

John Dale Grover

CONF 652

Final Long Paper

*A South Korean vs Chinese Intervention in a Collapsed North Korea: Towards a Workable Socioeconomic Reintegration and Reconstruction*

## Introduction

As pointed out in the previous paper for this class, the collapse of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) is likely inevitable and will carry with it a monumental humanitarian and geopolitical crisis in East Asia that will shape future dynamics for decades to come. Previously, the question of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) national interests in any intervention into North Korea were examined. In this paper, the question of what a Republic of Korea (ROK) vs a Chinese intervention would look like, specifically regarding socioeconomic reintegration/reconstruction is looked at. Ultimately, the ROK approach is recommended as the one most likely to be successful in the long-run for the North Koreans. It should, however, be noted that while such a scenario is recommended, there is no way to be certain that any such project would be carried out by South Korea as opposed to the PRC. This paper only attempts to speak to the complexities of socioeconomic reconstruction and the likelihood of success of each given model.

## Scenario

As with the previous study, this paper makes the following assumptions: 1) any intervention takes place after major combat operations, if any, have been completed, (2) Kim Jong-Un is removed from the scene politically, (3) American forces remained south of the 38th parallel and thus no Chinese-American armed engagement occurred, and (4) DPRK nuclear weapons have been secured or destroyed. In addition to these, three other assumptions are added. First, under a Chinese intervention it is presumed that Beijing will intend to either annex the former DPRK or to create a new puppet state out of it. Second, an intervention led by South

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Korea is presumed to annex North Korea. Thirdly, while America would assist, its help would come in the form of expertise and funding rather than through deployment of its forces. These assumptions aim to focus the scope of the research on the questions surrounding North Korea's socioeconomic systems and how reconstruction would fair under Chinese or South Korean leadership. Although the importance of Chinese-South Korea-American geopolitical conflict should be addressed, spending too much time on that would distract from the research question.

A South Korean Intervention

Under a ROK intervention, Seoul would seek unification by annexing North Korea, much in the same way that West Germany absorbed East Germany. The ROK, in fact, has a Ministry of Unification whose task is to plan for, and eventually oversee, such a unification. Its mission statement has "a new unified korea [sic] that ensures everyone's happiness" as its goal.<sup>1</sup> Every Korean administration since 1982 has laid out a unification formula that would guide any intervention.<sup>2</sup> The most recent iteration declares that following reconciliation measures, the two Koreas would establish a loose commonwealth that would create a council to draft a new constitution that a then unified Korea would vote on, including a new unified national assembly.<sup>3</sup> Under the scenario of DPRK collapse, South Korea may attempt a jointly drafted new constitution from the remnants of the old regime, but it is also likely to simply impose its system wholesale. Regardless, it can be assumed that South Korea will integrate North Korea into its socioeconomic systems and will not perpetuate what system is left when it intervenes.

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<sup>1</sup> South Korean Ministry of Unification, "Vision Statement," *Ministry of Unification*, 2016, <http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1773>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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The most immediate concern is that of humanitarian relief. Without providing for the basic human needs of North Koreans to ensure that they will survive, there would be more resistance and instability on the ROK's hands, something that would run both against Seoul's declared goal of a unified "humane democracy" and any attempt to bring the DPRK up to socioeconomic speed. Thus it is widely understood that South Korea would likely use the full amount of resources it could muster to achieve its dream of unification and would invite funds, expertise, and volunteers from allies such as the United States and from international organizations such as Oxfam, the Red Cross, and the United Nations.

At the same time that humanitarian relief is provided, steps would have to be taken to ensure basic economic activity can take place, such as securing local market spaces and making it clear that any exchange of goods would be allowed and not punished. Although the DPRK is one of the most authoritarian states with a central market economy, there is a basis for private enterprise that a ROK-led intervention could build on. For instance, one recent study by the Carnegie Endowment found that a growing DPRK market economy evolved out of necessity during the famines of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> While private enterprise is not officially allowed, it is given a pass since it now accounts for between 30 and 50% of North Korea's GDP.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, ensuring basic economic activity after a DPRK collapse, such as farmer's markets for food and construction of housing, is essential to helping North Koreans' secure their own basic needs in addition to the help that the ROK and international nonprofits can provide.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrei Lankov, "The Resurgence of a Market Economy in North Korea" (Moscow, 2016), 8, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Lankov\\_Eng\\_web\\_final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Lankov_Eng_web_final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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Eventually there will be longer-term programs needed if the entire unified Korea is to have a capitalist, or mostly capitalist, economy. Part of that will be helping to ease the adjustment into a new economic system as best as possible. For example, there will be assistance in the form of job training and education that teaches what the new economic system is and how to function in it. There will also be a massive need for employment, which could be provided through stimulus projects to modernize and integrate North Korea's energy, transportation, and communication infrastructure with South Korea's. Germany undertook multiple similar projects during and after unification which cost Germany at least \$1.4 trillion from 1991 to 2004.<sup>6</sup> South Korea understands and is willing to shoulder costs estimated as between \$1.13 and \$3.2 trillion.<sup>7</sup>

