unification somehow has become an easier

task. I believe everyone understands how difficult the task will be. It is not likely to come gradually as sunshine policy advocates wish. It is likely to come suddenly. Koreans will meet this challenge. They will have substantial support and help from Korea's allies, including the United States.

But they will also need a little bit of luck. If one looks at Korean history, luck is not a trait that has been in abundance. And yet Korea has done so well. But as Professor Paik Jin-Hyun once said, one can never be lucky if one is not prepared. Luck does not come to those who are unprepared. It only comes to those who are ready.

In this sense, I believe that the unification ministry's efforts to reach out to the world and to the younger generation of Koreans through a series of international conferences and other outreach efforts is an excellent way to prepare. Money that once went fully to the North as part of "engagement" is now being put to use educating younger Koreans and socializing the world to how South Koreans see unification. President Lee Myung-Bak's upholding of a unification tax is a watershed moment, essentially telling his country not only to be psychologically prepared for unification, but also to be materially prepared. At the Center for Strategic and International Studies, we have engaged in a project focused on the longer term task associated with unification—how to reenergize North Korea's power sector; how to reconstruct its health system; how to manage the social security burden; how to reform education in the North; how to handle transitional justice. These are just a small sampling of the tasks ahead for this Herculean effort.

Finally, I believe that the new discourse on unification extends beyond the peninsula. Increasingly countries are reaching the conclusion that the only real solution to the Korean question is unification. Japan, for example, long thought to be opposed to unification, views the costs of the status quo with nuclear tests and ballistic missiles pointed at them from the North as unacceptably high. Japan officials, in fact, have been magnanimous in urging U.S. and South Korean colleagues to have more serious discussions about unification contingencies – not even asking that they participate in this due to ROK sensitivities. While Russia supports North Korea, they also have grown increasingly concerned that the nuclear program they long ago helped to create is now out of control. The United States has already stated in its communiqué with Lee Myung Bak that America aspires for a Korea free and at peace.

The one party that may not share this view is China. While China has experienced vigorous internal debate after the first and second nuclear tests about where its interest lay on the peninsula, Beijing does not appear to be in favor of active discussions with any party on how to prepare for sudden change on the peninsula. Beijing's actions after the Cheonan sinking by a DPRK torpedo fell far short of their aspirations to be a responsible stakeholder and leader in East Asia. Deterring North Korea from undertaking other actions that threaten freedom of navigation in East Asian waters is a public good that

China was uniquely positioned to provide. Such actions would have won it great praise and respect in the region. Yet China, unfortunately, has clung thus far to an anachronistic view of the peninsula. One hopes that with greater dialogue among the United States, ROK, and China, Beijing's party stalwarts will not view a united Korea as a geostrategic risk.

