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## **Korean Unification Prospects and the United States' Policy**

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Korean unification seemed a conceivable prospect at the turn of the century, especially after the Inter-Korean summit in 2000. This is not the case nowadays, however, in light of the provocative behavior of the North Korean regime in 2010, 2012 and 2013 (especially the declarations made in March 2013).

Since such an option seems likely in the future, U.S. foreign policy-makers should analyze possible scenarios for Korean integration and its influence on the regional system.

The costs of such an endeavor are hard to estimate, although using German unification for comparison, we may expect that such a process could ruin the economies of both Koreas, as well as the socio-political systems of both countries. There are even greater doubts concerning whether there is any actor in the regional scene that could support Korean unification. As for the main regional players – China, Japan and the United States – such a change would be a serious challenge. This is why it is important to focus on the German example in order to strengthen the regional trust and alliance system.

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the crucial Northeast Asian challenge of American foreign policy, present the possibilities of Korean unification, assess its costs, use German unification as a point of comparison, and assess the possible influence of Korean unification on the regional system and the approaches of regional powers towards the process of creating a New Korea.

**D**espite its limited potential in terms of population and territory, the Korean Peninsula seems to be a crucial factor for regional and even global strategic relations, as well as a balance of power. Having in mind the North Korean declarations of March 2013, including declarations of preemptive nuclear strikes against the U.S., withdrawing from the non-aggression pact with South Korea, and eventually ending the armistice of 1953, it is hard to imagine further cooperation or integration leading to unification of the Koreas. Former events, such as North Korea's rocket launch of 2012 (proving it is capable of producing intercontinental ballistic missiles), or the sinking of a South Korean corvette Cheonan in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyong Island in November 2010, have increased fears concerning peace and

stability in Northeast Asia and the chances for Korean unification in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea, as well as between North and South Korea, will be restored in the future, as there is support from the American administration (especially the newly appointed secretary of state, John Kerry) and newly elected South Korean President Park Geun-Hye (unlike her predecessor, President Lee Myung-bak). Such dialogue seems a remote prospect at the moment, due to the provocative behavior of the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. It is worth noting, however, that such behavior could be connected with the succession of power from Kim Jong-il to his youngest son, Kim Jong-un (including an internal power struggle between Kim Jong-un and the military<sup>1</sup>), therefore we should perceive it as merely a temporary disturbance in the regional system.

The unification of the two Korean states, the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, is not an easy process due to more important, structural factors that will be characterized here. The costs of such an endeavor are hard to estimate, although when German unification is used as a point of comparison, we may expect that such a process could ruin both economies, and subsequently the socio-political systems of both countries. There are even greater doubts whether there is any actor on the regional scene that could support Korean unification. As for the main regional players – China, Japan and the United States – such a change would cause a serious challenge. This is why it is important to focus on the German example again and increase the regional trust and alliance system.

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the crucial Northeast Asian challenge of American foreign policy, present possibilities of Korean unification, assess its costs, use German unification as a point of comparison, present possible models of integration, and assess the possible influence of Korean unification on the regional system and the approaches of regional powers towards the process of creating a New Korea. For an analysis of the regional system, the regional powers (triangular perspective) and regional organizations modified systemic theory (as well as mixed approach) will be used.

## Scenarios of unification

There are three basic scenarios of Korean unification analyzed in various sources and presented in the Institute of International Economics Report (Noland ed.), as well as the CSIS analysis (*A Blueprint for U.S. Policy*) and RAND Corporation analysis (Wolf, Akramov), although a bit differently.<sup>2</sup> As for the U.S. policy, the Council of Foreign Relations Task Force analyzes four policy options connected especially with the North Korean nuclear program, including explicit acquiescence, containment

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noticing, however, that we should not expect important changes within the North Korean system in the short term. However, in the long term, Kim Jong-un may be open to some, especially economic, reforms, as it may help him gain proper legitimacy (Lankov). For more about power transitions, including the role of military provocations and changes in military cadres, see Jin-Ha Kim.

