China’s Role and Perception of a Unified Korea

Jun Byoung-Kon & Kim Jang-ho*

Korea Institute for National Unification, Seoul, Republic of Korea

This paper takes an eclectic approach in analyzing China’s perception of, and role in, a unified Korea and seeks ways in which unification of the Korean Peninsula can be facilitated with the acquisition of China’s cooperation. In seeking a favorable environment for a South Korean-led unification, this article first analyzes China’s position on Korean unification, provides evidences that China’s perception of a unified Korea is reflected in its policies on the Korean Peninsula, and entertains scenarios of its future role. Specifically, this article analyzes China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula’s strategic value in Northeast Asia given its changing relations with the United States. Moreover, the link between China’s basic position on Korean unification and its national interests, and its perception and plans on the process of the unification as well as a unified Korea will be analyzed. This paper will examine how such a perception and plans are reflected in China’s policies towards both Koreas and attempt to project the future role of China in the process of unification. Finally, based on the above analysis, the paper will endeavor to conclude with some policy directives that may enhance the possibility of inducing China to become more cooperative toward Korean unification.

Keywords: Korea unification, China, Korean Peninsula, China’s foreign policy, North Korea, South Korea’s foreign policy

Introduction

In the aftermath of 65 years of Korean division and the dismantlement of the Cold War structure, the Korean people’s aspirations and hope still lie with the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. However, both national and international disagreements are the core foundations of the issues pertaining to the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, unification not only requires efforts from the two Koreas but also cooperation from neighboring countries, since it is a significant event in not only Korean historical terms but also in the establishment of a new order in and around the Korean Peninsula.

In particular, China and the United States have been engaged in the issue since the division process,\(^1\) so they play a crucial role in any fundamental changes to the inter-Korean relationship. Despite the controversy over the relative decline of the United States’ influence on a global level and China’s rise,\(^2\) the dynamics between the two countries are, in fact, undergoing particular changes in Northeast Asia.\(^3\)
Such changes are also reflected in China’s perception of the Korean unification and ultimately, in its policies toward the Korean Peninsula.

This article is based on the perceptions of the neighboring states toward Korean unification in general and the perception by China in particular. The perception by China will play a crucial role in either facilitating or denying Korean unification, as well as in its role during the unification process. South Korean strategies for Korean unification diplomacy should thus be immediately established not just on a national and inter-Korean level, but also on a regional level. South Korea’s strategies have to aim at both maintaining the South Korea-United States alliance and advancing its strategic partnership with China, and it should not be about choosing between China and the United States. In particular, it is necessary to develop strategic measures to encourage China to assume a positive role in Korean unification and secure its cooperation. Given China’s strong interest in, and influence on, the Korean Peninsula, Korean unification is impossible without China’s cooperative participation.

It has been well noted that officially, at least, China has supported an independent and peaceful Korean unification and this support has been the foundation of its policies on the Korean Peninsula. In substance, however, its policies have focused on the peace and stability of the peninsula as its first priority and have been focused on increasing China’s influence through the balanced growth of the two Koreas. Therefore, research has conventionally shown China’s role in the Korean unification as detrimental based on the view that China’s policies on the Korean Peninsula are aimed to maintain the status quo rather than changes, namely, unification. However, with the recent changes in Chinese rhetoric vis-à-vis the North Korean nuclear issue, there are growing hopes that China will play a positive role in the Korean unification by supporting a peaceful unification.

This article does not follow or deny such existing views, but instead, it takes an eclectic approach. In seeking favorable conditions for a South Korean-led unification, this article first analyzes China’s position on Korean unification, provides evidences that China’s perception of a unified Korea is reflected in its policies on the Korean Peninsula, and entertains scenarios of its future role. Specifically, this article analyzes China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula’s strategic value in Northeast Asia given its changing relations with the United States. Furthermore, China’s basic position on the Korean unification and its perception and plans on the process of the unification and a unified Korea will be analyzed. Finally, this article will examine how such a perception and plans are reflected in China’s policies on the Korean Peninsula and project the future role of China in the process of unification.

