

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Does Korea Have to Reunify? Short Answer, No.

Doug Bandow

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On his recent [trip to Asia](#) [3] President Donald Trump asked his South Korean hosts an impolitic question: “Do you have to reunify?” They said yes, but the right answer is no.

The head of the ruling Democratic Party observed that “people who come to South Korea almost never ask it. The fact that he posed this question, frankly speaking, gave us the opportunity to explain the need for reunification.”

But there is no need. In fact, reunification is unlikely, absent a catastrophic collapse of North Korea. And no one should wish for that, given the possibility of civil war, factional conflict, loose nuclear weapons and mass refugee flows.

Korea was an ancient kingdom, long dominated by China. But the latter was defeated by Japan in 1895. As a result, Korea was effectively absorbed by Tokyo. After Japan’s surrender in World War II the United States and Soviet Union divided the peninsula into two occupation zones.

Some South Koreans blame America for Korea’s division. However, the only alternative would have been a united Korea under Moscow’s control. If the Soviet Union would have [had its way](#) [4], today’s South Koreans would be enjoying life as subjects under the third ruler of the Kim dynasty. They should thank Washington for its intervention.

Korea’s division was cemented after the Korean War, during which the conflict spread refugees across the peninsula and left multiple families divided. That left a common desire for, even expectation of, reunification. For those driven from their homes reunification would be a homecoming of sorts.

But the older generation is dying off. Young South Koreans have no connection with the North. For them the appeal of reunification is purely abstract. They might not be opposed, but they have little reason to support it. Especially given the likely cost of knitting the two Koreas back together. Some 40 percent of Koreans in their forties believe reunification is essential. Just 20 percent of Korean teens do so.

Indeed, German reunification caused even the most ardent of unification supporters to hesitate. Germany’s process cost somewhere between 2–2.5 trillion euros (\$2.4–3 trillion). The higher estimate is about twice the Republic of Korea’s annual GDP. Reunification was a significant burden for West Germany, which was wealthier than South Korea—and East Germany was

richer than North Korea. For context, the per capita income ratios were 3-1 for West/East Germany, and twenty or more to one for the South/North Korea. South Koreans hoped that the subsequent “Sunshine Policy,” which channeled money and aid to Pyongyang, would promote more rapid economic development and encourage economic convergence between the two Koreas before reunification.

The likely political consequences of reunification [5] also raise concerns. Some conservative South Koreans worry about adding millions of voters raised as socialists. The latter might reject Communism, but still vote left. Thus, uniting the peninsula could backfire against those who most opposed the current North Korean regime.

Moreover, it is hard to imagine how reunification could occur voluntarily. In 1972 the two Koreas agreed to principles for reunification, but, as expected, nothing came of it. Although Koreans North and South share a common heritage, their cultures, economies, and political systems differ dramatically. Most important is the question of power. When I first visited the North twenty-five years ago, North Korean officials told me that they did not want to be “swallowed.” They understood that in any genuine reunification the DPRK would simply disappear—and with it their privileged positions.

Indeed, most would have no useful role in a new united Korea. South Koreans would flood in with money as newly empowered North Koreans defenestrated their former overlords. North Korean elites would end up at the bottom in a united Korea. They have no incentive to consent to their demise.

An equally important, though usually ignored, factor is China. The common assumption is that Korean reunification is inevitable. But Beijing does not want the Koreas to reunite. The result would be a larger, stronger, more populous competitor, one offering a powerful draw to the ethnic Koreans who populate China’s border provinces. A reunited Korea allied with American bases and forces would be an even more undesirable development.

While Beijing would hesitate to block a voluntary reunion, that, as noted earlier, seems extremely unlikely. In contrast, if the Kim regime lost control, or if the North Korean state suffered a serious loss of authority, China might find an opportunity [6] to intervene, perhaps on behalf of internal forces friendly to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Beijing might create an independent but more pliant neighbor, one willing to conform to its foreign policy objectives in return for security guarantees.

This result might disappoint some South Koreans, but others might be relieved to avoid the manifold uncertainties, difficulties and costs of reunification. Moreover, a willingness to accept Chinese intervention could be used as a bargaining chip to encourage Beijing to toughen its stance toward Pyongyang. Knowledge that the allies would not take advantage of a North Korean collapse and reunification might make the PRC more willing to threaten the North to promote denuclearization.

While the desire for Korean reunification looks quixotic, the objective of denuclearization deserves priority. Ending or at least limiting the security crisis in Northeast Asia would open possibilities for peaceful transformation of the Korean Peninsula. Pursuing reunification without denuclearization is guaranteed to fail. Who really believes the rulers of a nuclear state would be willing to be absorbed by their neighbors?

President Trump asked an important question: is reunification necessary? It is not. It isn't even obviously desirable, at least absent an unlikely transformation of the North. South Korea has come far; it does not want to sacrifice its success in a vain attempt to incorporate the North.

Maybe everything will work out. But maybe not. And the allies should be prepared. They have no higher duty than maintaining the peace. Reunification would be too dearly bought if it followed by another Korean War.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World.