

Is “Unification Bonanza” Possible in Near Future?

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The ups and downs in relations between North and South come with regularity of summer changing winter, but during the last 6 years since the conservatives established themselves in Chongwadae the inter-Korean climate became particularly severe. Up until recently there were no high expectations for a breakthrough, as many experts suspected that North Koreans had “closed the book” on Park Gyeon Hye’s administration and won’t seriously deal with her. Pyongyang do have reasons not to expect anything meaningful from the incumbent government: the “trustpolitik” is seen by them as suggesting de-facto capitulation by giving away their only card- nuclear weapons and getting in return “assistance” aimed at changing their economic and political system, leading to a South Korean-led unification. Demanding prior denuclearization from DPRK (the nuclear status of which is enshrined in its Constitution while the Byungjin line– has become the trademark policy of the current leader) is equal to demanding baptism from a Muslim before any dialogue could start with him, so Seoul’s intention to have any dialogue at all seems doubtful not only to North Koreans, but to international observers as well.

Therefore the October visit of North Korean ruling “troika” to South Korea to jumpstart the stalled inter-Korean dialogue shocked everybody. It came on the heels of the rumors of Kim Jong Un's health problems, which recently reinvigorated the discussion of a possible collapse of the Pyongyang regime and the need for South Korea to prepare itself to swiftly act in such a case. These rumors turned out to be short-lived, as Kim Jong Eun re-appeared, once again making blush the numerous “collapsists” and “coup d’état” “experts” worldwide. However the shootings between North and South, failure of military talks, incidents with balloons and leaflets put the rapprochement in doubt and high-level talks were cancelled. At the same time the difference of on the unification agenda between North and South is much deeper than these short-term issues. There is a basic divide on the models of relations.

The anticipation of the "imminent collapse" of DPRK as the prerequisite for unification of Korea remains the mainstream of South Korean and U.S. political thinking for the last quarter-century. These were the lost decades for a Korean reconciliation. Even the more shrewd engagement tactics (the Sunshine Policy of 1998-2008), introduced by liberal Seoul administrations, had in fact the same goal: to dilute the political and economic structure inside North Korea by introducing market forces and liberal ideas to cause the system to slowly disintegrate (“soft landing”).

Although Park Geun Hye's administration as compared to Lee Myong Bak's era took a less hardline approach, only one plausible scenario seems still to dominate in Seoul's quarters of power – taking charge of the North by eradicating family rule of the Kims when the opportunity arises and absorbing the North.

At the same time, paradoxically, most people in South Korea do understand that would result in immense burden on South Korean economy, probably leading to its loss its international competitiveness in the short term at least. And this is not the worst scenario – in case of overnight unification, even in the absence of direct military conflict, a protracted war is quite possible. Even if a small faction of radicals from the approximately 1mln elite (say 1/20th) would choose to fight (and all the infrastructure for a guerrilla war is long in place in North Korea), that would make a unification jackpot a messy business indeed. Even under best of circumstances the South Korean government would have to take responsibility of re-educating and subsidizing North Koreans, feeling themselves “second rate people”, leading to a protracted popular dissent.

The reaction of big powers is also not taken into account. For example, China won't ever let South Korea absorb the North. In case of a real crisis the North Korean elite, unless offered real incentives and guarantees, would prefer to turn to China than expect a Southern invasion and a pro-Chinese regime would succeed the current one after ousting the former leaders. But anyway, the new leadership would be formed from the same pool of people – there is simply no alternative to educated professionals in DPRK.

The root of the problem seems to be the regretful misunderstanding in Seoul of the core interests and the nature of North Korean political class, as well as the total rejection of the idea of taking the interests of this class into consideration. They prefer to appeal to the “repressed people of the North” in many ways – from sending aid to sending leaflets. However, it should be stressed, that the North Korean traditionally obedient “oppressed masses” simply do not matter in the unification equation, as the authorities have succeeded in brainwashing them into a belief that the country is actually at war, and any attempt at dissent is unpatriotic and should be brutally persecuted.