**China’s Perception of the Korean Peninsula**

**China’s Foreign Strategies and the Korean Peninsula**

In order to understand China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula, one should first examine how its foreign strategies based on its national goals are reflected in its policies on the Korean Peninsula. With an aim to realize “socialist modernization” by 2050, China plans to establish the Xiaokang (well-off) society by 2020 as a mid-term goal and emphasized the creation of a stable internal and external environment for its continuous economic growth. Based on such targets, China is pursuing a peaceful
China’s Role and Perception of a Unified Korea

international environment and securing an international standing befitting its stronger national power as the guiding principles for its foreign strategies. To this end, it stresses a peaceful development (ûúøÁÛ¡î÷) and a harmonious world (ûúú²á¦Í£), while implementing the Good Neighbor Policy toward its neighboring states (ÙÎ×ö, äÌ×ö, Ý£×ö).

This foreign strategy has gained momentum after the 2008 global financial crisis. China has increased its influence on the global stage by capitalizing on the crisis as a strategic opportunity to promote its rise and role as “a responsible stakeholder” in the international community,7 and has begun exercising its foreign strategies in a more active and leading manner than in the past. China’s renewed confidence has been directly reflected in its approach toward its neighbors in East Asia. Thus far, China held a rather passive position in which it focused on establishing a stable environment in Northeast Asia for the benefit of its economic development. However, China has started pursuing higher status and greater influence based on its economic power since the global financial crisis. Prime examples of such changes are its strong reactions to the 2010 ROK-U.S. military exercise in the West Sea following the sinking of the South Korean naval corvette, Cheonan, and its embargo on rare earth exports to Japan due to their territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands. Moreover, China has implemented stronger measures as in July 2012 when it established the city of Sansha on a chain of islands in the South China Sea, which had been disputed with neighboring countries, and warned them of the future establishment of a military garrison.8

Such strong responses brought about repercussions by reinforcing the neighboring countries of “the view that China will be a threat” and “the view that they should raise their guard against China.” In particular, as it coincided with the U.S. policies centered on Asia, the United States is increasingly checking China in an effort to retain its influence in Northeast Asia. However, as the United States has recognized that without China’s cooperation, it is difficult to resolve current issues in the Northeast Asian region, it has also asked China to assume a leading role.9 China responds to such an approach with suspicion that the United States is attempting to incorporate China into the U.S.-led world order and also, establish a security cooperation network in East Asia as a means to create a containing mechanism against China.10 While vocally responding to sovereignty-related issues, such as disputes over territories and territorial waters, China is focusing on promoting economic cooperation with neighboring economies in a stable environment and minimizing conflicts with the United States in order to achieve the Xiaokang society, unification with Taiwan and national integration, and stability among ethnic minorities in the frontiers.

In short, China attempts to gain strategic advantages by maintaining and forming a stable and peaceful regional order, which is favorable in sustaining economic development, and expanding and promoting China’s position that befits its national strength and standing. Given China’s strategic goals in Northeast Asia,11 the Korean Peninsula holds a crucial strategic position. The Korean Peninsula is a key area that both directly and indirectly affects China’s national, Northeast Asian, and East Asian strategic policies. Specifically, the Korean Peninsula is a core area, in which China’s interests meet those of other major powers, such as the United States, Russia, and Japan, and where land powers represented by China, Russia, and North Korea and sea powers represented by South Korea, the United States, and Japan meet. Furthermore, the Korea Peninsula is wrought with complex issues, such as territorial disputes and the North Korean dilemma.12 The peninsula is important to China in its pursuit of
economic diplomacy and cooperation for the ultimate goal of economic development and a new China-led regional order. In addition, China shares long territorial and maritime borders with the Korean Peninsula and have more historical relations and cultural similarities with Korea than any other country. Therefore, China has significantly deep interests in the Korean Peninsula in a variety of aspects.

**Strategic Value of the Korean Peninsula**

The Korean Peninsula acts as a crucial strategic point for China to successfully implement its national and foreign policies. This view is well reflected in China’s policies on the Korean Peninsula and shapes its strategic basis. China’s policies toward the Korean Peninsula essentially aim to maintain peace and stability for its own benefit and to enhance its position as a major power by gaining an advantage through its influence on the peninsula. The maintenance of peace and stability on the peninsula lies at the center of China’s policies and has been applied comprehensively as is seen through the North Korean nuclear issue. However, due to its rise in power, China’s growing influence on the Korean Peninsula is emerging as one of the key factors in shaping the peninsula’s entire future.