<sup>2</sup> An additional, fourth scenario of disequilibrium and potential external intervention is discussed in Pollack and Chung Min Lee (75-82).

and management, rollback, and regime change. Of these, containment and management or rollback are advised (*U.S. Policy Toward* 11-19).

The first scenario is based on the assumption of peaceful integration of the Korean Peninsula, and is defined as a "soft landing" by the CSIS. It requires cooperation from both Korean and international actors (especially four powers: the U.S., Japan, China and Russia), based on acceptance of the status quo by all important actors, mutual diplomatic recognition, a formal peace treaty, the prolonged peaceful coexistence of the Koreas, accompanied by greater integration between the two Korean states (starting from, and based on, economic interaction) and structural change (similar to the "one country - two systems - two governments" model adapted from China) with eventual unification.<sup>3</sup> Charles Wolf and Kamil Akramov suggest adopting and implementing China's economic model, with liberalization of the economic system, opening capital and trade transactions, and decentralizing the economic system. Economic interaction and cooperation between Mainland China and Taiwan can serve as an example for this model (Wolf, Akramov 22-23). This scenario seems to be the most likely and the most beneficial for the regional system, including regional organizations and great powers of the region. This is the sole scenario which would guarantee stability of the regional system, although it presents certain risks for American regional policy, including its alliance with South Korea, which would be affected by North-South tensions.<sup>4</sup>

The second scenario is integration "by default," as described in CSIS analysis and based on the collapse of North Korea, especially its economic system, followed by the collapse of the state and absorption of the North by South Korea. Paradoxically, despite the total disintegration of the North Korean economy, the state cannot be perceived as a fallen state, since the state apparatus, supported by a strong military, is still capable of functioning.<sup>5</sup> In the model presented above, the regime collapses as a result of a triggering event (either from below, such as mass protests, or from above, such as a change in the elite), resulting in sudden unification without proper preparation. Such a process would probably require limited external intervention to restore order in North Korea (it is disputable whether only South Korean or joint U.S.-South Korean intervention would be necessary, and if so, how it would influence the regional system), and high priority interim measures of population control would probably be unavoidable (such as border maintenance, refugee processing, control of labor migration). Integration in all spheres (political, social and economic) would be acute, and such a scenario seems to be very dangerous for the Korean Peninsula and the regional system, as well as the international system in general.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This model is based on economic interactions and the following integration, accompanied by social and political interaction, resulting from economic cooperation (See *A Blueprint for U.S. Policy* 3-4). Such a gradual model of unification is perceived as the sole model for U.S. policy goals towards the Korean Peninsula, since it takes into consideration many dangers and dilemmas. The model is analyzed in Snyder (1998: 39-50).

<sup>4</sup> Lee Myung-bak's policy supported the best South Korea-United States alliance relations in history (see Manyin et al. 1).

<sup>5</sup> North Korea is ranked 22nd in the *Failed States Index 2012* prepared by the *Foreign Policy* and the Fund for Peace, scoring 95.5 (*The Failed States Index 2012*).

<sup>6</sup> See *A Blueprint for U.S. Policy* (3-4). A. Foster-Carter perceives such a scenario as the most likely, and thus suggests undertaking all measures preemptively in order to ensure a softer landing for the North Korean part of the Peninsula (Foster-Carter 27-38).

Despite the relative resilience of the North Korean regime, based on dexterity in acquiring support from external sources and military establishment, it is possible that these sources of resilience will be limited in the future, hence the regime may collapse suddenly.<sup>7</sup> South Korea and the regional community, including regional organizations such as the East Asian Summit, ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum (and possibly the Northeast Asian Community), should have scenarios for a North Korean collapse prepared in order to avoid regional system destabilization and acute security problems in East Asia or even the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>8</sup> It would be important for the regional powers not to have the U.S. (supporting South Korea, incorporating North Korea) play too strong a role in this process. For such a scenario, the United States proposed a detailed Operations Plan in October 2008 (*OPLAN 5029*).

