GLOBAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE, SPATIAL MEDIATION, AND UNIFICATION DYNAMICS IN KOREA AND GERMANY

Roland Bleiker*

The fundamental features of postwar Korean and German politics are strikingly similar. At the end of World War II, both countries were divided into different occupation zones in order to facilitate the transition into a new world order. However, the emergence of a bipolar, international power structure that reflected the competition between two antagonistic societal systems transformed the supposedly temporary partition of Korea and Germany into sustained national divisions. As a result of their geopolitical and symbolic importance, the bifurcated territories became closely integrated into opposed global alliance systems. Henceforth, the fate of Korea and Germany was intrinsically linked to the evolution of superpower relations.

It was only with the recent fading of the global ideological schism and the dissolution of the bipolar power structure that external obstacles to Korean and German unification vanished. Yet, the new post-Cold War order has affected the two national divisions very differently. Following the dramatic collapse of Marxist-Leninist régimes in eastern Europe, Germany was

* I would like to thank the following persons for having provided useful comments on earlier drafts and for having rendered the writing of a non-native English speaker more accessible: Doug Bond, Julie Fieldhouse, Kathy Harrison, Kal Holsti, Deepa Khosla, Darryl Jarvis, Myung-Soo Lee, Urs Leimbacher, Paul Marantz, Michelle Markley, and Bill Vogele.
reunited in the fall of 1990. Korean unification dynamics, by contrast, have not experienced a similar impetus. Despite emerging signs of greater inter-régime tolerance, the peninsula remains divided between two politically and ideologically distinct states.

This evolution presents a fundamental puzzle to the analysis of international politics. Why have two, structurally-comparable situations evolved so differently as a result of global systemic change?  

In order to address that question, this paper is divided into four sections. The first one briefly examines how external influences have shaped intranational dynamics during the Cold War period and in its more recent aftermath. The following three sections will focus on the often neglected regional and domestic levels of analysis. I argue that the foundations for the divergence in Korean and German unification dynamics were established throughout the period of national partition and are discernible only by taking into account the following three time- and place-specific themes:

(1) Intrananational politics in divided Germany was characterized by Cold War tension rather than direct military confrontation. Hence, intranational antagonisms never spread far beyond the tensions associated with the competition of two ideologically incompatible social systems, making a domestic rapprochement relatively easy once external obstacles to unification had vanished. By contrast, the Korean War and the countless postwar incidents created an atmosphere of hate and distrust that must first be reduced before constructive talks on unification can begin.

(2) The German precedent suggests that a requisite for unification is elimination of the ideological and institutional differences within the divided nation, which can only be achieved through a fundamental régime change on at least one of the two sides. Régime stability, in turn, is partly dependent on the compatibility of the employed ideology with its cultural environ-

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1. It is yet to be seen whether the new world order will assume a multipolar power structure or evolve in a monohegemonic era, a pax-Americana II. What is clear, however, is that this transformation constitutes what Robert Gilpin (1981: 40-43) has labelled ‘systemic change’, an alteration of the international distribution of power and the hierarchy of prestige.