First, the stable management of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, which increases the possibility of China’s smooth economic development, is one of China’s key diplomatic missions. By fermenting insecurity in the region, the Korean Peninsula can make it difficult for China to attain its national goal of achieving economic development through sociopolitical stability. In particular, it can hamper sustainable and stable economic development which is rapidly emerging as China’s growth engine and is essential to resolving a variety of national issues. Furthermore, in external terms, China cannot push forward the tactful diplomacy as well as multidirectional diplomacy in Northeast Asia and the international community without stability on the peninsula. Instability on the Korean Peninsula can provide room for intervention amongst competing nations or strengthen cooperation between South Korea, the United States and Japan, which would weigh on building a new order favorable to China.

In this sense, China believes that it should support the establishment of a peace mechanism through dialogue and negotiations between the parties concerned in order to improve the situation on the Korean Peninsula where inter-Korean military confrontation has persisted. China also seeks to foster a stable environment of coexistence and co-prosperity through the expansion of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation. On the other hand, China opposes the collapse of the North Korean regime or any acts to heighten tensions, which could complicate the situation on the Korean Peninsula or increase instability. In this regard, China strongly opposes the international community’s policies of pressuring North Korea, while it rhetorically opposes a nuclear Korean Peninsula and adheres to the international principles of denuclearization.

Concurrently, China aims to advance its relations with the two Koreas through a policy for inter-Korean balance as a means to establish greater influence on the peninsula than any other power. In other words, the Korean Peninsula could become a bridge to maximize its national interests within Northeast Asia and the global community. Moreover, the peninsula serves as a diplomatic and security buffer zone for China, since it competes with the United States and Japan over regional leadership and responds to checks from the United States.

Both South and North Korea are strategically important to China, primarily
China’s Role and Perception of a Unified Korea

373

given China’s policies on the Korean Peninsula. In regard to South Korea, China has recognized that economic reciprocity, maintenance of a good political relationship, and security cooperation with South Korea is essential to its reform and opening. Forming a partnership with South Korea is favorable to China in order to pursue its national interests and creating a peaceful environment for its economic development. Moreover, with the rise of Chinese ambitions, its relationship with South Korea has become important in establishing a regional order favorable to China and assuming a leading role within the international community. In particular, establishing relations with South Korea in consideration of its relations with the United States and Japan has gained more weight in strategic terms.\(^{15}\) Advancement of the Sino-South Korean relationship to that of a “strategic partnership” in May 2008 and the initiation of China-South Korea FTA negotiations in 2012 are manifestations of these Chinese interests.

On the other hand, North Korea is a traditionally friendly socialist nation which has engaged in cooperation and exchange with China for a long time in diverse aspects including a war. Even with all the quagmires that it presents to China, North Korea still provides a buffer zone, which blocks pressures from competing sea powers such as the United States and Japan, and therefore, carries high geopolitical and strategic value. China believes that by maintaining its influence over North Korea, it can gain leverage in its relations with the United States and Japan, and lead issues related to the Korean Peninsula, particularly those issues favorable to its own interests. Therefore, despite North Korea’s inconvenient acts and issues such as its economic crisis, the North Korean defector issues, nuclear weapons development, and provocations toward South Korea, China assumes the role of a sponsor to North Korea—an inevitability given North Korea’s diplomatic and security value.

Therefore, China is likely to pursue stability on the Korean Peninsula in consideration of both Koreas’ strategic value and attempt to progressively and strategically expand its influence on the peninsula. This is because the status quo on the peninsula is more advantageous to China’s national interests in enhancing its national strength through economic growth, rather than an early unification of the two Koreas.\(^{16}\) In the mid- to long-term, China will examine how Korean unification will preserve the two Koreas’ current strategic value. Until such uncertainty is fully resolved, China is considered to prefer the status quo over Korean unification.