The third discussed scenario is unification by war, with North Korea invading the South. This scenario is the worst for both the Korean Peninsula and the regional system. It would result in mass American and Korean casualties and large-scale devastation of Seoul, in particular, but probably also other urban and industrial centers in Korea. North Korea would also be ruined, as well as Japan, being a target of North Korean missile attacks (including chemical and possibly also nuclear attacks). In this scenario, North Korea would be occupied and administered by the U.S. and ROK, but the occupation would probably generate huge additional costs, let alone the costs of post-war rebuilding.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth discussing China's role in this scenario, as Korea unified by force and dominated by the U.S. would definitely be a destabilizing factor in the regional environment, and Chinese reactions are hardly predictable. The same holds true for the Russian reaction. A common policy for the regional powers would be most recommended for such a scenario.<sup>10</sup> Cooperation would be extremely valuable, as it could lead not only to a faster end to the conflict, but could also help maintain a safe and stable regional system by limiting a possible arms-race in the region.<sup>11</sup> A structure to handle such a process should be created either by the cooperation of regional powers, or within regional organizations, the East Asian Summit or, when such a possibility appears, the Northeast Asian Community (currently nonexistent). American engagement is the highest and costliest in this scenario.

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<sup>7</sup> Ch. Wolf and K. Akramov stress that severe economic adversity combined with limited external subventions can lead to the inability of supporting military assets and maintenance of control over Korea, leading to the collapse of the system (see Wolf, Akramov 23-24).

<sup>8</sup> Measures that should be undertaken for economic and political integration in this scenario (monetary conversion, economic restructuring, privatization) are discussed in Eui-Gak Hwang.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth pointing out that the U.S. is better prepared for such a scenario, but unfortunately only in military terms, hence problems with administration, occupation and reconstruction of Korea (probably both northern and southern parts) would be similar to the second scenario (*A Blueprint for U.S. Policy* 7-8).

<sup>10</sup> The activity of external powers is crucial for avoiding a war on the Korean Peninsula. War is actually unlikely, but North Korean leaders do not always behave rationally (Kyongmann Yeong 9-25).

<sup>11</sup> An uprising in the North would be a factor favoring a quick end to the conflict (Wolf, Akramov 24-25).

## Costs of unification

There are various estimations of Korea Unification costs, usually considering German unification as a model. It is worth noticing that there are important differences between Germany and Korea, especially economic differences, making the process of German and Korean unification incomparable. Despite its imperfections, this model seems to fit best for current analyses. Differences between East and West Germany in comparison to North and South Korea, especially focusing on the economic situation, as this dimension is usually considered crucial, are shown in Table 1.

Factors worth stressing are the differences in population shares (the North Korean population is 48% of the South Korean; the East German share was 26%), GDP per capita (8 to 60%) and foreign trade volume (0.4 to 25%). These economic factors make unification of Korea much more expensive than unification of Germany, even though its cost of \$2 trillion in the last 20 years looks really impressive.

Table 1. Size and income comparisons FRG-GDR versus ROK-DPRK

	FRG (1989)	GDR (1989)	Percentage Share
<b>Population (millions)</b>	63.4	16.4	26.3
<b>Area size (sq km)</b>	248,689	108,333	43.6
<b>GDP (billions DM)</b>	2,237	353	15.8
<b>GDP per capita (DM)</b>	36,300	21,500	59.2
<b>Foreign Trade Volume (billions DM)</b>	1 148	286	24.9
	ROK (2007)	DPRK (2007)	Percentage Share
<b>Population (millions)</b>	48.5	23.2	48.0
<b>Area size (sq km)</b>	99,173	122,762	123.8
<b>GNI (billions USD)</b>	971.3	26.7	2.7
<b>GNI per capita (USD)</b>	20,045	1,152	8.1
<b>Foreign Trade Volume (billions USD)</b>	728.3	2.9	0.4

