China’s Role and Perception of a Unified Korea

Jun Byoung-Kon & Kim Jang-ho*

Korea Institute for National Unification, Seoul, Republic of Korea

This paper takes an eclectic approach in analyzing China’s perception of, and role in, a unified Korea and seeks ways in which unification of the Korean Peninsula can be facilitated with the acquisition of China’s cooperation. In seeking a favorable environment for a South Korean-led unification, this article first analyzes China’s position on Korean unification, provides evidences that China’s perception of a unified Korea is reflected in its policies on the Korean Peninsula, and entertains scenarios of its future role. Specifically, this article analyzes China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula’s strategic value in Northeast Asia given its changing relations with the United States. Moreover, the link between China’s basic position on Korean unification and its national interests, and its perception and plans on the process of the unification as well as a unified Korea will be analyzed. This paper will examine how such a perception and plans are reflected in China’s policies towards both Koreas and attempt to project the future role of China in the process of unification. Finally, based on the above analysis, the paper will endeavor to conclude with some policy directives that may enhance the possibility of inducing China to become more cooperative toward Korean unification.

Keywords: Korea unification, China, Korean Peninsula, China’s foreign policy, North Korea, South Korea’s foreign policy

Introduction

In the aftermath of 65 years of Korean division and the dismantlement of the Cold War structure, the Korean people’s aspirations and hope still lie with the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. However, both national and international disagreements are the core foundations of the issues pertaining to the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, unification not only requires efforts from the two Koreas but also cooperation from neighboring countries, since it is a significant event in not only Korean historical terms but also in the establishment of a new order in and around the Korean Peninsula.

In particular, China and the United States have been engaged in the issue since the division process,¹ so they play a crucial role in any fundamental changes to the inter-Korean relationship. Despite the controversy over the relative decline of the United States’ influence on a global level and China’s rise,² the dynamics between the two countries are, in fact, undergoing particular changes in Northeast Asia.³
Such changes are also reflected in China’s perception of the Korean unification and ultimately, in its policies toward the Korean Peninsula.

This article is based on the perceptions of the neighboring states toward Korean unification in general and the perception by China in particular. The perception by China will play a crucial role in either facilitating or denying Korean unification, as well as in its role during the unification process. South Korean strategies for Korean unification diplomacy should thus be immediately established not just on a national and inter-Korean level, but also on a regional level. South Korea’s strategies have to aim at both maintaining the South Korea-United States alliance and advancing its strategic partnership with China, and it should not be about choosing between China and the United States. In particular, it is necessary to develop strategic measures to encourage China to assume a positive role in Korean unification and secure its cooperation. Given China’s strong interest in, and influence on, the Korean Peninsula, Korean unification is impossible without China’s cooperative participation.

It has been well noted that officially, at least, China has supported an independent and peaceful Korean unification and this support has been the foundation of its policies on the Korean Peninsula. In substance, however, its policies have focused on the peace and stability of the peninsula as its first priority and have been focused on increasing China’s influence through the balanced growth of the two Koreas. Therefore, research has conventionally shown China’s role in the Korean unification as detrimental based on the view that China’s policies on the Korean Peninsula are aimed to maintain the status quo rather than changes, namely, unification. However, with the recent changes in Chinese rhetoric vis-à-vis the North Korean nuclear issue, there are growing hopes that China will play a positive role in the Korean unification by supporting a peaceful unification.

This article does not follow or deny such existing views, but instead, it takes an eclectic approach. In seeking favorable conditions for a South Korean-led unification, this article first analyzes China’s position on Korean unification, provides evidences that China’s perception of a unified Korea is reflected in its policies on the Korean Peninsula, and entertains scenarios of its future role. Specifically, this article analyzes China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula’s strategic value in Northeast Asia given its changing relations with the United States. Furthermore, China’s basic position on the Korean unification and its perception and plans on the process of the unification and a unified Korea will be analyzed. Finally, this article will examine how such a perception and plans are reflected in China’s policies on the Korean Peninsula and project the future role of China in the process of unification.

**China’s Perception of the Korean Peninsula**

**China’s Foreign Strategies and the Korean Peninsula**

In order to understand China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula, one should first examine how its foreign strategies based on its national goals are reflected in its policies on the Korean Peninsula. With an aim to realize “socialist modernization” by 2050, China plans to establish the Xiaokang (well-off) society by 2020 as a mid-term goal and emphasized the creation of a stable internal and external environment for its continuous economic growth. Based on such targets, China is pursuing a peaceful