

China's Interests in Korean Unification: How Much Longer is the 'Buffer' Worth It?*

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Abstract

I apply a generic framework of states' international goals to Chinese foreign policy toward North Korea and unification. Following traditional international relations theory, I argue that states seek, in ranked order, security, economic gain, and prestige in their interaction with other states. Applied to China and North Korea, this suggests: 1. Security: North Korea 'buffers' China from the democracies of South Korea, Japan, and the United States. As long as North Korea does not veer too wildly from Chinese preferences, China will obstruct unification. If it cannot, it will likely seek Korean neutralization and a withdrawal of US forces in exchange for its acquiescence. 2. Prosperity: China will likely seek to vouchsafe its unique economic penetration of North Korea in a united Korea. However, South Korean economic interaction with China is so great that whether China gains or loses economically from unification is indeterminate. 3. Prestige: China suffers growing international 'audience costs' by indefinitely supporting the North. This is the likeliest point of leverage for those seeking to disjoin Beijing from Pyongyang, accelerate unification, and win over hesitant Chinese elites. This paper assumes China to be a rational actor; it therefore will continue to support North Korean sovereignty until the costs of #3 outweigh the gains of #1, with #2 indeterminate. If US manages to 'pivot' to Asia, it may up-end the security calculus, by tying a growing US Asian presence to Chinese behavior on North Korea.

Key Words: North Korea, China, South Korea, Unification, Security, Buffer

At some point, the Korean peninsula will be united. Most observers seem to agree that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), for all its maddening and surprising persistence, will one day collapse.¹⁾ While there have been many wrong

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predictions of that collapse, there seems to be consensus that the North Korean economic model is not sustainable and that North Korea has not seriously embraced Chinese style-reform.²⁾ The People's Republic of China (PRC) today is apparently keeping North Korea afloat, but for how long?

There is little to suggest that China bails out the DPRK for normative or affective reasons.³⁾ China's attitude toward North Korea and the possibility of Korean unification is almost certainly driven by a very traditional, *realpolitik* definition of its national interests; the old talk of the "blood alliance" is giving way to pragmatism on both sides.⁴⁾ As David Shambaugh notes,

China is, in essence, a very narrow-minded, self-interested, realist state, seeking only to maximize its own national interests and power. It cares little for global governance and enforcing global standards of behavior (except its much-vaunted doctrine of noninterference in the internal affairs of countries). Its economic policies are mercantilist and its diplomacy is passive. China is also a lonely strategic power, with no allies and experiencing distrust and strained relationships with much of the world.⁵⁾

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- 1) Robert Kelly, "Book Review: Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder, eds. *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society*," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (2013), pp. 932-934.
- 2) There is a voluminous literature arguing that North Korea cannot survive as it is; it requires either change or permanent aid to avoid collapse. Recent examples include: Sue Mi Terry, "A Korea Whole and Free," *Foreign Affairs*, (June/July 2014), available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141483/sue-mi-terry/a-korea-whole-and-free> (accessed on Aug. 31, 2014); Mathieu Duchatel and Phillip Schell, "China's Policy on North Korea: Economic Engagement and Nuclear Disarmament," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, Policy Paper #40 (December 2013), available at http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=470 (accessed on Aug. 31, 2014); Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2011), pp. 84-119.
- 3) David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long-Term," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2(2003), pp. 43-56, p. 46; Jae-Ho Hwang, "The ROK's China Policy under Park Geun-Hye: A New Model of ROK-PRC Relations," *International Journal of Korean Unification*, Vol. 23, No.1 (2014), pp. 103-130, p. 123.
- 4) Heung-Kyu Kim, "China's Position on Korean Unification and ROK-PRC Relations," *Second KRIS-Brookings Joint Conference* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, January 2014), pp. 227-49, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2014/1/21%20korean%20peninsula%20unification/kim%20heung%20kyu%20paper.pdf>, pp. 240ff (accessed on Sept. 2, 2014); Sunny Lee, "Chinese Perspectives on North Korea and Korean Unification," in Abraham Kim and Nicholas Hamisevicz, eds., *On Korea 2013: Academic Paper Series, volume 6* (Washington, DC: Korean Economic Institute, 2014) pp. 49-68, available at http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/on_korea_2013_volume_6_complete_full_version_final.pdf (accessed on Sept. 2, 2014), pp. 65-66.
- 5) David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 310.