Source: Hilpert

There were other factors making German unification easier, as the two countries started cooperation in the 1970s and the Soviet Union was perceived as an external power in the GDR making it difficult to benefit from West German welfare, hence West Germany was admired as a "promised land." The above-mentioned economic cost will be definitely higher in the case of Korea than in Germany, but there are other costs such as the mental adaptation of North Koreans to capitalism (Bleiker). This is a problem of most of the Central and Eastern European countries, including Eastern Germany, even though economic and social contact between the two

countries and countries of the former eastern bloc existed. Hence people were not so isolated from the external world. An additional factor favoring German integration was West Germany's central role in European economic integration, its important role in NATO and its role in the regional system, making it a more attractive partner and natural leader of the unification (Hilpert). There are many issues Korea can learn from Germany, however, especially in the relationship between micro-economic polities to macroeconomic ties and side conditions, which was somehow neglected in Germany.<sup>12</sup>

Various estimations of costs of Korean unification are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Estimates of Korea unification costs

Definition of reunification costs	Costs (USD)	Source
Incremental investment	1.2 trillion – 2.4 trillion	Hwang (1993)
Total investment costs in 1990 prices over 10-year period	360 billion – 1.13 trillion	Joon-Koo Lee (1995)
Present discounted value of capital transfers from South Korea to North Korea	290 billion – 389 billion	Young Sun Lee (1994)
Additional fiscal burden on South Korea	332 billion	Jin-Young Bae (1994)
Present discounted value of expenditures	1.4 trillion – 3.2 trillion	Noland, Robinson, Scatasta (1997)
Present discounted value of capital expenditures	754 billion – 2.2 trillion	Noland, Robinson, Scatasta (1996)
Transfers to North Korea from South Korea and other donors	0.25-5% of the South's GDP annually at the beginning; cumulative cost may vary from 55% to 190% of South GDP over 20 years	Frecaut (2003)

Source: Wolf, Akramov 49.

There are two important issues – firstly, whether it is worth bearing such costs (and what economic benefits can be expected) and, secondly, how a unified Korea would be perceived in the international environment.

In an analysis by Seung Mo Choi, Hyung Seok Kim and Max St. Brown, the effects of integration on output, total factor productivity, wage rates and interest rates are discussed. The level of Western German TFP (Total Factors Productivity) in relation to the U.S. TFP decreased from 77% (1971-1990) to 71% (1991-2006). For South

<sup>12</sup> An analysis by Ulrich Blum, based on the World Bank Revised Minimum Standard Model (RMSM) and on the Salter-Swan-Meade model, suggests that neglecting these limits was a fundamental error of German unification. One can presume that it may even be a more acute factor in the case of Korea (Blum).

Korea, estimations are of a ca. 20% decrease of TFP as a result of the economic integration of the two Koreas (Seung Mo Choi et al.).

The influence of both reunification and lack of unification are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Figures 1 and 2 depict changes in GDP per capita in Germany (West Germany and East Germany), using a counter-factual analysis, hence estimating the situation of non-unification and analyzing possible Korean unification in a similar way.

Table 3. German reunification influence on output and labor

		<b>Integration</b>	<b>No-integration</b>
<b>Output</b>	GDP of WG and EG combined (Projection in 2025)	\$2 633 billion	\$2 708
	GDP per capita (Projection in 2025)	Germany \$31 833 WG: \$32 758 EG: \$26860	WG: \$36 968 EG: \$12 934
<b>Labour</b>	Population (Projection in 2025)	WG: 70.3 million EG: 12.2 million	WG: 68.1 million EG: 14.5 million
	Wage Rate per person	WG: \$11 850 (1990) \$13 628 (2005) \$21 838 (2025) EG: \$5 210 (1990) \$9 540 (2005) \$17 907 (2025)	WG: \$11 850 (1990) \$16 455 (2005) \$24 658 (2025) EG: \$5 210 (1990) \$6 742 (2005) \$8 623 (2025)