China’s Perception and Plan on Korean Unification

Basic Position

Given the current policies of China regarding the Korean Peninsula, China is considered to prefer the status quo. However, this does not mean that China is necessarily opposed to Korean unification. The official position of China toward Korean unification is to support Korea’s independent and peaceful unification. In Article 5 of the Joint Declaration upon the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and South Korea in 1992, it is specified, “China supports an independent and peaceful Korean unification. China respects an early and peaceful unification of Korea, since the aspirations of the Korean people support the peaceful unification of Korea.”\(^{17}\)

This shows that China is for Korean unification, not unconditionally, but only in
an independent and peaceful manner. Such a position can be summed up into the three following points in terms of the process of unification: First is the opposition to unification by force and support for peaceful unification. Second is the opposition to unification by foreign intervention and support for independent unification conducted by the Koreans themselves. Third is opposition to unification by absorption and support for unification by mutual agreement. To be more specific, first, China is against Korean unification by force and is for peaceful unification. The latter is more suitable for China in order to achieve a peaceful rise in power through peaceful development than the former. In case of military conflicts on the peninsula, China, which has signed a friendship and cooperation treaty with North Korea, including immediate military intervention, can be forced to make an unwanted choice and can face serious damages in case of intervention. So long as the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance remain effective, China could potentially engage in armed conflicts with the United States and Japan.

Therefore, China is strongly opposed to any form of unification by force regardless of whether it is instigated by South or North Korea, as well as by military intervention of foreign powers such as the United States. China has also contained factors that could disrupt the status quo on the peninsula or destabilizing factors as much as possible in the pursuit of peace and stability of its neighboring region. Furthermore, supporting peaceful unification can be advantageous to China in securing legitimacy for its unification with Taiwan by preventing unnecessary confrontation with the two Koreas, and justifying itself externally as a responsible major power in the international community.

Second, China backs independent unification, not unification by foreign intervention. In particular, China is opposed to Korean unification under the influence of the United States; a country that China distrusts in strategic terms and is in competition with. An independent Korean unification is favorable to China as it can be an opportunity to reflect its own national interests in the process of the Korean unification. In addition, an independent Korean unification certainly has implications for China’s own policy of unification with Taiwan under the principle of “one country, two systems.” If Korean unification is achieved through intervention by the United States or Japan, the issues concerning Taiwan, which China claims as internal affairs, are likely to be negatively affected.18

Third, China places emphasis on unification not by absorption but by mutual agreement. There is a growing perception within China that unification by absorption (North Korea “absorbed” by South Korea) is more realistic given the gap in national strength between the two Koreas. Nevertheless, in terms of its strategic competition with the United States, the view which considers North Korea as a strategic asset is more influential in policy choices than the view which sees it as strategic burden. This is why China is wary of unilateral unification by absorption led by South Korea, which would be under the influence of the United States and the robust U.S.-ROK alliance.

However, this does not necessarily mean that China prefers unification led by North Korea either. With a minimal chance of a North Korean-led unification by absorption, this means a unification process involving the use of force. So far, China has sent tough warnings against North Korea’s provocative acts, such as its nuclear and missile tests, and provocations toward South Korea. In addition, China, which aims for its peaceful rise and its role as a responsible major power, does not have
justification to support a North Korean-led unification by force. Rather, China is more concerned about a South Korean-led unification by absorption due to the chances for sudden change or collapse in North Korea, while it remains uncertain whether a sudden change on the Korean Peninsula due to unification by absorption would affect China’s national interests positively or negatively. In this sense, China tries to maintain an optimal situation, in which uncertainty can be minimized, by supporting North Korea, a country that has been stricken by diplomatic isolation and economic hardships, and by emphasizing improvement in inter-Korean relations. China, which has adhered to the principle of non-intervention with regard to inter-Korean relations, hopes Korean unification will be achieved peacefully through dialogue and negotiation between the parties concerned: North and South Korea.

**Perception on the Process of Unification**

As it aims to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, China prefers an incremental and phased unification process over a sudden one, which is largely related to sudden changes in North Korea, armed conflicts, intervention by the international community including the United States, as well as a South Korean-led unification by absorption. Specifically, a sudden unification of Korea can undermine China’s socioeconomic stability as North Koreans and armed groups could move into China, which shares a 1,300 km-long border with North Korea. Moreover, depending on the situation after a potential collapse of North Korea, armed conflicts could arise due to intervention by the international community such as the United States, made under the pretext to prevent civil war, accidental and local provocations to the South, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which could threaten regional peace, as well as China’s influence. In short, China is opposed to a sudden Korean unification, which can impose huge burdens and costs.

