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PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES FOR
KOREAN REUNIFICATION

Understanding Peaceful Reunification: Its Dynamics and Challenges

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The reunification of the Korean Peninsula has been an important aspiration of the Korean people on both sides of the 38th parallel for nearly six decades. The emotional family reunions of loved ones wrenched apart for more than half a century illustrate the deep desire for reunification, at least, among the older generation of Koreans. Despite this mutual desire to reconnect and after rounds of North-South negotiations, the two Koreas have failed to reunify. Their inability to do so after all these years naturally begs the basic, yet loaded, question of why is it so difficult. Although it is easy to respond that ideological differences or a history of rivalry are the reasons, these ostensible explanations do not explain the complex nuances of how such factors ultimately serve to promote or prevent reunification. This ambiguity is endemic to the existing policy literature on reunification. In addition, the current international relations literature has generally ignored the problems of achieving reunification despite the importance of this issue in shaping present-day geopolitics in Northeast Asia.

To address this gap, this chapter applies a combined approach of strategic bargaining and national identity politics to understand the relational dynamics and challenges that lie ahead for reunification dyads. Although political science literature has not tackled the issue of reunification directly, scholars have written broadly on the challenges related to negotiating power-sharing arrangements, states seeking to cooperate in high stakes and competitive bargaining situations, and the influence of nationalism and identity politics on government behavior. Drawing from this rich body of work, this paper views the reunification process through the lens of recently completed works on strategic bargaining and national identity politics, and to draw implications that will encourage deeper exploration and research of this issue in the future. The first objective is to highlight problems with extant schools of thought on reunification, namely nationalist, functionalist, and collapsist perspectives, whose views are found in policy literature and other venues. These approaches are at best inadequate, if not problematic, in their logic, to explain and prescribe solutions for peaceful reunification on the Korean Peninsula.

The second objective of this chapter is to offer an alternative, more useful framework to understand the characteristics, obstacles, and structure of reunification dyads. The goal here is not to provide a grand explanation as to what might give rise to peaceful reunification, but to take a more fundamental approach by laying out a different prism by which we can understand the challenges ahead for states that seek a negotiated union. This is an important step to take before we can begin to understand what will ultimately bring about a peaceful reunification. With that said, the alternative framework proposed in this paper is strategic bargaining, while incorporating national identity politics as a force that shapes reunification engagement. This presentation leads to the following generalizations with policy implications:

1. Stable states tend to delay reunification as long as they can because they can afford to do so.
2. There is a trade-off between peaceful and international engagement and the prospects for reunification.
3. Reunification dyads face a security dilemma.
4. Within an identity community, greater engagement between reunification states could lead to the erosion of the idea of reunification in the long term.

DEFINING PEACEFUL REUNIFICATION

The most basic definition of reunification, or national unification, is the merger of two or more states that share a common ethnic national identity and the belief that their nation formerly existed as a single political unit.¹ More specifically, it is the irreversible integration of governing institutions, functions and authorities of two governments into one.² Peaceful unification requires the cooperation of the two states involved.³ It is a negotiated merger where two states adjust their divergent interests and demands, coordinate their behavior, and each makes accommodations to establish a common government over the people of both countries.⁴ Military violence is not used to achieve unification. In other words, states voluntarily pursue a union, free from external coercion or any foreign subversive action. This is not to suggest that adjustments are necessarily symmetrical and the benefits derived are equal. This merger can materialize in two ways: (1) the transfer of multiple centers of power to a new single government that has overriding political authority over all constituent states (i.e., symmetric power-sharing); or (2) the transfer of governing authority of one or more states to a single dominant polity that has sovereign authority over all involved territories (i.e., asymmetric power-sharing; for example, West Germany in the case of German reunification).⁵ Thus, “peaceful” reunification is the condition in which states voluntarily choose to reunify, free from external coercion or any foreign sponsored, extra-legal or subversive action that would force leaders to make a decision they would otherwise not make. This is not to suggest that when states face a decision to reunify there will be no domestic pressures or a crisis; it simply means that leaders’ decisions were intentional, negotiated, and not made under duress.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON REUNIFICATION

Although many yearn for peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, the factors involved in reaching this goal are frequently contested. Policy analysts, pundits, and journalists have written countless articles and books on the topic, but these are mostly descriptive or prescriptive, providing much detailed information on particular cases without offering systematic and generalizable knowledge on what enables peaceful reunification. Mainstream international relations theory has also overlooked this important subject. This neglect is puzzling given how states seeking to reunify are not only major political and economic powers, but their unification could reshape the political and security environments of their regions, if not the globe.

The dominant explanations offered by policymakers, pundits, and scholars can be categorized into three main schools of thought: (1) ethno-nationalist/divided nation perspective; (2) functionalist/integrative perspective; (3) collapsist perspective. Below I examine each school for the arguments presented on its behalf and some analytical shortcomings found therein.