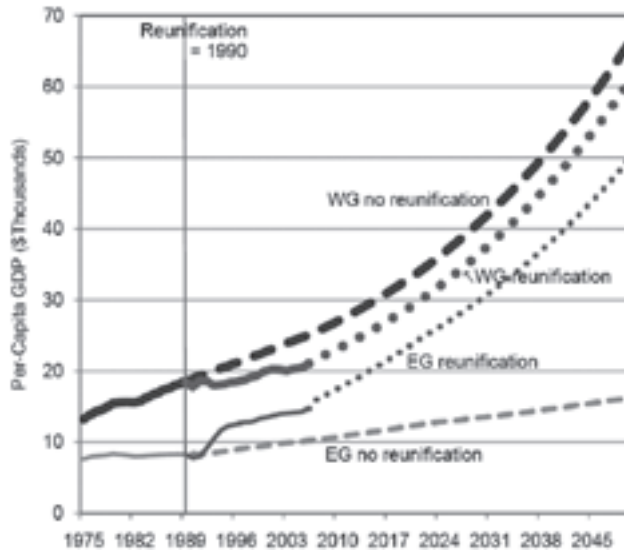
Source: Seung Mo Choi et al.

Table 4. Korean reunification influence on output and labor

		<b>German-Style integration in 2015</b>	<b>No-integration</b>
<b>Output</b>	GDP of SK and NK combined (Projection in 2040)	\$3 238 billion	\$3 323 billion
	GDP per capita (Projection in 2040) Compare US Projection \$89 212	Korea: \$43 848 SK: \$52 191 NK: \$23 837	SK: \$67 324 NK: \$796
<b>Labour</b>	Population (Projection in 2040)	SK: 52 million NK: 22 million	SK: 49 million NK: 25 million
	Wage Rate per person	SK: \$18 680 (2015) \$36 244 (2040) NK: \$665 (2015) \$12 414 (2040)	SK: \$18 680 (2015) \$44 882 (2040) NK: \$665 (2015) \$531 (2040)

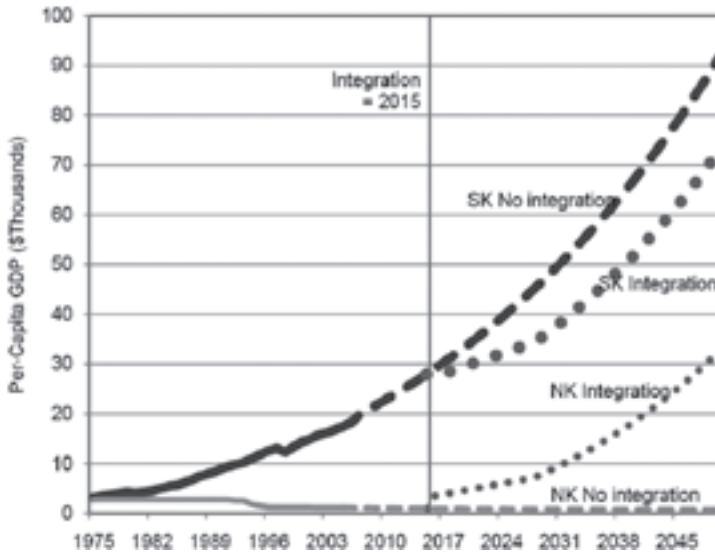
Source: Seung Mo Choi et al.

Figure 1. GDP per capita – GERMANY



Source: Seung Mo Choi et al.

Figure 2. GDP per capita – KOREA



Source: Seung Mo Choi et al.

All of the data presented above depict both the substantial costs of the process and the losses South Korea may face from unifying with North Korea. Looking more closely at the figures and data in the tables, we may observe that the costs South Korea has to bear are compensated by the benefits gained by Northern Koreans. Other factors, such as political and social factors, also play an important role.



