

VII

PROSPECTS ON THE FUTURE

1. Changes in Environment

During the Cold War the Korean peninsula was an ideological boundary between the capitalist camp and the communist camp. In the post-Cold War era, however, the peninsula has assumed the role of a vital post in the Asian-Pacific region because of its geopolitical importance. As a new international order materializes, the Asian-Pacific region is emerging as a new political and economic hub and its influence is expanding accordingly. As a result, along with the four great powers around it—the United States, Japan, China, and Russia, many nations in the world have begun to pay closer attention to the Korean peninsula. All these politico-economic changes in the international environment have had direct or indirect effects on Korean unification.

A series of recent changes in environment are expected to help break the deadlock in intra-Korean relations. Of course, some of those changes may have favorable effects on unification, while others may prove to be adverse. Nonetheless, both categories of changes are likely to act as a catalyst for Korean unification because any change in environment can be turned into an opportunity for nation-

al unification if handled by the Koreans with wisdom and determination. Consequently, to have a better understanding of the prospects of Korean unification, it is necessary to study the changes that have recently taken place around the Korean peninsula.

1 — Favorable Factors

Changes that are expected to have favorable effects on Korean unification include the successful development of South Korea, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, increased possibility of change in the Pyongyang regime, and the death of Kim Il-sung and subsequent succession of power by Kim Jong-il.

Success of South Korea

Since the ROK government launched an ambitious development plan in the 1960's, South Korea has achieved remarkable success in economic development and recently joined the group of advanced industrialized countries. Parallel to its economic success, many years of socio-political development in South Korean society have finally borne the fruits of genuine democracy with the inauguration of a truly civilian government. South Korea has become a pluralistic society as the freedom of individuals has expanded through the process of democratization. The presence of a wide spectrum of opinions and society's capacity to reflect it through various aspects of life have become one of the prime forces behind the development of South Korean society. With such economic, political, and social advancement, the ideology of liberal democracy no longer exists merely in name in South Korean society; instead, it has become a

key social value and a standard of the social order.

In the past, due to the aggressive posture taken by the North according to its communization strategy, unification was sometimes exploited as a sensitive concept that raised tension, alertness, and even fear among many South Koreans. Today, however, because of socio-economic advancement, there is only a slim possibility, if any, for class struggle and communization to take place in South Korea. Public fear stemming from their alertness against communism is also being transformed into confidence. This was possible due to the combined efforts of all the Korean people. Moreover, such confidence is a clear evidence for the expanded national capabilities and also the driving force behind the country's move toward national unification.

The Collapse of the Soviet Bloc

The most important change in the international environment during this period was the collapse of the Soviet bloc which brought an end to the competition of conflicting ideologies between the West and the East. As the Soviet Union and East European states came to abandon socialism due to the economic difficulties they suffered, conflicts between the two camps were easily resolved.

Consequently, North Korea could not avoid being isolated from the international community as long as it continued to escalate conflict on the Korean peninsula. In particular, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been a strong supporter of North Korea, and the normalization of relations between South Korea and China were two major diplomatic losses for North Korea. These factors, therefore, provided a valuable opportunity to accelerate the process of

resolving the Korean issue.

Under such circumstances, more and more people have begun to realize that the unification of the Korean peninsula should no longer be a by-product of confrontation and competition in the process of overcoming ideological conflicts. Rather, they believe it should be the result of friendly competition and cooperation between South and North Korea for the advancement of their systems. Thus, a new concept of unification has emerged from the changes in the international environment.

Increased Possibility of A Change in the Pyongyang Regime

Another environmental factor that may cause a change in the nature of Korean division is the economic hardship prevalent in North Korean society. Like the Soviet Union or many East European states, North Korea has adhered to a socialist economic system for the last half century. Since the socialist economy did not provide any incentive to work for its members, North Korea was destined to face economic failure.

Moreover, having chosen the use of force as a means to accomplish communist unification of the Korean peninsula, North Korea has built up its armed forces in order to achieve military superiority over the South. However, this overwhelming investment in the military industry has resulted in devastation of its light industries, leaving only poverty for its people. Subsequently, deviation of North Koreans from their social institutions has been observed quite frequently in recent years. It is a phenomenon that is rarely observed in a society as strictly controlled as North Korea. Corrup-

tion and irregularities have also become prevalent in the North Korean society.

Under such circumstances, North Korea can no longer cling to its communization strategy. Its regime has come to a crossroad where it must adopt as an alternative an open-door policy and social reform in order to resolve its internal problems, or else follow the steps of its fallen East European allies. The difficulties North Korea faces not only pose a threat to the regime but also affect the existence of North Korea as a nation. Pyongyang, therefore, has to make some changes regardless of their form or content.

Consequently, the most important task for the South Korean government at this moment is to induce the North to come forward on the path of liberalization and reform through the expansion of intra-Korean exchanges and cooperation.