Ethno-Nationalist/Divided Nation Perspective. The ethno-nationalist perspective is a dominant belief which frequently shows up in the foundational documents, such as constitutions and legislation, as well as in writings and rhetoric of nationalist policymakers and pundits regarding reunification.⁶ This perspective attributes the deep emotional and spiritual attachment to the homogenous national community defined by its long history, common heritage, and language as the galvanizing force that will eventually drive people within both states to overcome their political differences and restore the nation-state.

Many scholars have embraced these arguments to explain why states reunify. One Korean academic writes:

The long historical root of Korea's nationhood supports the expectation that Korea will reunite sooner or later. This is an issue that touches the hearts of Koreans and is tied to their sense of national identity. Although there are sharp political cleavages between the two Korean halves that are not easily bridged, in historical perspective, an eventual return to normality seems assured⁷⁷

A slight variation on this perspective is what Gregory Henderson, Richard Ned Lebow, and John Stoessinger presented in the early 1970s, known as the “divided-nation approach.”⁷⁸ Focusing primarily on nations that have been divided as a result of the Cold War, their model suggests that the common cultural identity and the deep-seated commitment by all parties involved to restore the original unified state will drive these states through a series of phases of unification. Their teleological argument maintains that divided nations will begin with a high level of hostility and non-recognition, evolve to coexistence, tacit recognition, and reduced ideological competition, and eventually move to active rapprochement and communication, ending with a loose political amalgamation and symbolic unification. While these ethnic-nationalist perspectives provide insights into *why* reunification is important for various groups, it falls short in providing an explanation for *how* reunification is to be achieved. The nationalist account, for example, cannot explain why nearly sixty years have passed on the Korean Peninsula where the fervor for reunification has arguably been among the strongest.

Another shortfall is that these explanations imply a primordial view of nationalism, as if identities are historically fixed and immutable. As generations pass, however, a divided people can gradually see reunification as unlikely or undesirable, thus diminishing the demand for it. Such a change of attitude is arguably occurring in places like South Korea and Taiwan. For example, Gilbert Rozman and Andrew Kim write about the rising support for the “*gukmin*” (or state-based) form of national identity that accepts the status quo division of the peninsula rather than the “*minjok*” (ethnic-based) form that supports the need for reunification. Citing South Korean polls that show that Koreans are not interested in paying for reunification, they write: “These shifts provide compelling evidence that *gukmin* identity is taking precedence in the South Korean psyche. South Koreans are increasingly tolerant of, if not satisfied with, the notion that striving for a unified state is not worth the potential costs and damage that might be inflicted on the state they already have. Koreans may be bound by blood but South Koreans are also bound by the success of their state...”⁷⁹ In Taiwan, popular opinion is also increasingly supportive of greater national autonomy, albeit a majority still prefers the status quo. The strongest indication of this was the election and eight-year tenure of Chen Shui-bian, an independence sympathizer of the Democratic People's Party, as president. His presidency toppled the Kuomintang Party, a long-time proponent of reunification with the PRC, although that party regained power in 2008.

The most problematic assumption is that nationalist sentiments are inherently benign and facilitate cooperation between states by mobilizing groups of people who share an identity. If there is one standard bearer, then the ideational community is likely to be cohesive. However, if there are multiple entrepreneurs with varying and incompatible visions regarding what principles or which leaders should govern the national community and state, then it becomes

a competitive, if not conflictual, environment. As Marc Ross writes: “It should be pointed out that in a shared meaning and identity system the fact that different individuals and groups understand each other does not imply agreement that widely held meanings are necessarily acceptable to all. Rather, meaning and identity, control over symbols and rituals, and the ability to impose one interpretation rather than another on a situation are frequently bitterly contested.”¹⁰ Nationalist communities can often be factionalized, making national identity an indeterminate force for reunification.¹¹

Neo-functionalism/Integration Perspective. Another frequently cited argument that has had a profound influence on the reunification discourse is functionalism—a liberalist-inspired perspective on political integration. This combines the idea of common cultural identity and the desire to maximize economic efficiency and prosperity as the driving factors of political integration, which will result from low levels of economic and cultural engagement compelling higher levels. Prompted by the model of European integration, one functionalist concept that has inspired policy-makers and analysts is the notion of a “spillover effect.” As one theorist argues, peace “is more likely to grow through doing things together than in chancelleries.”¹² As both functionalist and neo-functional theorists argue, integration does not start with costly, high-risk political integration efforts, but rather with low-key economic and social exchanges, and then gains momentum as both domestic forces and governments learn the value of active exchanges and close coordination of policies. Success builds trust and confidence for more frequent and higher forms of economic, social, and eventually political cooperation that requires greater risks, closer cooperation, and increasingly higher levels of trust. Ultimately, the culmination of cooperation across different functional domains provides the environment for reunification.¹³