It is also worth recalling models which present more benefits (Noland, Robinson, Liu), including economic benefits of unification, showing that the discounted value of the South Korean economy is higher with unification than without.<sup>13</sup>

The data and estimations presented above suggest that the integration process on the Korean Peninsula is definitely not an easy one. It is possible, however, and will certainly influence the regional system. Definitely the first scenario would be the best one for the stability and development of East Asia, as well as for American foreign policy, although the two latter scenarios should also be taken into account. Looking at the above data, we have to stress that one should not expect East Asia's next superpower, although the balance of power may change – which is especially important for the United States.

### **The role of Korea in the strategic triangle of China, the U.S. and Japan**

Analyzing the Korean Peninsula's position in U.S. foreign policy is impossible without analyzing the regional system of the Asia-Pacific. The system is quite unique, and can be easily depicted as a tripolar one. A tripolar system may be perceived as a model for a multipolar one, although due to its specifics and role in the Pacific Basin, it will be used for an analysis of the regional system in East Asia and unified Korea's role in it.<sup>14</sup> Formally, there has never been a tripolar international system in history, although Sino-Soviet-U.S. relations since the 1960s may be perceived as such.<sup>15</sup> This concept is deeply rooted in the theory and practice of international relations in the Asia-Pacific sub-system. This model is present in Chinese strategic thinking and the policy of hedging between Russia and the United States, as well as between the U.S. and the EU nowadays (Shambaugh). Other conceivable triangles are China, Japan and the U.S. (Ming Zhang; Vogel, Yuan Ming, Tanaka), China, India and the U.S. (Garver) or even Russia, China and India to balance the American presence in the region (Pant). It is clearly the U.S. that can be seen as the leader of international relations in the region, especially if the regional environment is properly shaped. Can Korea be an obstacle in the process?

The Beijing-Tokyo-Washington triangle is definitely a crucial factor for peace and stability in the region, and the Korean factor, being a strategic pivot of the regional system, may support the system, but, unfortunately, it is very likely to contribute to the regional system's destruction. All three powers have broad interests in the region, and maintenance of the balance of power among them is definitely a challenge. Japan is perceived as an American "unsinkable aircraft carrier" in Asia and traditional competitor (or even enemy) of China (Brzezinski 19). Improvement of relations between the U.S. and China is perceived as a threat to Japan and, simultaneously,

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<sup>13</sup> In this analysis, based on a general equilibrium model, the authors stress that even though lower income groups in South Korea experience reduced incomes, redistribution of gains makes everyone better off. What is interesting is that in the case of a low investment level and high migration, economic benefits will be higher (Noland, Robinson, Liu).

<sup>14</sup> For more about the trilateral international system, see Rourke 66.

<sup>15</sup> For more about tripolarity, see Ross; For more about trilateral diplomacy of that period, see Grabowski.

the improvement of relations between the U.S. and Japan is a threat for China (Carpenter; Christensen; Silver).<sup>16</sup>

Sino-Japanese cooperation is of vital importance for the regional integration in East Asia and it should aim at integration dialogue, similar to post-war Europe, wherein France and Germany became the core of the European Community.<sup>17</sup> Such a model, based on Sino-Japanese cooperation, including their relations with a unified Korea (and a common policy towards both Koreas at the moment and a unified Korea in the future), seems to be the best for the regional system. The U.S. can also benefit from such cooperation, even if in the short term their influence in the region would be limited (Kotler, 19; Lim Hua Sing 256-359; Yoshimatsu 136-156; Dent; You Ji). Korea's trade relations with China, Japan and the U.S. (as well as other trade relations) are depicted in Table 5.