Another difficulty is integrating two Korean societies that, although they share the same ethnic and cultural background, have experienced over seventy years of hostility towards each other under very different social and political systems. One question is whether North Koreans, having lived under such a repressive and Orwellian regime would be pliant to the new authorities out of habit or if their historical animosity and propaganda would make them more resistant to rule under Seoul. There are three factors that would make a difference: the attitudes of North Koreans, how much input/buy-in South Korea would seek from them, and how any reconciliation and attempts at justice are handled.

There exist very few surveys of North Koreans can one can draw on, but they do exist. One 2014 poll by the South Korean newspaper *The Chosun Ilbo* was conducted among North

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Wolf Jr. and Kamil Akramov, "North Korean Paradoxes: Circumstances, Costs, and Consequences of Korean Unification" (Washington, D.C., 2005), 28, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG333.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG333.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

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Koreans who were visiting China on business, and therefore had been allowed to cross and were vetted by Pyongyang.<sup>8</sup> This means that their attitudes theoretically serves as a proxy for broader elite DPRK attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Of those surveyed, 95% wanted a united Korea and 97% thought that a unified Korea would “have a positive influence on their lives.”<sup>10</sup> These attitudes bode well for a ROK-led intervention as it would suggest reunification is desired by many in the DPRK.

As mentioned in addition to North Korean attitudes are the importance of local input/buy-in as well as any attempts at reconciliation and justice. This is especially important in light of the mass trauma, including anxiety and fear, many North Koreans refugees exhibit which makes it harder for them to function or to hold a job.<sup>11</sup> The Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) carried out mass psychological studies of DPRK refugees in the PRC from 2004 to 2005 that show rates of partial post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among refugees range from 30 to 51%, while 26% of refugees suffer from full PTSD.<sup>12</sup> That survey also revealed 30% had family members who died of starvation, 9.6% had been to prison, 27.3% had seen executions, and 60.3% witnessed deaths as a result of torture or beatings.<sup>13</sup>

For all of these reasons, the degree of healing and peace building needed to secure a stable and equal future would be an immense undertaking. North Koreans have suffered and are angry at their government for their lack of livelihood. For these reasons a ROK-led intervention

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<sup>8</sup> The Chosun Ilbo, “N. Koreans Favor Reunification,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, July 10, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/07/10/2014071000658.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/07/10/2014071000658.html).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Yoonok Chang, Stephan Haggard, and Marcus Noland, “Migration Experiences of North Korean Refugees: Survey Evidence from China” (Washington, D.C., 2008), 1, <https://piie.com/sites/default/files/publications/wp/wp08-4.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10, 22.

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must address pressing basic human needs and the economic situation while also listening to local concerns. As pointed out in the short paper, a collapsed DPRK will be full of victims, traitors, oppressors, and collaborators. This means that clamping down too hard while ignoring such divisions could cause those tensions to explode. Conversely, being too lenient might result in a chaotic, state-of-nature bloodbath of retribution or preemptive attacks. Again, for the sake of long-term peace and prosperity, economic justice through improved standards of living and social justice through some kind of tribunal or truth committee are vital. Given that South Korea has studied and planned for cooperative unification since the Korean War and that Seoul would have access to, and allow in, the expertise and volunteers of other countries and international organizations, it is likely that South Korea would take these concerns into account.

A Chinese Intervention

A PRC intervention was examined in the short paper and concluded that China would likely either annex North Korea itself or set up a new puppet regime. It would seem that in the interest of stabilizing the former DPRK and preventing any new North Korean regime from repeating the danger of building nuclear weapons, Beijing would likely opt to simply annex North Korea. One could argue that China is already laying the groundwork for such an option, both through military exercises<sup>14</sup> and through efforts in revisionist history such as the “Northeastern Project.”<sup>15</sup> The Northeastern Project, undertaken by the PRC government and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, allegedly proved that the ancient Korean kingdom of

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Bennett, “Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse” (Washington, D.C., 2013), 91, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND\\_RR331.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND_RR331.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> The Chosun Ilbo, “What China’s Northeast Project Is All About,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, May 30, 2008, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2008/05/30/2008053061001.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2008/05/30/2008053061001.html).