A close look at the writings and speeches of leaders in divided nations reveals that these functionalist ideas are deeply embedded in their views of how to achieve peaceful reunification. Kim Dae-jung’s “Sunshine Policy” to North Korea, which was subsequently continued by Roh Moo-hyun’s “Peace and Prosperity” policy, illustrates this point. Chung-in Moon summarizes Kim’s functionalist-inspired strategy as a three-step process: (1) peaceful coexistence (peace building through the termination of hostile relations, arms reduction, and mutual surveillance as well as through the establishment of a multilateral security cooperation regime); (2) peaceful exchange (restoration of common national identity through political, economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian interactions and expansion of common interests through increased economic exchanges); and (3) peaceful reunification (incremental unification and the rejection of unification by absorption, military power, or manipulation).¹⁴ This linear progressive notion is even evident in Lee Myung-bak’s idea of unification, which was set forth in the following way: (a) the creation of a “new Korean peace structure” to actively respond to the changing situation on the peninsula; (b) the establishment of “North-South economic collaboration” and, in doing so, dramatically improving the quality of people’s lives; and (c) the development of an environment in which the political unity of the people is possible, thereby ensuring long-term economic prosperity.¹⁵

Although these functionalist arguments seem appealing, there are shortcomings. First, the successful operations of factors that encourage integration requires a relatively stable, long-established, and often democratic political system in which economic and social interest groups play a recognized role in political life. Joseph Nye critiques this functional perspective as being

inapplicable to integration cases outside of Western Europe, where regional communities do not necessarily share common political and ideological systems: “It only makes sense to pay primary attention to economic interests when one can take for granted the political, ideological, and institutional framework within which economic interest can function. This is an impossible assumption in Africa (or any other developing areas) where one of the prime concerns of politicians is to change the framework.”¹⁶ The cooperating governments need to be adhering to similar political and ideological systems and playing by similar institutional rules. As in any state relationship, greater levels of engagement eventually lead to conflicts as both sides work to resolve the disparity of interests in various issues, which requires a common institutional framework. Western Europe is unique. This cannot be assumed for integration efforts among developing countries or, for that matter, for reunification cases where two contending states have dramatically divergent political systems.

Another widely criticized point regarding functionalist explanations is that they are not so much causal theories for integration as they are normative statements, outlining what should be done to achieve reunification, but not what factors cause states to decide to reunify. A related problem with functionalist theories is that they are teleological. An assumption is that nurturing trust and goodwill through building mutually beneficial and deeper cooperation in the economic and cultural arenas will not only heal decades of political separation and strife, but will also build the foundation for higher levels of political cooperation and, ultimately, reunification. This is an oddly idealistic view of state leaders. Governments have a natural tendency to avoid making decisions that would encroach upon their political prerogatives and work against their self-interest, voluntarily relinquishing their power for the sake of integration rather than attempting to protect their interests while trying to expand their power through reunification.

Policy-makers fail to consider whether the path to congenial interstate relations and the road to power-sharing under reunification are similar. Will increased economic and social interaction necessarily lead governments to ultimately give up their sovereignty? The context and dynamics of these two forms of cooperation are different. In security alliances, international economic regimes, and other types of interstate cooperation, governments collaborate with each other because through these efforts, wealth, welfare, and/or security constituents are increased. By improving the lives of citizens living in their countries, the authority of incumbent leaders is reinforced and their power strengthened. In interstate cooperation, mutual aggrandizement, in most cases, improves the condition of all governments involved.

In the case of reunification, however, cooperation is not necessarily mutually beneficial. The goal of peaceful reunification is power-sharing and establishing institutions in which stakeholders must be subjected to former competitors. By empowering an opposing state by offering economic assistance or political compromise, collaboration is complicated by the underlying competition among the elites of member states who seek greater influence, if not domination, in the reunified government.¹⁷ States within reunification dyads have incentives and disincentives to cooperate. In short, it appears that the functionalist logic for reunification may actually be detrimental to political integration efforts rather than supportive of them.

Collapsist Perspective. The underlying assumption of writings from the collapsist perspective is that the two countries are fundamentally incompatible and that competing leaders are not

willing to relinquish their authority for the sake of reunification. In this view, the only means of reunification is either the overthrow of one state by the other state, or the political implosion of one state. In the mid-1990s, the collapsist perspective was popular in discussing how the two Koreas could possibly achieve reunification. Seeing an unprecedented famine and paralyzed economy, many predicted that the regime and state would crumble under the weight of an anachronistic economic system and overly rigid totalitarian government; the “inevitable” collapse would lead to a German-style reunification. Nicholas Eberstadt, a collapsist supporter, encouraged the international community to hasten a “contained collapse” of North Korea.¹⁸

There are two serious problems in this view. First, as Samuel Kim points out, many predictions of North Korea’s collapse commit “the fallacy of premature economic reductionism based on a mistaken conception that equates economic breakdown with system collapse or even with the collapse of the North Korean state.”¹⁹ Economic conditions often do play an important role in contributing to political stability and boosting the authority of governing elites, especially in non-democratic countries where performance-based legitimacy is critical. However, these serve more as an intervening variable to political conditions, which are the primary factors in the regime downfalls. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan in their celebrated book on democratic transitions and consolidation emphasize this:

