

# Jackpot Unification and dangers of fantasies of collapse and the 'German Solution'

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*This essay draws on the third part of Tim Beal's forthcoming trilogy 'The Western Border: The Korean Peninsula Region and the American Empire', due to be published later this year as an e-book*

There has been a burst of talk about unification in South Korea this year, propelled in large part by President Park Geun-hye's 'Jackpot' speech of 7 January.<sup>i</sup> Unification properly conceptualised and properly brought about would be an immense economic and cultural boon to the Korean peninsula with benefits to the wider world. Done properly it would reduce tension and the threat of war, and liberate Koreans from the burdens of militarisation. But so much hinges on that word 'properly'. Much of the current discourse in the South, with its fantasies about collapse of North Korea and a 'German solution', brings with it considerable danger, even of war, and there is a need for clarity and realism.

## Two approaches to unification

There are basically two approaches to Korean unification, each including a number of variants.

Firstly there is the peaceful approach based on a consensual, mutually beneficial, gradual process leading to a neutral Korea reunified without one part absorbing the other. Park Geun-hye's *Foreign Affairs* article might be seen to be pointing in that direction, though her actions as president were at variance to it.<sup>ii</sup> Kim Dae-jung is famous for articulating his 'Sunshine Policy' which was, on the face of it at least, a form of peaceful engagement progressing towards reunification.<sup>iii</sup>

Secondly, there is the approach articulated in the Jackpot speech, the Dresden declaration, and much of the current discourse that unification is not something to be negotiated with Pyongyang. Rather it is something which will come about by collapse or crisis in the North, and will result in its absorption by the South. This attitude was candidly expressed by Prime Minister-designate Moon-Chang-keuk who is reported to have discounted any need for negotiations:

.. he also went on church television in 2012 saying there is no point in having dialogue or negotiations between North Korea and South Korea because the North Korean regime is going to collapse. Specifically, Moon predicted that North Korea would "fall by the providence of God when nobody is expecting it," offering perhaps one of the more extreme versions of collapse theory.<sup>iv</sup>

## The Dresden declaration and the chimera of the 'German solution'

Park Geun-hye gave an address in the east Germany city of Dresden on 28 March that was touted by the state news agency *Yonhap* as a 'landmark speech', a definitive statement of her *Nordpolitik*.<sup>v</sup> If she wanted to allay the suspicions of the North Korean elite, and progress peaceful reunification, the

choice of venue was a strange one. As Ruediger Frank, the Korean expert who was himself brought up in the then German Democratic Republic, the choice of Germany, of eastern Germany and of the city of Dresden, was highly symbolic:

But given the context of her speech, it is hard not to see this as deeply symbolic, because a quarter of a century after the takeover—oh forgive me, unification—the elite in East Germany still often speak West German dialects.<sup>vi</sup>

The example of German reunification infuses the Korean narrative. It is what many in Seoul hope will happen on the Korean peninsula – a collapse of the smaller state followed by its takeover and absorption into the larger, without war or huge disruption. This is a fantasy based on a false historical analogy. Korea is not Germany. The China of 2014 is not the retreating and disintegrating Soviet Union of 1989/90.<sup>vii</sup> And neither is contemporary Russia.<sup>viii</sup> Russia, and China, are well aware that the United States reneged on the commitment not to extend NATO eastward after the reunification of Germany, and its absorption into NATO.<sup>ix</sup> The 2013/14 Ukraine crisis is a reminder of the desire for continued eastward expansion of NATO and the destruction of Russia as a competitor power.<sup>x</sup>

That is the external framework, but the internal one, on the peninsula itself, is even more important. Germany did not suffer a civil war and both Germanys, in their different ways, had a shared resistance to Nazism. By contrast, Korea had a civil war that has left deep scars and the elites do not have a shared history of resistance to Japan; Park Geun-hye's father after all did serve in the Imperial Japanese Army. North Korea, despite the economic buffeting it has experienced over the last quarter century is essentially an independent, relatively self-sufficient, and certainly resilient state. There are indications that the economy is recovering and strengthening.<sup>xi</sup> The elite are not likely to succumb as easily as their German counterparts, and if any are thinking of taking that course, they have the German example to dissuade them. An example which has been inadvertently reiterated by Park Geun-hye in Dresden.

## Park's dissonance

There has been a marked dissonance between Park's professed search for peaceful reunification and her actions. A genuine commitment would, for instance, facilitate inter-Korean cooperation, particularly economic. However, Park has not rescinded Lee Myung-bak's ban on tours to Kumgangsan, or the 'post-Cheonan' sanctions on trade with the North.<sup>xii</sup> Crucially a peaceful approach would be built on a defusing of tension, but Park Geun-hye has instead repeatedly called on North Korea unilaterally to disarm, and has continued the extensive, frequent, and provocative military exercises, either ostensibly with the ROK forces on their own, or as a junior partner with the US.<sup>xiii</sup>

This might be considered as business as usual, a continuation of the policy of Lee Myung-bak with some honeyed words about *trustpolitik* thrown in, as politicians do, to provide a spurious sense of differentiation from her predecessor.<sup>xiv</sup> That is essentially so, but there is a further, historically specific dimension. Lee Myung-bak's *nordpolitik* was based on the assumption that a crisis in the North (with perhaps a little bit of help from the South in terms of sanctions, military exercises, etc) would provide an opportunity for a takeover, an absorption of the North by the South. A lot of this revolved around the ill health of Kim Jong Il, and it was widely presumed in Seoul and Washington

that Kim's death would provide the long awaited opportunity.<sup>xv</sup> However there was no crisis in the North and the transition to Kim Jong Un appeared to be smooth. A year later, a week before the South Korean presidential elections that brought Park Geun-hye to power, the North, far from falling apart, had beaten the South in the race to launch a satellite. Dreams of collapse and absorption must have faded somewhat.

However, it appears that the Jang Song Thaek affair has changed things, if not perhaps in reality, but in perception and aspiration. This is what links together her talk of 'instability, 'provocation' and reunification. Jang's ouster and execution revealed a schism in North Korea that took South Korean and American intelligence by surprise but no doubt delighted both.

## Casting aside illusion, seeking peaceful unification

However, it is clear that North Korea has weathered the purge of Jang Song Thaek, and whatever weaknesses that revealed in the North Korean polity, unity is prevailing.<sup>xvi</sup> Relations with Russia are rapidly improving, China will follow, and there may even be a breakthrough with Japan.<sup>xvii</sup> The United States is occupied elsewhere. The 'German solution' has always been a chimera, and collapse is becoming increasingly implausible. If there is to be progress on unification, rather than empty words, it must proceed on the basis of North-South negotiations. Given the resilience of North Korea that means a peaceful, consensual, mutually-beneficial process. It also means a unified Korea which is neutral and not beholden to any outside power. A Korea at peace with itself, and with its neighbours on both sides of the Pacific.

And no neighbour is ultimately more important than China

The comments of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on at a reception at the Chinese embassy in Seoul on 27 May 2014 merit reflection. He was reported as saying:

... his government hopes **for improvement in inter-Korean relations** and wants North and South Korea to "**achieve peaceful reunification.**" ...  
"China firmly supports **improvement of relations between North and South Korea** and is determined to play a constructive role."<sup>xviii</sup>[emphasis added]

Peaceful unification requires peace between the two Koreas.

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