The Death of Kim Il-sung and Succession of Power by Kim Jong-il

Another factor that should have a favorable effect on accelerating the unification process is Kim Il-sung's death and the subsequent emergence of the Kim Jong-il regime. Although the intra-Korean summit scheduled on July 25, 1994, was indefinitely postponed, the death of Kim Il-sung implied that there was nobody left alive who could be held responsible for the division of the country. Consequently, the focus of intra-Korean relations could now be removed from the hatred and confrontation of the past and placed on goodwill competition and cooperation in the future.

While the North was ruled by Kim Il-sung, the leader who was responsible for the national division and for a bloody civil war, the

ROK government had to bear an extra political burden in soliciting popular support for its efforts to promote reconciliation and cooperation with his regime. Although it is necessary to clarify who is responsible for the past events, the ROK government does not have to maintain the current state of conflict and confrontation with the new North Korean regime anymore. Rather, it is now able to implement more constructive policies toward North Korea to build up a relationship based on co-existence and cooperation for the present and the future.

The new North Korean regime cannot deviate significantly from the policies and influence of the late Kim Il-sung. However, to assure his legitimacy as a new leader, Kim Jong-il has to come up with an accomplishment that benefits the North Korean people. In the long run, therefore, the liberalization of economy and reform of society are a choice inevitable for Pyongyang.

2 — Adverse Factors

On the other hand, factors that would act as obstacles for unification include the increased heterogeneity between the two Korean societies, the worsening domestic situation in North Korea, the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea, and the change in dynamics among the great powers in the Northeast Asian region.

Intensified Heterogeneity

Because intra-Korean exchanges remained virtually impossible under the continuing state of division, the heterogeneity between the two Korean societies grew consistently larger. The differences

were enlarged in every social sphere, including the political, economic, and social areas. If such a phenomenon is further ignored, it could consolidate the division permanently and become a serious obstacle for unification. The difficulty Germany has had with internal integration even after political unification due to a strong heterogeneity between the residents of the West and those of the East is a valuable lesson for the Korean unification.

The Worsening Situation in North Korea

The severe economic hardship that increased social deviation within North Korean society, along with and the North Korean government's inability to improve the situation, could become another obstacle for unification. The continued aggravation of economic and social problems could lead North Korea into either a rapid collapse or an irrecoverable state of bankruptcy. Under such circumstances, the costs of reconstruction would be enormous even after unification. Large reconstruction costs would not only increase costs of unification but also cause the widening of a class gap between the residents of the South and those of the North even after unification. Eventually, it could impose an excessive burden on the entire Korean community in a unified Korea.

The Development of Nuclear Power by North Korea

North Korea's attempt to develop nuclear weapons not only goes against South Korea's policy to pursue reconciliation and cooperation, but also raises tension of a totally new dimension on the Korean peninsula. Nuclear weapons in the hands of North Korea pose a serious threat to South Korea, which has repeatedly reaffirmed its

strong desire for peace. Furthermore, it could trigger the nuclear arming of the Northeast Asian region and be a threat to peace that is slowly settling in this region. North Korea's nuclear development is also an up-front challenge to international cooperation for nonproliferation and a threat to world peace.

The ROK government has maintained close cooperation with the international community, including the United States, to restrain and prohibit North Korea's nuclear development. In the beginning, North Korea steadfastly refused to comply with the demands of the international community, but when the US-DPRK Agreed Framework was finally signed on October 21, 1994, it changed its policy to accommodate those demands. In turn, North Korea agreed to freeze its graphite-moderated reactors and other auxiliary facilities and promised to abide by the denuclearization provisions of the Agreed Framework.

Subsequently, the KEDO was created to facilitate the provision of light-water reactors and substitute energy to North Korea. The light-water reactor project got underway on December 15, 1995 when KEDO and the North Korea signed the agreement in New York. Yet, a question over whether North Korea has completely abandoned its desire to develop nuclear weapons still remains unanswered. This uncertainty will have an adverse effect on intra-Korean relations and become an obstacle in achieving peaceful unification.

The Unstable Dynamics in Northeast Asia

Another element that may have adverse effects on unification is a possible competition among the great powers of the Northeast

Asian region to fill in the vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dynamics in interaction among Russia, China, and Japan may increase the complexity of international relations around the Korean peninsula. Recent efforts by the United States and Japan to approach North Korea and those by China and Russia to restore their influence over Pyongyang foreshadow a forthcoming change in relations among the great powers around the Korean peninsula in the post-Cold War era. If such a change results in an increased intervention by those nations in regards to the Korean question, it would have an adverse effect on a unification initiated by the two Koreas.

Currently, the region is in a transient state in which the existing balance between the West and the East has been broken, but a new balance is yet to be formed. In the meantime, several trends are being observed in the moves of the great powers: the United States has preserved its status as a superpower, China has increased its influence over the Korean peninsula, and Russia and Japan are competing against each other to maintain influence in the region.

As a restructuring of the regional order takes place in the future, the great powers are more likely to try to expand their influence over the Korean peninsula. In this context, therefore, the two Koreas have to ask the question of how to establish the role and status of the Korean peninsula. As the direct parties in unification, the South and the North have to be ready to answer such a question in order to take initiative in the process of unification.