If the political situation is such that there is no strong perception of a possible alternative, a non-democratic regime can often continue to rule by coercion. However, when the belief grows that other alternatives are possible (as well as preferable), the political economy of legitimacy and coercion sharply changes. If the coercive capacity of the non-democratic regime decreases (due say to internal dissent or the withdrawal of vital external guarantees), then the political economy of prolonged stagnation can contribute to the erosion of the regime. *It is not changes in the economy, but changes in politics, that trigger regime erosion—that is, the effects of a poor economy often have to be mediated by political change.*²⁰ (Emphasis added.)

Although the DPRK underwent its most severe economic crisis in the 1990s since the end of the Korean War, the country’s tightly controlled “theocratic” totalitarian political system limited the exposure of its population to the outside world, suppressed any internal forces liable to challenge the establishment, and maintained a strong coercive apparatus to ensure security and regime stability. Even Hwang Jang-yop, the highest-ranking North Korean political figure to defect to the South, warned of the solidarity of the DPRK: “The republic [North Korea] is in economic difficulty but remains politically united and there’s no danger of its collapse.”²¹ In short, economic crisis alone will not guarantee any form of political change unless it is accompanied by political fragmentation and polarization.

A second problem is the over-deterministic argument that state collapse leads to reunification, which fails to specify what causal mechanism links the two phenomena together. It is not clear why the collapsed state would not rather choose to reestablish a new government than choose to merge with its reunification partner state, especially when the two have been hostile rivals. An underlying assumption is that all failing states in a reunification dyad will behave like East Germany in 1990, as seen in Aidan Foster-Carter’s 1994 assessment:

The “collapsist” scenario seems the most plausible. Although I fully share the hope, which is widespread in South Korea, for a gradual, stable, peaceful, and inexpensive evolution, indications point to collapse. The key element of my reasoning is that North Korea cannot continue indefinitely as it is . . . [T]he North Korean regime will be overthrown. As in Germany, there will then be a strong popular demand for immediate integration . . . version of the German scenario seems likely.²²

This generalization about the German reunification and its likelihood to be repeated in the Korean Peninsula reveals the failure of reunification analysts to fully comprehend the complexity of what happened in Germany during 1989-1990, and creates a false basis for what might happen in North Korea if it collapsed. Analysts who link the German experience to Korea, among a number of mistakes, make the error of *post hoc determinism*. In other words, the impression is that there was no alternative path for East Germany besides asymmetric reunification with West Germany.

A more contingent turn of events and more complex environment could have easily led to an alternative end for East Germany than being asymmetrically incorporated into the West German political system. Three possible futures were discussed prior to the March 8, 1990, elections that finally determined what policy East Germany would pursue: (1) accession to West Germany (Article 23 of the Basic Law); (2) gradual and negotiated reunification (Article 146 of the Basic Law); or (3) reform and remaining independent as a social democracy.²³ There was both support and opposition to merging the two countries, but the more common public belief was that they would remain divided in a state of peaceful coexistence for some time. Prior to the 1990 election, the victory of the “Alliance for Germany” coalition led by the East German Christian Democratic Union party (i.e. those who supported immediate reunification by being asymmetrically merged with the Federal Republic) was in doubt. Many thought that the Socialist Democratic Party in support of a gradual reunification policy would win. But, through a complex series of events, including direct campaigning by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in East Germany, the Alliance for Germany coalition won.²⁴ Even German unification was the result of conditional events. The regime’s deterioration was not sufficient cause for the union.

The discussion of the three perspectives above highlights shortcomings in explaining what causes reunification. There are logical flaws, underdeveloped lines of reasoning, and a lack of empirical support. This, however, is not to suggest that the perspectives above are completely without merit. It would be difficult to imagine states unifying if there were no shared identity that they belong together. Yet, this overview makes clear the need for further research to understand reunification and what may compel states to move toward it. To take a first step, the remainder of this chapter explores how strategic bargaining and national identity politics offer refreshing and counterintuitive insights for understanding what may induce states to negotiate reunification.²⁵

NEW VIEW ON PEACEFUL REUNIFICATION – STRATEGIC BARGAINING AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Setting aside for now any attempt to answer the question what causes states to peacefully reunify, the objective here is to consider the challenge of peaceful reunification as a strategic

bargaining situation between two states with competing interests and high stakes, drawing on work that provides useful insights to help understand the dynamics that states face as they try to cooperate toward a power-sharing arrangement. To inform this bargaining situation, I examine how the fact that both states are embedded in a common political identity community further shapes, and at times, makes more contentious, their relationship within a reunification dyad.

Reunification as Strategic Bargaining. To understand how states cooperate, the political science strategic bargaining literature provides a simple and useful framework, which focuses on the leaders of the reunification dyads,²⁶ assuming that they are rational and security-minded, and their principal interests are to protect their political authority and ensure their survival when faced with a political crisis.²⁷ They survey their environment, carefully weigh the available options, and, to the best of their ability, choose the strategy that optimally meets their subjectively defined goals.²⁸ In a bargaining scenario, states cooperate when both believe it will make them better off than choosing not to do so. This is feasible only when the lowest common denominator is mutually acceptable (i.e. one side's bottom line is not more than what the other side is willing to give up.) But, even if the range of acceptable agreements between the two overlaps and there is room for compromise, leaders will still face the challenge of reaching an array of possible solutions that have varying levels of payoff to each participant. Some agreements may benefit one actor more, and thus are preferred over other arrangements.²⁹

The challenge is to identify stress points and apply pressure that would compel one's opponent to reassess its willingness to incur costs, forego benefits, and ultimately accept an agreement.³⁰ In other words, how does a state make the cost of non-cooperation for its opponent so high that it decides to moderate its demands and pursue an agreement? When two partners cannot reach an agreement, they incur the opportunity costs of failure and the loss of benefits for not reaching a resolution. In high stakes negotiations for agreements with long-term effects political scientists note: (1) the incentive to reach an agreement quickly diminishes; and (2) the sensitivity to relative gains can rise. This implies: (a) stable states tend to delay reunification as long as possible; (b) there may be trade-offs between peaceful and international engagement and the prospects for reunification. Below I examine these suppositions and how they can shape states' decision-making calculus to venture toward peaceful reunification.

Implication One: Stable states tend to delay reunification as long as they can because they can afford to do so.

James Fearon argues that the more actors care about the future payoffs of an agreement and the longer the anticipated duration of the agreement, the greater the incentive for the bargaining parties to continue to negotiate to attain a better deal. "The longer the time horizon of the agreement is, the greater the possible expected benefit one can reap over time by locking in the greater distributional advantage in the agreement and concomitantly, the relative costs of holding out to reach the better deal diminishes as the shadow of the future lengthens."³¹ Because the time horizon for reunification is indefinite, the negotiating leaders have high incentives to extract the greatest advantage in power-sharing efforts because any disproportional advantage can contribute toward becoming the dominant power in a new state arrangement. As long as the cost of non-cooperation is low, state leaders will resist committing themselves to a settlement, hoping that their opponent will face pressure to capitulate. Fearon argues that this stalemate becomes a "classical war of attrition" where both sides may inflict costs but not enough to prompt change until the "no cooperation" status becomes unsustainable or no longer cost-

effective for one side. If the involved states are capable of absorbing large costs for the sake of potentially achieving a better agreement in the long term, the stalemate may go on indefinitely.

As we think about what would drive the costs high enough to compel states to choose reunification, it is worth linking the question to civil war termination and post-war nation-building. Both share the challenge of compelling political elites and their supporters to work together toward building a single government. Characteristics of intrastate war – such as high distrust, the competitive dynamics of elites, and the willingness of elites to go to great lengths to dominate rather than cooperate – are comparable to reunification state relations. In the case of civil wars, sustained armed conflicts are the main cost drivers to compel states to capitulate or engage in a compromise agreement to share power. For reunification cases, the conflict takes place on the political and diplomatic front. Economic competition, military threats, political posturing, terrorist attacks, and other less violent or non-violent measures have been the weapons of choice.³² In reunification there is no condition that dramatically alters the cost-benefit calculus of member states that drives them toward a power-sharing arrangement. Without forces to impact the cost-benefit equilibrium, the inclination of governments is not to pursue potentially risky cooperation agreements that do not guarantee a positive future for the stakeholders involved. As Arthur Stein points out, states tend to be risk adverse in situations when survival is at stake.³³

Not only are states reluctant to reach agreements on high stakes issues, they also tend to be more sensitive to relative gains. Any skewed distribution of economic resources, military power and/or political authority may result in a serious threat to the power and even survival of the relatively disadvantaged elites when building a long-term power-sharing arrangement.³⁴ When relative gains become increasingly important, Duncan Snidal argues that cooperation becomes more difficult. He writes, “[E]ven in purely harmonious absolute gains situations between two-actors, they approximate zero-sum conflictual contests when relative gains are important. If room for cooperation remains, agreements are often less viable, since states’ incentives to violate them increase under relative gains. Thus, relative gains decrease states’ interests in cooperation as well as their ability to maintain self-enforcement agreements in anarchy.”³⁵ This compounds states’ unwillingness to reach reunification agreements.

By viewing the reunification process as a high stakes strategic bargaining process, we can anticipate that states will defer agreement to the long term. Their sensitivity to relative costs makes the possibility of cooperation more difficult. Unlike a power-sharing arrangement driven by intrastate wars, there are no obvious forces that change the cost-benefit calculations. Thus, a state will sustain the status quo until the costs of non-cooperation are so overwhelming that it accepts the demands of the other state. We cannot conclude that stable states are inclined to reunify because they can afford to wait until the agreement is best suited to their demands.