China considers a gradual Korean unification as desirable. It presumably believes that a gradual unification is advantageous in coordinating the interests of powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula, as well as for the two Koreas, themselves. Since China, which has claimed to uphold the principle of nonintervention, has never provided any specific blueprint or opinion on it, its perception on the process of Korean unification can be inferred from its unification policy and attitude toward the peace regime on the peninsula.

First, China’s own unification policy, “one country, two systems,” promotes gradual unification through a long-term coexistence of two different political systems. In particular, it aims to minimize confusion caused by rapid integration by maintaining current economic and social institutions for 50 years. As the conclusions of the CEPA with Hong Kong and the ECFA with Taiwan show, China has tried to narrow the political gap through economic integration with Hong Kong and Taiwan, which have different political systems. This indicates that China prefers a gradual unification process than a rapid one.19

Furthermore, regarding North Korea, China prefers policies of engagement that encourage gradual changes in North Korea through economic exchange and cooperation. In a similar context, China plans to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue from a long-term perspective through stable control and negotiation based on the Six-Party Talks framework rather than any other forced measures, while officially opposing North Korea’s nuclear development and possession.20 China encourages
North Korea to follow suit in “opening and reform” as a socialist and “friendly” nation. In this sense, China has not many reasons to prefer a Korean unification that involves sudden changes with the North Korean regime.

This is also evident in China’s support for a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, which, for the Chinese, requires a long-term and phased process. China has agreed to have discussions on a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula after some progress is made in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue by the concerned parties through the Six-Party Talks. China believes not only that the peace regime will contribute to peace and advancement of Northeast Asia, but also that the course of establishing the regime will be favorable to China in keeping the United States and Japan in check by increasing its influence. Therefore, China is deeply interested in replacing the Korean armistice treaty with a peace treaty. As a concerned party of the Korean armistice treaty, China looks for an inter-Korean peace treaty and engagement by both the United States and itself in the treaty as a way to provide a guarantee.

Although not the official stance of the Chinese government, research discourse from Chinese scholars on the process of Korean unification reflects China’s overall attitude in preferring a gradual unification process. The process presented by the research is as follows: First, North and South Korea bridge the economic and cultural gaps and encourage the community ideals through economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation, based on the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement. Second, peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas is realized by replacing the armistice treaty with a peace treaty. Third, based on an inter-Korean peace and coexistence treaty, North and South Korea initiate dialogue and negotiations on unification. In this process, the two Koreas should discuss sensitive issues such as their differences in political systems and institutions and the withdrawal of American troops in South Korea. Finally, after the transitional period of one ethnic group, two nations, and two systems, a unified nation with one ethnic group, one nation, and two systems is achieved.

A Plan on a Unified Korea

The Chinese government has never publicly expressed any clear attitude toward a unified Korea. However, the establishment of a unified Korea draws crucial policy interests from China. In particular, China is expected to show deep interest in the standing of a unified Korea and its implications for the order surrounding the peninsula. Even though it depends on the process in which a unified Korea is established, an overall national strength of a unified Korea will have the potential to grow and this will in turn, bring about direct ramifications to its neighboring nation—China’s political, economic, diplomatic, and security interests.

In this sense, China is considered to prefer a denuclearized unified Korea, since sharing a border with a unified Korea with strong military force and nuclear weapons could put much burden on China’s security. Therefore, China is unlikely to accept a unified Korea until North Korea dismantles its nuclear weapons and facilities, regardless of its expectations on its future relations with a unified Korea. Moreover, China is expected to pursue diplomatic efforts in encouraging the two Koreas to scale down their conventional military strength and/or for North Korea to reduce its biochemical weapons.