2. Prospects for Unification

Today we are living in a globalized era where the world is becoming a single neighborhood or, furthermore, a single community. The old days dominated by politics and ideology has gone, and a new age of economy and technology is now unfolding. Revolutionary advancement in science and technology have shortened the gap between both ends of the earth to turn them into virtual neighbors. Moreover, economic interdependence among nations has increased to such a degree that no country can sustain its economy if isolated from the international community.

At the same time, however, globalization foreshadows a new age of uncertainty in which unlimited competition prevails among individuals and political fluidity is greatly enhanced. The demise of Soviet communism could be interpreted as the historic victory of liberal democracy over socialism. At the same time, it could also be viewed as the turning point toward a new era of chaos as nations struggle over political, economic, and territorial boundaries and identities at the global, regional, or national level.

What is needed in such an era of rapid change is the ability to cope with these currents of history with a rich imagination and a reformist mind set. Korea had a shameful experience of being annexed by Japan at the turn of the last century because it failed to adapt at that particular juncture of history. That shameful experience eventually led to the division of the country. The Korean people should not repeat the same mistake. It is time to draw on every Korean's resources to concentrate the national potential which has long been dissipated because of the national division.

Just before the dawn of the 21st century, South Korea has joined the rank of the advanced industrialized countries as it became a member of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The ultimate goal of South Korea in its wish to become an advanced industrialized nation is to advance the quality of life for every member of the Korean community. A society in which all its members can enjoy freedom and human rights and are guaranteed the opportunity to live with dignity is the model of an advanced country that South Korea is aiming for. With such a goal in mind, the South Korean people have been trying to clean up the negative legacies of the past military-based authoritarian regimes and repair the distortions in history through the institutionalization of democracy based on voluntary civilian participation and reform of various fields of the society under the leadership of a democratic government. In short, they are trying to build a morally just nation by restoring their national spirit.

The efforts to restore the national spirit and to join the group of advanced nations will be that much more rewarding if they are based on a strong foundation of national legitimacy. From such a perspective, the South Korean people believe that the task of unification, or of creating a Korean nation by overcoming the national division, is a historical mandate for the entire Korean people.

To achieve unification, however, the two Koreas have to end the state of conflict and confrontation that has existed between them until now and put the divided national potential together. The best way to accomplish this is to move gradually toward unification by restoring mutual confidence and building mutual trust through intra-Korean exchanges and cooperation. Most South Koreans agree with such an approach. In short, they wish to achieve unification

through the creation of a future-oriented national community while being prepared to adopt to the rapidly changing domestic and international environments.

An important key to the success of such efforts by the South is a change in the North Korean regime. As long as the present system of dictatorship continues, and Pyongyang's desire to communize the South remains unchanged, the chances for a substantial improvement in intra-Korean relations are slim. Nonetheless, South Koreans believe that the change in the North Korean regime is inevitable and unification will be soon accomplished. According to a survey recently conducted by the Research Institute for National Unification, for example, an absolute majority (84.4%) of South Koreans expect that unification will be achieved within 30 years and, of them, more than half (51.4%) believe that it will be possible even within ten years.

The phenomenon of national division should no longer be a symbol of national tragedy characterized by mutual confrontation. It must be transformed into a constructive partnership to catch up with the current historic trends of cooperation and co-existence. History also calls for Korea to become a leading member of the international community in the making of human history.

Since the country has remained divided over the last half century, the first step toward unification should be to restore a single national community to overcome the existing heterogeneity between the two societies. Gradual and step-by-step preparations for unification will enable the creation of a single national community by filling in the space and period in Korean history left void for such a long time.

After all, Korean unification should be achieved through mutual

understanding and cooperation between the South and the North, not through a unilateral victory by one side over the other in political or military confrontation. To prevent the national division being extended into the new century, all Koreans have to actively cope with changes in the environment surrounding the Korean peninsula. The current environment provides the Korean people with a wonderful opportunity for a favorable outcome if they carry out the task of unification with a sincere and aggressive attitude.

In doing so, South Koreans believe that any effort to overcome the state of political division should not transcend the scope and concept of the national community. In other words, unification through political union is only acceptable when it is based on the co-existence and co-prosperity of the residents of both Koreas. As an interim arrangement prior to complete unification, this national community should be an independent, peaceful, and democratic structure that guarantees security and happiness for all its members.

From this moment on, the South and the North should cease the non-constructive competition and political confrontation and move toward forming a national community. In the light of this belief, the KNCU Formula of the ROK government presents a forum through which a consensus on the nature of the national community can be reached and practical methods to actually build such a community can be developed between the two Koreas.

The last few years of this century represent a period of new challenges and responses for Koreans. The Korean people must use this historical turning point as a starting line in building a great and unified Korea in the 21st century. This historical mandate can be accomplished only through the pain and sacrifice of the present generation of Koreans.