The role of Korea in the strategic triangle is hard to overestimate (as the role of China, Japan and the U.S. in both strategic and economic terms), especially having in mind the U.S.-South Korea Alliance. The Korean potential is definitely weaker than the aforementioned three regional or global powers, but its role in the maintenance of the geostrategic balance in the region is crucial. The North Korean nuclear program has also been a basic issue for the U.S. Administration since the early 1990s, diverting its attention from other regional problems. At the same time, however, it was a possible field of cooperation between the U.S., China, Japan and Russia within the framework of Six-Party Talks. Korea has been characterized by Zbigniew Brzezinski as the strategic pivot of the region, and U.S. withdrawal from the region has been treated as a triggering factor for huge regional instability, stemming from North Korea's close cooperation with China, which triggered an arms race in the region (Brzezinski 50, 242-242; similar analysis Overholt 154-169). A unified Korea could be an important actor both in Northeast Asia and East Asia in general. If unified according to the second or third discussed scenario, it could be extremely dangerous for the regional system (Woosang Kim 123-139).

The creation of stable relations and a common policy for the three powers (China, Japan and the U.S.) seems crucial for stability and unification of the Korean Peninsula. Russia should also be included. Basing it on the current Six-Party Dialogue seems the most rational option, although other regional organizations should also be included in the process. In any case, this should be of special importance for two crucial regional powers: the U.S., being the leader of the regional system with a position that could be lost in the case of strong regional turbulence, as well as the PRC, being a challenger, risking not only losing its role in the regional system, but also the change of its political system, leading to a defeat of the Communist Party of China. Cooperation and common interests in Korean, especially North Korean, policy have been visible, particularly after the power transition in North Korea in 2011 (Snyder 2012).

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<sup>16</sup> According to C. Soerensen, a skillful U.S. policy may lead to constructive relations between China and Japan, while an inadequate one (quite common after the Cold War) could lead to the destabilization of the regional system (Soerensen).

<sup>17</sup> We can also refer to German-Polish relations, having in mind the level of atrocities committed by the occupying power (Yinan He 112-114).

## Conclusion

American foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula is definitely not an easy one, as the region is not only turbulent, but also of crucial importance for a set of regional powers. Moreover, the current power transition in North Korea and internal struggle for domination make the perspectives of stabilization a problem of the future. In this context, the problem of unification seems very distant. However, it should be, and currently is, of interest to American politicians and policy-planners, as the presented options may be crucial for the U.S.'s position in East Asia, as well as the Asia-Pacific regional system.

Despite current disturbances and the fact that the unification of Korea is definitely a difficult process, it shall be perceived as an unavoidable one, hence the regional system should be prepared for absorption of this new actor. Activities aimed at building the proper reactions and scenarios of endeavors should be prepared by both regional powers and regional forums, which could support the process and make it much easier, but also cause some difficulties.

Undoubtedly the first scenario of peaceful integration is the most beneficial for the regional system, hence it should be supported by all important regional players, especially the United States (cooperating with the People's Republic of China, at best). An opportunity to institutionalize the process exists within the proposed Northeast Asia Regional Forum that could be based on six-party talks. Having in mind the lack of success of the six-party process, such a solution is not very likely in the foreseeable future. Despite this, however, existing regional forums, especially the East Asian Summit (with the U.S. and Russia since 2011) and the ASEAN Regional Forum, should support the initiative. When possible, the U.S. should support this option, also economically.

As for economic costs, we may assess, using comparisons with the German model, that they may be difficult for South Korea to bear. Hence, a form of support for the unification process, including financial support from regional powers, mostly the United States and Japan, should be provided, as a stable Korea would definitely reduce security costs in the region (including energy security, costs of humanitarian aid, etc.). Even though estimated costs are relatively high, the benefits for the people (mostly in North Korea) are unquestionable, and improvement of the economic situation in the North would probably boost the South Korean economy.

Summing up, a properly facilitated process of Korean unification could benefit all the regional powers, from both strategic and economic points of view, hence international cooperation between the U.S., China, Japan and Russia is highly advisable. If the United States becomes the leader of the process, it may benefit additionally, even though the economic costs seem quite high in absolute numbers.

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