In diplomatic and security terms, China is likely to look for a unified Korea that is friendly to China or at least, a neutralized unified Korea that does not hamper
China’s interests, while considering it undesirable for a unified Korea to be incorporated into powers which are hostile to or competing with China. In this regard, the Sino-American relationship will be a key determinant in China’s perception of a unified Korea. If China forms a partnership with the United States based on mutual strategic trust or if they maintain friendly and cooperative relations, China will not only play a constructive role in establishing a unified Korea along with the United States, but also guide a unified Korea so that it can play a constructive role within the regional order.

On the contrary, if the United States and China engage in strategic competition caused by a power transition, China is likely to oppose a unified Korea under the influence of the United States and the maintenance of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Essentially, China views the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) as a product of the Cold War, as well as a means for the United States to keep China in check. In particular, China considers the great strategic flexibility of the USFK as a way to keep a rising China in check and contain it. Therefore, China is wary of such a change. This is why China reacted sensitively to the ROK-U.S. combined military exercise in the West Sea in connection with the 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval ship, Cheonan. Simply put, China is against the deployment of American forces on the Korean Peninsula after the conclusion of an inter-Korean peace treaty and believes that the troops should ultimately be withdrawn. In addition, China is expected to be wary of diplomatic and security policies of a unified Korea shifting toward Japan. Although China aims at cooperative relations with Japan mainly through economic cooperation, it has been in conflict with Japan over issues of history, territorial disputes over the Senkaku Islands and competition over initiatives in regional affairs. Therefore, China is likely to be uncomfortable about a unified Korea with a cooperative relationship with Japan.

Despite all this, China will support a unified Korea in adopting and operating a market economy. So far, China has reinforced sustained growth through the development of northeastern China and the Chinese-led Northeast Asian economic cooperation. As part of such efforts, China has encouraged and facilitated reform and opening of North Korea. Given this, China is believed to be positive about the introduction of a market economy in North Korea. However, it is likely to be concerned about the political system of a unified Korea, which will most likely adopt a multi-party democracy. While not being publicly opposed to a unified Korea’s own political system, China will hope that a unified Korea will not strongly support or pursue freedom, democracy, and human rights. This is because a confrontation over values between China and a unified Korea can weigh on building friendly and cooperative relations between China and Korea. In addition, China is likely to hope that a potential surge of nationalism in a unified Korea will not spread outside of the Korean Peninsula. If this happens in a unified Korea, whose overall national strength is likely to grow, such a rise could spark democratization within China, as well as nationalism among its ethnic minorities, while causing complex disputes on a level of international laws over, for example, the succession of the 1909 Gando (or Jiandao) Convention and the Boundary Treaty Between North Korea and China.
Analysis of China’s Position on Korean Unification and Its Future Role

Examination of China’s Position on Korean Unification and its Korean Peninsula Policies

As aforementioned, China is against a sudden unification through absorption, and supports a peaceful unification by mutual agreement between the two Koreas. This is because there is a great possibility that the situation on the peninsula could change drastically and in unpredictable ways. In other words, it is uncertain whether the Korean unification will be achieved in a way that coincides with the national interests of China, which has pursued peace, stability, and a greater influence on the Korean Peninsula. As the uncertainty becomes greater, the costs of controlling it increase. Therefore, China is expected to formulate its policy and role on the Korean Peninsula based on its evaluation of such uncertainties.

Given the current situation, Korean unification is both advantageous and disadvantageous to China’s national interests. First, it is advantageous in that unification could give less room for intervention by external powers in the region than when divided, thereby helping to eliminate security risks. Moreover, Korean unification would provide a stable and peaceful environment so that China can enhance its prosperity through Northeast Asian economic cooperation. Furthermore, unification could bring China a chance for its own unification with Taiwan. On the other hand, Korean unification is likely to be led by South Korea and this could mean a unified Korea under the influence of the United States. In such a case, Korean unification could potentially become a threat to China’s security. The view that a unified Korea can be advantageous for China’s national interests is logically connected to a perception that North Korea is a strategic burden and the perspective which stresses the importance of the strategic value of South Korea. Contrastingly, the view that a unified Korea can undermine China’s national interests is in line with the view that North Korea is a security buffer zone and that North Korea is a strategic asset.