So any plan of unification aimed at circumventing or destroying the North Korean political class, based on the presumption is not supported by population, is doomed to failure. The North Korean political system is actually not an isolated family dictatorship, but a hereditary aristocracy/meritocracy, created much along the lines of Confucian tradition, already in its third and fourth generation. It cannot be lured into partial concessions: unlike in former USSR or communist countries their members or their siblings cannot expect to become successful capitalists or officials under the new regime. Obviously, after a South Korea-led unification the elite class can expect persecution or to be relegated to outlaw status if events unravel in accordance with Seoul's scenario. Even the removal of a “God-given” monarch would not mean the destruction of the system – a new royal clan will seize power, maybe with a foreign assistance.

Although the desired North Korean version of unification is the same as that in the South – taking over "the puppet regime" (after U.S. troops depart), and it looks like only a minority of hard-liners still cherish such dreams. The official "confederation" formula (one country, two systems) – once just a propaganda plot by Kim Il Sung – now seems more realistic. It was stressed again by Kim Jong Un's newly appointed Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong in his maiden speech at the UN, and this is no coincidence. For outside powers as well (at least for China, Russia and Japan), coexistence rather than break up of the status quo on the Korean Peninsula now seems a better option than a military conflict or chaos.

Of course, sentiment runs deep in the South that those who started the Korean War and tortured their own people should answer for their wrong doings. However, the younger people seem not so bent on Middle Ages-style revenge. They care more about their own life and priorities. These priorities do not necessarily include shouldering the historic burden of civilizing and assisting the people, who actually share nothing but blood with them – even their language has become markedly different. Is it not time for the Seoul political class to recognize the realities of the 21st century?

What kind of policy could suite South Korea's national interests most? And not run counter to the interests of big powers? South Korea should take the driver's seat. My policy suggestions are simple and lie totally within the realm of possibilities in modern South Korea, especially with the advent of a new generations of politicians.

- Cooperation with North Korea should be revived, starting from the abolition of the "May 24th measures" that have barred most inter-Korean trade since 2010.
- Previous and new economic projects, including Geumgansan, and also Russia-promoted trilateral projects should be re-started.
- Humanitarian aid projects should be carried on without attempts to introduce a "hidden agenda" of undermining the North Korean regime.
- The denuclearization issue should be qualified as a matter for multilateral (Six-Party) negotiations, not inter-Korean relations.
- Political contacts on a mutually respectful basis to discuss the prospects of cooperation and the concepts of unification should be introduced, probably based on the former summit meetings agreements.

That could pave a way to an inter-Korean summit, even if the ROK president would have to get to DPRK territory for that (or maybe in a third country). After a serious public discussion – or maybe even a referendum in ROK – a strategic decision should be taken, that unification by absorption should not be on the agenda and confederation formula should be legalized instead. Maybe a corresponding constitutional amendment could be adopted.

Policy guidelines, excluding the "hidden agenda" of undermining DPRK regime, should be adopted. The Ministry of Unification could be renamed into the Ministry of National Reconciliation.

Eventually legally binding basic document between the two Koreas should be prepared, recognizing the reality of two separate administrative entities on the Korean Peninsula at least for the time being.

Such a document should be part of the set of bilateral treaties between the members of the Six-Party format, guaranteeing peace and security on the Korean Peninsula with the responsibility of the great powers. One of the provisions should be the nuclear-free status of the peninsula and its immediate neighborhood.

This would open the way to a long period of small steps to the national reconciliation, economic aid to North Korea to recreate its productive basis and integrating North Koreans (starting from educating the young people) into the modern world. Eventually the peoples and elites of the two autonomous administrative entities could choose to delegate their powers to a unified authority, crowning the unification. Of course so far it is just a wishful thinking. But should we wait another quarter-century for a North Korea's collapse, which might never happen?