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Koguryo (which includes all of present-day North Korea and most of South Korea) was really a part of ancient China and therefore Korea's territorial inheritance is actually part of China's.<sup>16</sup>

Like South Korea, China would likely pursue many similar, top-down policies and actions to address immediate humanitarian needs and economic reconstruction in the former DPRK. Economic reconstruction, again like a ROK intervention, would include securing markets and funding massive infrastructure and job programs. As the second largest economy and a fairly modern country, China would possess the technological base, resources, and experience to rebuild North Korea. Like South Korea, China would also likely impose their socioeconomic system or something similar to it. Although China is not an actual market economy, its state capitalist model would still be a drastic improvement over North Korea's system. In fact, given that China's system involves state control and local bribery, there may be a chance that North Koreans black marketers would fare better at adjusting their skills to a Chinese style economy than a freer and less corrupt South Korean one.

However, there is another concern which is whether or not Beijing would listen to, let alone allow, interested regional powers, international nonprofits, and international organizations access to the former DPRK to help rebuild it. This is to say, would the PRC welcome or shun the interests, research, experience, funds, and volunteers that other actors like South Korea, the United Nations, the Red Cross, or USAID would most certainly offer? If the answer is yes, then the PRC's intervention would benefit greatly and would likely be more successful than if the answer was no and China tried to rebuild North Korea all on its own.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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Unfortunately the answer to this question is unclear. On one hand the PRC has traditionally refused outside help out of pride and the fear that accepting aid, especially from geopolitical rivals, might make the ruling communist party look weak and unable to uphold the principle of self-sufficiency that Mao originally set in place.<sup>17</sup> For instance, China refused Japan's offers for help after the 2013 Sichuan earthquake.<sup>18</sup> Additionally in early 2016 China recently passed a new law restricting the activities of international nonprofits in China by requiring them to register and be subject to security services and to disclose all of their donations.<sup>19</sup> Other aspects of that law include banning the hire of too many local Chinese and the threat of raids of offices suspected of damaging China's national interests or security.<sup>20</sup>

However, China has also demonstrated that it can open up when it needs to, such as after the devastating 2008 Wenchuan earthquake that killed over 69,000 and impacted some 33 million people.<sup>21</sup> During and after that disaster the PRC accepted outside help, including over \$740 million from the World Bank.<sup>22</sup> Based on all of this it is too difficult to tell for certain how well a Chinese-led intervention would go or if North Koreans would be more prosperous in the long-run under than under South Korea.

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<sup>17</sup> Yi Kang, *Disaster Management in China in a Changing Era* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 25–30.

<sup>18</sup> South China Morning Post, "We're OK Thanks, Says China As Japan Offers Aid After Sichuan," *South China Morning Post*, April 22, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1220155/were-ok-thanks-says-china-japan-offers-aid-after-sichuan-earthquake>.

<sup>19</sup> BBC, "China Passes New Laws on Foreign NGOs Amid International Criticism," *BBC*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36157052>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, "World Bank Response to Sichuan-Wenchuan Earthquake," *World Bank*, 2008, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2008/12/15/world-bank-response-to-sichuan-wenchuan-earthquake>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

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### Merits and Detriments of Each Approach

An ROK-led intervention is more likely to be informed and successful than a PRC-led intervention. This is not to say that there are no problems or risks in a South Korean intervention. Indeed, there are still some factors that any South Korean leaders would need to consider. For instance, although many North Koreans have learned rudimentary bartering, the skills of these black marketers in beating the system and bribing officials would not translate well to, or be useful in, a law-based market economy. Another consideration is North Korea's gross domestic product per capita is 3.7% of South Korea's<sup>23</sup> and it would likely take several decades to close that gap. The former DPRK may still lag behind and given the disparities of wealth and skills, many North Koreans will necessarily be relegated to the bottom of the economy, to manufacturing and service industries, even though they will be vastly better off than under the old regime.

A PRC-led intervention might not be able to pull off an as successful economic reconstruction and Beijing might not even seek input or buy-in from the North Koreans themselves. China necessarily will extend its own systems and it cannot be too harsh to former DPRK leaders for crimes against humanity without raising the question of Mao's own atrocities and those of the ruling Chinese communist party such as during the recent 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen. These factors alone make a Chinese-led solution much less workable. In addition, Beijing's imposition of another authoritarian system might not play out well even though North Koreans have lived a similar system for so long. One argument is that North Koreans would accept Chinese rule because of their experience of obeying dictators. But a counter argument

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<sup>23</sup> Yang Mo-deum, "N. Korea's Per-Capita GDP Is Less Than 4% of S. Korea's," *The Chosun Ilbo*, September 30, 2016, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2016/09/30/2016093001338.html?Dep0=twitter](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/09/30/2016093001338.html?Dep0=twitter).

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would assert that many North Koreans actually have been taught to see outsiders as threats to their ethnic homeland<sup>24</sup> and therefore might actually be more resistant to China out of nationalism than originally thought.

Existing surveys of North Koreans seem to indicate they would be resistant to accepting a repetition of socioeconomic and cultural conditions if they were too similar to the ones they've experienced under Kim Jong-Un. Among the primary reasons North Koreans have fled to China and South Korea in the past are seeking a better life for their children and freedom to use their resources and money as they see fit instead of being told.<sup>25</sup> Below is a table of answers to two other questions refugees were asked.

What is the chief reason for the necessity of unification?			
Economic Development	Reunion of Korean people	Improved Quality of Life	To End the Pain of Families Separated During the Korean War
48%	24%	16%	6%
What kind of economy should a united Korea have?			
Free Market	A Mutually Agreed System	Don't Care	Other/No Answer (lumped together in survey report and did not go into details)
34%	26%	24%	16%

<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> B. R. Myers, "North Korea's Race Problem," *Foreign Policy*, February 11, 2010, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/02/11/north-koreas-race-problem/>.

<sup>25</sup> The Chosun Ilbo, "N. Koreans Favor Reunification."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

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Additionally, a survey by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the only one ever conducted inside North Korea itself, supports these findings.<sup>27</sup> That small survey of 36 people from different walks of life and provinces in the DPRK found that there was widespread anger towards the North Korean government and local officials for their interference with citizen's attempts to trade and to spend their limited money.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, 100% of respondents expressed "the public distribution system does not provide what they need to live a good life."<sup>29</sup> To follow up on those results, CSIS also conducted a survey of 146 North Koreans refugees in 2015 demonstrated that 76.7% had engaged in market activity and bartering as a means to survive.<sup>30</sup> Lastly the previously referenced PIIE survey of DPRK refugees in China revealed that 64.3% wanted to ultimately resettle in South Korea and 19.1% in the United States, whereas only 14.3% wanted to resettle in China.<sup>31</sup> For all of these reasons, a ROK-led reconstruction would likely be both the most successful in socioeconomic terms and would better address most North Koreans basic needs and preferences.

Recommendation

As laid out in the previous short paper, a deal must be worked out between the major regional actors to ensure a successful intervention into a collapsed North Korea. Ideally at least the United States, South Korea, and China need to sit down and work out a plan for how to

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<sup>27</sup> CSIS Beyond Parallel Project, "A View Inside North Korea: Meager Rations, Banned Markets, and Growing Anger Toward Government" (Washington, D.C., 2016), <http://beyondparallel.csis.org/view-inside-north-korea-meager-rations-banned-markets-and-growing-anger-toward-govt/#jump>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Chang, Haggard, and Noland, "Migration Experiences of North Korean Refugees: Survey Evidence from China," 24.

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proceed in the event of North Korean collapse. This paper builds on the last by deeply considering what the socioeconomic aspects of a broader DPRK reconstruction would look like, what the views of and impacts on North Koreans would be, and why a South Korean effort would be better than a Chinese one.

Both the ROK and the PRC have the capacity to economically reconstruct North Korea and bring it into their own systems. In either scenario North Koreans would be better off than they currently are or would be in the immediate aftermath of a regime collapse. Standards of living would rise, markets would grow and become legalized, and North Koreans would eventually adjust more-than-not to the new system. When it comes down to exactly how successful economic reconstruction would be and, perhaps more importantly, how social efforts at reconciliation and justice would go, it is a South Korean-intervention that clearly works best. The ROK would take in the advice, funding, and volunteers from other countries and global organizations that the PRC may turn away and the entire socioeconomic reconstruction effort would benefit from it. The statements and plans of the South Korean Ministry of Unification and the surveys of North Koreans demonstrate that there already exists some shared ground to build any reconstruction upon. If the point of reconstruction is to help those at whom the intervention is targeted, then a South Korean one would better take into account North Koreans' needs and wants, creating a stronger integration in the long-run through local input and buy-in.

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