Such a perception is also reflected in China’s Korean Peninsula policies. When the first view prevails over the latter, China’s Korean Peninsula policies put an emphasis on Sino-North Korean relations and focus on maintaining stability on the peninsula by maintaining and supporting the North Korean regime. In this case, the policies focus more on the status quo than unification. However, when the latter view prevails over the former, the policies aim to advance not only economic, but also diplomatic and security cooperation with South Korea. In this case, the Chinese may opt to facilitate unification over the uncertainties and the risks that North Korea has not failed to provide.

However, in reality, such views are not mutually exclusive. They are more likely to show a relative dominance over one another or complement each other depending on the situation. For example, China started showing interest in Korean unification right after the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit and since then it has actively engaged in discussions on the Korean Peninsula peace regime when there is progress in the Six-Party Talks and inter-Korean cooperation is active. By doing so, it has tried not to be excluded in the future process of unification. However, as the view which puts stronger emphasis on North Korea’s strategic value prevails, China has comprehensively strengthened its ties with North Korea, despite North Korea’s second nuclear test in May of 2009. For the time being, China seems to believe that a unified Korea
is more burdensome than beneficial to itself; therefore, it takes greater interest in management of the division than preparation for Korean unification.

**China’s Role in the Process of Korean Unification**

China prefers the status quo to Korean unification because management of the division is more advantageous for China than unification. China is likely to exert its influence in such a way that Korean unification is not achieved in a sudden manner under the current Northeast Asian security landscape. For the short term, the major goal is to prevent the collapse of the North Korea regime.

Management of the division by China means that it will try to build a foundation so that the process of Korean unification can be favorable to its national interests. While preventing the collapse of North Korea by providing the least amount of economic support and increasing its political and diplomatic influence, China is likely to promote diplomatic and security cooperation with South Korea, thus forming an asymmetric mutual reliance through expansion of economic cooperation. This is because China can secure a favorable position in dealing with North and South Korea and other interested states in the future establishment of the peace regime and the process of unification.

If uncertainty over Korean unification is minimized by the management of division, or is deemed controllable; if the benefits from unification to China would be greater than the burden from it; or if China is confident that it can exert influence on the process of unification to make it favor its own interests, China will show a more positive attitude towards unification than the status quo and assume an active role. This is because if China’s national power is relatively weak and if it pursues aggressive diplomacy, a unified Korea is likely to adopt a U.S.-oriented foreign policy. However, if China becomes stronger and promotes cooperative diplomacy, a unified Korea is likely to adopt a neutral foreign policy toward the United States and China. Nevertheless, what role China will assume in the process of Korean unification depends on the Sino-American relationship. If the two countries form a strategically hostile relationship due to the rise of China, China will try to prevent unification via intervention by the United States and Japan, and will also try to stop a unification led mainly by the United States and South Korea.

If the Sino-American relationship becomes amicable and cooperative, and there is progress in promoting strategic mutual trust between China and South Korea, China will become able to accept a South Korea-led unification. However, even in such a case China will compete with surrounding nations diplomatically to make post-unification regional priorities favor its interests. As illustrated above, China has conceived a model of a unified Korea favorable to itself and prefers an incremental unification which can translate its model into a reality. Therefore, China is expected to lead the process of establishing a peace mechanism through the replacement of the Korean Peninsula armistice treaty with a peace treaty and encouraging an inter-Korean agreement.

Thus, given the current landscape, China is unlikely to facilitate Korean unification and has a decisive influence in delaying Korean unification and interrupting a South Korea-led unification. This indicates that without dispelling China’s anxiety and gaining its cooperation, Korean unification is unlikely.
Conclusion and Tasks

Although China officially supports an independent and peaceful Korean unification, it also prefers the status quo of the Korean Peninsula given the uncertainties of the process of unification and its outcome. Furthermore, it prefers a progressive unification over a sudden one. At a time when the United States is increasingly keeping China in check in economic and military terms in East Asia and China does not trust South Korea’s security strategies, China will try to prevent the collapse of North Korea and a South Korea-led unification. China is expected to support the establishment of a unified state on the Korean Peninsula which is friendly and cooperative to it, but China will be against a unified Korea under the influence of its competitors—the United States and Japan.