Implication Two: There is a trade-off between peaceful international engagement and the prospects for reunification.

The supposition that stable states are not inclined to reunify highlights a trade-off between political-economic engagement that stabilizes states and the goal of reunification. If embattled states facing an uncertain future are more inclined than stable states to consider reunification, then efforts to engage and assist a weak state may be counterproductive for reunification. This

logic challenges progressive views of reunification. Roh Moo-hyun argued in his “Peace and Prosperity” policy that North Korea needs to be strengthened economically and the wealth gap must narrow before reunification can occur. However, the discussion above predicts the opposite outcome: strengthening North Korea would provide it with a buffer to absorb short to medium-term costs and enable it to defer further the decision to reunify. This does not deny that increased positive interaction between competing states is likely to contribute to stabilizing relations that were historically contentious, but it highlights the existence of trade-offs between promoting peaceful coexistence and creating conditions favorable for reunification.

This framework also clarifies how regional powers and neighboring states can delay reunification. These dyads do not exist in an international political vacuum. Any change in a region as significant as the union of two states can arouse anxiety and even threaten neighboring states. Thus, outside powers may have a strong incentive to sustain the status quo, even trying to intervene and prevent reunification by buttressing a dyad under the pretext of assisting an ally. An example of such an intervention occurred during the 1953 Berlin Uprising, when the Soviet military intervened on behalf of the East German government when it could not control violent demonstrations that nearly brought down Walter Ulbricht’s regime. The DPRK persists today because of China’s generous economic and political support, even though it is internationally ostracized. International support (and threats) can change the calculus and resolve of bargaining states by providing a weak state with the resources it needs to sustain its independence. Regional powers can change the calculus of reunification states by intervening militarily or politically (or at least threatening to), thereby disrupting cooperation. Saudi Arabia’s repeated use of the tribal elements in North Yemen to pressure its leaders to halt their collaboration with the South are examples of this.³⁶

If we assume that states involved in a high stakes strategic bargaining process to share power are predisposed not to cooperate, then we can see why efforts to strengthen one or both states will actually give them the resources to further delay reunification. Conceptualizing reunification in this framework helps us understand how political and/or economic engagement from abroad or within the reunification dyad could delay consideration of reunification.

THE CHALLENGES OF SHARED NATIONAL IDENTITY

Reunification dyads mutually perceive a common national identity, which influences the dynamics governments face when considering political integration. Sharing an identity does not necessarily promote cooperation among stakeholders, but rather can make relations even more contentious. Ideological competition and a history of rivalry make national identity politics in reunification cases more competitive, as each side feels vulnerable to its counterpart state. The result is a security dilemma because the other side always serves as a “counter-hegemony,” a reality with important policy implications for reunification.

Why are national identity politics within reunification dyads so contentious? Elites and the general populace in both countries accept a dominant narrative that they belong to a common national community that shares a unique history, culture, religion, language, institutions, and/or set of values as well as a common destiny that makes them homogenous. They share the aspiration to return to a “golden era” when the entire nation existed as a single political unit. These beliefs are institutionalized in the constitution, law, historical texts, and other

political and/or societal edicts to memorialize this national identity. As part of this identity, there are often emotionally and politically charged collective memories of the past, which provide idiographic material for leaders to weave stories to stir up nationalist feelings, develop a sense of connection among people who share these sentiments, and mobilize support. One important goal is to be unified under a common political leadership, recovering from colonial subjugation, national shame, or oppression, which are linked to the nationalist narrative and the origin of the division. The division serves as a vestige of this painful past. National unification represents the final shedding of the nation's colonial past as a proud independent state is born. The close ties between unification and nationalism link these two factors closely to state legitimacy. Ernst Gellner writes: “[N]ationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones.”³⁷ A reunification state, the defender of the nation, may be judged on how effectively it achieves this goal of restoring the nation.

Given the highly charged nature of the reunification issue, it is no surprise that leaders have used this issue to mobilize domestic support and strengthen their control when faced with governing challenges. Park Chung-hee used the euphoria that accompanied the signing of the 1972 North-South Korea Joint Communiqué and associated negotiations, after almost thirty years of mutual isolation, to push through his authoritarian Yusin policy that dissolved the parliament and essentially ensured that he would retain the presidency indefinitely. He packaged the policy as an effort to strengthen South Korea to meet the challenges of reunification and the changing international environment.

Shared identities can be both a forum for cooperation as well as for contestation.³⁸ If there is one agreed set of values and norms for the ideational community, then its members are likely to be cooperative and the group cohesive. However, if there are multiple entrepreneurs with varying and incompatible opinions regarding what ideology, principles, or leaders should govern the national community, then it becomes a contentious environment.³⁹

Reunification dyads often emerge immediately after a catastrophic war or the collapse of colonial control at a time when no dominant indigenous power emerges to fill the vacuum left by the discredited outgoing authority. While nationalist entrepreneurs and parties share a common definition of community membership, they fight over what principles, secular ideology, or shared norms should organize and govern that society. One side typically represents some form of leftist or communist ideology, while the other promotes a conservative, non-communist ideal. The inability of competing political groups with antithetical visions to build a nation with a single political system that would manage conflicts results in a fractured polity. If left on their own, the political groups would fight until one emerged as the victor and legitimate successor of the new state, while competitors were neutralized. Outside powers intervene to ensure that friendly leaders will prevail, ultimately preventing a decisive winner and fueling an endless struggle to take control.

In the case of reunification, two competing groups set up governments within their territory of control, each claiming to be the only true legitimate representative over the entire nation, while assailing their opponent as charlatans. As Chaim Kaufman argues, the primary interest in ideological conflict is not to control territory, but more importantly to win the hearts and minds of all nationals.⁴⁰ Although political borders are drawn, territories secured, and

governments established, these competing states struggle with their opponents to win control and eliminate the rival government. Leaders promise not to rest until the nation is united.

Adversaries divided along ideological lines rarely overcome their differences. Donald Horowitz and Alex Groth argue that when “ideology forms the basis for understanding conflict, the participants see different worlds, speak different languages, and often define the conflict as one between incommensurable principles. Groups produce sustaining myths that create an image of ‘others,’ which is characterized by hostility, malevolence, suspicion, and mistrust.”⁴¹ In a similar vein, Gi-wook Shin et al. maintain that when ideological cleavages emerge within a social identity group like a nation, the “black sheep effect” occurs, where competing groups view their opponents as a profound threat to the “in-group homogeneity” and to the viability of the ethnic community.⁴² Given these threats, the objective of competing groups is the elimination of their rivals or the overthrow of the opposing government, making conflict resolution difficult.

In order to reach a negotiated settlement, both sides must forego claims to be the only legitimate authority of the national community and agree to a common political system, even if it is not consonant with the group’s ideological disposition. Many oppose any compromise to their ideological principles that endangers the viability of their philosophical order and governing power. If leaders with such a resolute position on either one or both sides hold political sway, a negotiated reunification where the two states compromise and agree to power-sharing is unlikely. Only by neutralizing this internal resistance would peaceful reunification be feasible. In short, the combination of national identity politics and ideological competition results in a significant impediment to reach common ground for peaceful reunification. As shown below, these factors may cause even greater problems for these states than just achieving reunification.

Implication One: Reunification dyads face a security dilemma.

One consequence of perpetuating the narrative that the two states share the same national identity is that it contributes to what Robert Jervis calls a “security dilemma.”⁴³ The two stand as alternative political systems. Citizens compare their living conditions with their compatriots just across the border. As Adam Pzeworski writes: “[A]s long as no collective alternatives are available, individual attitudes toward the regime matter little for its stability. What is threatening to authoritarian regimes is not the breakdown of legitimacy, but the organization of counter-hegemony: collective projects for an alternative future.”⁴⁴ If the two countries function under different ideological systems, the more prosperous society and its political institutions could serve as a “counterhegemony” for the ailing society. For example, beginning in the early 1970s, ordinary East German citizens were able to watch West German television programs every evening. What they saw was the wealth of their capitalist brothers, glamorous images of prosperity, consumerism, and freedom. This experience arguably contributed to the steady stream of East Germans defecting to the West in pursuit of better lives, and later led to the explosive support for immediate German reunification when the West German chancellor spoke about its possibility. Also, it is no surprise that the North Korean regime cracks down hard on the smuggling of South Korean DVDs that contain soap operas, news, and other programming that expose its citizens to South Korean society and uncover lies about the prosperity just beyond the DMZ.

The common language, culture, and national identity open the possibility of a more deliberate means of influence, where one state or even societal group could try to influence the populace of its counterpart — a bargaining strategy called “suasive reverberation.”⁴⁵ Leaders of one side may try to communicate directly, shaping attitudes toward the other side’s position in a bargaining situation. Applying pressure on their dyadic opponents by speaking directly to their constituents may force their government into accepting a particular position. In the most extreme case, a state may use persuasion, side payments, targeted messages, and other means to convince societal groups to overthrow their opponent’s ruling elite for another more compliant leader that will be more willing to adopt certain bargaining positions. Aware of their political, military, and/or economic advantages, the stronger state has tried to highlight this disparity between them to weaken popular support of the weaker state, often by offering peaceful reunification during politically vulnerable periods of the weaker state. North Korea, for example, repeatedly used this tactic to appeal to the South Korean public and create conditions for a communist revolution in the country. For example, after the fall of Syngman Rhee and mass student demonstrations, it offered a plan for peaceful reunification, intended not to actually promote intergovernmental cooperation, but rather to encourage radical South Korean students and intellectuals, who helped bring down the Rhee government, to apply pressure on the weak Prime Minister Chang Myon to move toward reunification during a period of enormous political and economic strains.

Implication Two: Within an identity community, greater engagement between reunification states could lead to the erosion of the idea of reunification in the long-term.

When dyadic relations actually improve, and political, economic, and societal engagement increases, we would expect the weaker of the two states to feel increasingly insecure, especially if the disparities are stark, leaving it vulnerable to criticism by its own citizens. Under these conditions, what policy options are available to protect the weak state’s legitimacy from being eroded? We would anticipate ruling elites of the weak state to distance themselves rather than emphasize commonalities. They would seek to weaken the bonds of common identity in order to persuade their citizens that the two should not be compared. Empirically, we see this in East Germany after the initiation of Ostpolitik and detente, Erich Honecker’s Abgrenzung’s (demarcation) policy attempted to redefine the country’s identity, culture, language, history, and worldview not as “German” but as socialist and tied to the Soviet Union. He even abandoned the idea of unification for fear of being overwhelmed. Taiwan’s independence movement and “Taiwanese” identity are also examples of this. Both the GDR and ROC faced dominant reunification partners and began this quest of “identity uniqueness” soon after their relations improved and exchanges dramatically increased. This identity redefinition has not occurred on the Korean Peninsula, but North Korea’s attempt to isolate its population from South Korea and cordon off areas where South Korean businesspeople and tourists travel to the DPRK reveal this “distancing.” These developments run contrary to functionalist expectations that increased relations between reunification partners lead to greater trust, cooperation, and eventually reunification. Instead, the tendency is greater insecurity and political movement away from reunification even to the extent of breaking down the national identity that binds the dyad.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on a different, more systematic way to analyze the dynamics of reunification, this chapter views the reunification process as a strategic bargaining process between two states that share a common national identity. Although the political science scholarship shows scant interest in the reunification question, there is a rich source of scholarly work on strategic bargaining and national identity that can generate insights on reunification. I derived four broad implications for further exploration:

1. Stable states tend to delay reunification as long as they can because they can afford to do so.
2. There is a trade-off between peaceful and international engagement and the prospects for reunification.
3. Reunification dyads face a security dilemma.
4. Within an identity community, greater engagement between reunification states could lead to the erosion of the idea of reunification in the long-term.

This is not to suggest that these are the only implications or hypotheses that can be drawn from this framework, but as we look at the challenges more systematically, we can better understand the dynamics of the reunification process. The next step is to explore what actually causes peaceful reunification.

ENDNOTES

1. For our purposes, a state is a territorially bounded political unit with a central government, possessing a monopoly of legitimate violence within this polity. Moreover, the government is recognized by members of the international community as a sovereign state.
2. This permanent union contrasts to what some call “national community”—the existence of two independent states that support the idea of cultural oneness, while allowing goods and people to flow freely between them. It is not a confederation where states share decision-making power over a few functional areas (e.g., foreign policy), but where most political authority is retained in the constituent states and each has the right to pull out of the arrangement.
3. As an example, North Vietnamese troops toppled the South Vietnamese government in Saigon, reunifying the two countries under the authority of Hanoi.
4. Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 51.
5. The reunification of Germany was a negotiated integration. Negotiations took place between Bonn and Berlin, and a mutual agreement was reached to reunify under Article 23. East Germany relinquished its authority to that of the FRG in exchange for a promise of prosperity.
6. This is a constructivist approach, focusing on the role of ideational factors that are collectively shared.
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10. Marc Ross, “Culture in Comparative Political Analysis,” in Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, eds., *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 138.

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19. Samuel Kim, "The Mirage of A United Korea," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 169, No. 9 (2006), pp. 9-14.
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22. Aidan Foster Carter, "Korea: Sociopolitical Realities of Reuniting a Divided Nation," in Thomas Henriksen and Kyongsoo Lho, eds., *One Korea? Challenges and Prospects for Reunification* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1994), pp. 32-33.
23. Kristina Spohr, "German Unification: Between Official History, Academic Scholarship and Political Memoirs," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2000); Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 199-205, 230-32.
24. James McAdams, *Germany Divided: From the Wall to Reunification* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
25. On viewing state building as a strategic bargaining process following civil wars, see David Mason and Patrick Fettes, "How Wars End: A Rational Choice Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (December 1996); Donald Wittman, "How Wars End: A Rational Choice Model," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1979).
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29. The question is not only 'Should we reach an agreement?' but also "Which agreement should we reach?" James Morrow, "Signalling, Commitment and Negotiation," p. 96.
30. H.E. Goemens, *War and Punishment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Donald Wittman, "How Wars End: A rational choice model," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1979), pp. 743-763.
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39. Marc Ross, " Culture in Comparative Political Analysis" in Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman, *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): p. 134-161.; See also Michael N. Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
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43. Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder, eds. *Civil Wars, Insecurity and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
44. Adam Pzeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 54-55.
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ASIA'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE: KOREA, CHINA'S AGGRESSIVENESS, AND NEW LEADERSHIP

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