Such a position is based on the perception that Korean unification and a unified Korea would be more of a burden than an asset to China in pursuing its national interests. This perception is closely related to changes in its relations with the United States and South Korea, which will in turn change the role of China. Therefore, if the Sino-American relationship becomes confrontational rather than cooperative, and trust between South Korea and China is weak, China is expected to play a crucial role in delaying or interrupting Korean unification. Contrarily, if the Sino-American relationship becomes cooperative and trust is built between South Korea and China, China can play a positive role in facilitating Korean unification.

Therefore, overcoming China’s anxiety and opposition is a key task in building an environment where a South Korea-led unification is possible. To weaken China’s opposition to Korean unification, South Korea must enhance mutual political and strategic trust with China. President Park Geun-hye did well to explain South Korea’s North Korea policy, and call for Chinese cooperation, to her Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping during the recent summit meeting on June 27.27 This should only be the beginning of such efforts on the part of the Korean government. South Korea should maintain and advance the U.S.-ROK alliance in a way that China can believe that such an effort does not aim to keep China in check. In addition, South Korea should acknowledge that it is difficult to achieve peace and unification only with the U.S.-ROK alliance and needs policies which reflect the future dynamism in East Asia—including China—from a broader perspective to attain a peaceful Korean unification.

However, South Korea should not forget that excessive expectations of China’s role for a South Korea-led unification can bring about significant difficulties in unification. This can expand China’s influence over peninsular issues and limit South Korea’s leadership on the issues. In this sense, inter-Korean relations should be improved at the same time. Without this, peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula are fundamentally impossible. Even if China opposes unification led by South Korea, with an inter-Korean agreement on peace and unification, China has no cause to reject it. Such an agreement can be the most important means to limit China’s negative role and encourage it to assume a positive one.

Nevertheless, China’s constructive role is crucial in the process of Korean unification. In particular, it is necessary to dispel China’s concern that South Korea’s unification policies aim to absorb North Korea with the help of the United States. South Korea should reassure China that Korean unification will be attained through the resolution of North Korean nuclear issue and the establishment of a peace regime.
China’s Role and Perception of a Unified Korea

on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, there should be an institutionalized dialogue for China’s constructive role throughout the process, and South Korea has to convince China that a unified Korea will not introduce any policies against China’s interests. At the same time, rather than an approach which merely stresses China’s cooperation and responsibilities, a practical diplomatic approach which can make China recognize that a unified Korea can offer significant benefits in promoting its national interests is a necessary precondition for unification.

Notes

11. Refer to Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, China’s Search for Security (New York,
16. Some in China oppose such an attitude. They believe that although it is obvious that the Korean Peninsula is a strategically important aspect to China’s security and economic gains, China can only secure a portion of the international influence by pursuing the status quo on the peninsula and focusing on North Korea’s strategic value, and rather, it can suffer bigger losses in economic benefits. Qiangyi Jin, “Resolving the Issue of the Korean Peninsula: Method, Perspective, and Path Selection,” *Northeast Asia Forum* 2 (2012): 47–56.
17. Article 5, the Joint Declaration upon Establishment of Diplomatic Ties between China and the ROK, 1992.
21. In the “September 19 Joint Declaration” in 2005 and the “February 13 Agreement” in 2007, China agreed to initiate negotiations on a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at a separate forum.
Notes on Contributors

Jun Byung-Kon (Ph.D., Hankuk University of Foreign Studies) is a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). He has been a visiting professor at both National Cheng Chi University in Taiwan and CICIR in China, as well as having been an Adjunct Professor at the Hankuk University of Foreign Policy. He has written numerous articles and books including *China’s Strategy on the Korea-China FTA and its Political Implications* (2008), *Contemporary International Relations of China* (2008), and “Possible Scenarios for China’s Future Relations with North Korea: A South Korean Perspective” (KJDA 2006). His research interests have been focused on Chinese foreign policy in general with particular emphasis on China’s relations with the Korean Peninsula.

Kim Jang-ho is a research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification. He received his Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom. His main research interests are on international relations theory, international security, Northeast Asian strategic relations and Sino-American relations. He has written numerous articles on northeast Asian security affairs in such journals as the SSCI-listed *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis, Korea Observer* and *The Korean Journal of International Relations*. He has lectured at Yonsei and Korea Universities, among others in Seoul, and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom.