

The Two Plus Four Treaty and Korean Unification

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While the importance and implications of the Two Plus Four Treaty from the German unification process have already been highlighted by extant literature on Korean unification, we claim that it needs to be revisited in light of the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape surrounding the Korean peninsula today. With the growing tension between the U.S. and China over regional leadership in East Asia, and the talk about an emerging new Cold War, international factors have become even more crucial than before when we think about possible Korean unification. Of course, this is not to downplay the domestic side of the equation. If there were any lessons we can draw from the German experience, however, they would be on international aspects rather than domestic ones. This paper's central claim is that Korean unification is becoming more challenging as it will be more internationally contested than Germany's experience.

Keywords: German unification, Korean unification, Two Plus Four Treaty, United States, China

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I . Introduction

Despite many cautionary suggestions against drawing simplistic parallels between Germany's unification and Korea's possible unification,¹ the former still remains an enticing point for reference when we talk about the latter. Germany, therefore, has often served as a symbolic place for South Korean leaders to pronounce their key policies toward North Korea. Past presidents Kim Dae-jung and Park Geun-hye both gave important speeches in Germany, and so did the current President Moon Jae-in in 2017, where he assured the North that there would be no unification via absorption.

One of the key pillars of the German unification process was the conclusion of a multilateral agreement, the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany that was signed in September 1990, which provided a legal basis for the reunited Germany's full sovereignty.² What came to be referred to as the Two Plus Four Treaty, the agreement was the result of a series of negotiations that started earlier the same year initiated by the U.S. secretary of state James Baker. The participants in the Two Plus Four talks were the two German states and the four Allied Forces that occupied Germany with the fall of the Nazis, including the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The final agreement not only authorized the unified Germany as a fully sovereign state while settling several major issues, including the question of its external borders, regional security issues, military strength, and future relationships with other European states. In European history, this diplomatic document might be considered one of the most important instances of successful multilateral discussion. Therefore, to understand the reasons why the unification of Germany was successful, it is vital to look

1 See, for example, Rüdiger Frank, "The Unification Cases of Germany and Korea: A Dangerous Comparison," *38 North*, November 3, 2016.

2 Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, September 12, 1990, *Federal Foreign Office*, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/248554/cf11046bd657eb2515e9930892f29ad3/vertragstextbgb1-data.pdf>.

at the details of the Two Plus Four Treaty.

While the importance and implications of the Two Plus Four Treaty from the German unification process have already been highlighted by extant literature on Korean unification, we claim that it needs to be revisited in light of the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape surrounding the Korean peninsula today. With the growing tension between the U.S. and China over regional leadership in East Asia, and the talk about an emerging new Cold War,³ international factors have become even more crucial than before when we think about possible Korean unification. Of course, this is not to downplay the domestic side of the equation. If there were any lessons we can draw from the German experience, however, they would be on international aspects rather than domestic ones.

This paper's central claim is that the Two Plus Four treaty can help us identify key security issues that will need close attention from now as we prepare for possible unification. What Germany went through more than three decades ago will not be replicated on the Korean peninsula today. Yet, we argue that it still provides a useful framework for us to consider how we may tackle issues such as alliances and military arming, including nuclear weapons. Of course, Korean unification is becoming more challenging as it will be more internationally contested than Germany's experience. The process leading up to Germany's unification, however, also provides a glimmer of hope.

The window of opportunity for German unification emerged in an unexpected way with the Soviet's demise in the late 1980s. West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) was able to seize the opportunity as it had been implementing an active engagement policy with East Germany (German Democratic Republic) and the rest of the Communist bloc. For South Korea, therefore, we suggest that it should strive to maintain a consistent position with regard to the North so as to wait for the right

3 Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War America, China, and the Echoes of History," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2021): 10-20.

moment for a more active unification strategy. In this respect, the goal of this paper is not so much to consider whether the Two Plus Four treaty is an ideal model or not as to think about important issues that may arise during a hypothetical Korean unification process through the lens of the German experience.

The article proceeds as follows: We first review extant research that compares German unification with a hypothetical one on the Korean peninsula. We then present a detailed analysis of the Two Plus Four Treaty that cemented the unified German state's international status. The section will be divided into four subsections regarding issue areas, including the future political system, alliance relationships, security issues, and borders. The following section draws a parallel between the Two Plus Four Treaty and possible Korean unification. We argue that the chance for such multilateral negotiations and agreements among the major parties will be scant in the Korean unification scenario. Finally, the implications of the analysis will be discussed.

II. Literature Review

In this section, we review recent literature on the comparison between German unification and possible Korean unification in order to locate this research within the relevant context.⁴ Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a large volume of scholarship was produced to draw lessons for possible Korean unification from the German experience. As such enthusiasm subsides, however, one of the major lines of research on the topic has become one that warns against drawing simplistic comparisons between the two cases. Stefan Niederhafner, for example, claims that North Korea today is no East Germany before the German unification in many aspects, including economy, political system, and social conditions.⁵ Unlike Germany, moreover, the two Koreas' division

4 Note that we focus on research published in the past ten years in English language outlets.

was sealed by the brutal civil war that killed hundreds of thousands. Rüdiger Frank also questions the comparability of Germany's unification and the hypothetical one of Korea due to the ideological barriers and the lack of communication between the North and the South.⁶

German unification nonetheless remains an attractive point for reference when it comes to possible unification on the Korean peninsula simply because it is the only case of reunification in modern history, barring Yemen. Robert Kelley, for example, compares the two on domestic and international levels, outlining both similarities and differences.⁷ While he stresses the differences between Germany and Korea, Kelly still seeks to draw some lessons from the example of the former, claiming that the reunification process should unfold slowly and cautiously to prevent Chinese interference. In a similar vein, Jochen Prantl and Hyun-Wook Kim also argue that the primary lesson South Korea can learn from the German experience is the importance of strategic diplomacy.⁸ They claim that South Korea needs to engage North Korea with clear strategic purposes of promoting shared identity and culture based on multilateral diplomacy. Others use unified Germany's struggle as a reference point to draw lessons for possible Korean unification. By dissecting 25 years of unified Germany experience, Wolf Wagner concludes that reunification by incrementalism would fare better than alternatives.⁹ In particular, he supports engagement with North Korea through the Sunshine policy as a means of achieving such goals.

5 Stefan Niederhafner, "The Challenges of Reunification: Why South Korea Cannot Follow Germany's Strategy," *Korea Observer* 44 (2013): 249-287.

6 Rüdiger Frank, "The Unification Cases of Germany and Korea."

7 Robert E. Kelly, "The German-Korean Unification Parallel," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 23, no. 4 (2011): 457-472.

8 Jochen Prantl and Hyun-Wook Kim, "Germany's Lessons for Korea: The Strategic Diplomacy of Unification," *Global Asia* 11, no. 4 (2016): 34-41.

9 Wolf Wagner, "Unification by Absorption or by Incrementalism (Sunshine Policy)?: A Comparative Enquiry 25 Years after German Reunification," *Development and Society* 44, no. 1 (2015): 167-189.

We concur with the extant literature about the usefulness of careful comparison between the two cases. As Kelly notes, it is possible to compare a historical case with a possible future history based on a structure and focused comparison.¹⁰ Our point of departure from the literature reviewed above is that we focus more specifically on international aspects of unification. While the literature has not been blind to the importance of the multilateral arrangement that undergirded German unification, more systematic accounts of the Two Plus Four treaty have not been provided.¹¹ We seek to fill this gap by analyzing the treaty in more detail and drawing parallels with the possible unification of the Korean peninsula.

III. German Unification and the Two Plus Four Treaty

The unification of Germany was neither foreseen to happen in 1990 nor was it expected to happen at such a rapid pace. While there is no doubt that the FRG's pursuit of *Ostpolitik* paved the way for future unification, the Soviet policy in the late 1980s, which was reflected in Mikhail Gorbachev's speech at the United Nations in 1988 played an instrumental role. Compared to his previously restricting and conservative policies, the reformed policies called *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* drove changes in behavior in both Germanies and other socialist states like Poland and Hungary. The new policies not only encouraged autonomy and free will of the former satellite states, but Gorbachev opened the window for Germany to pursue unification by signing the Joint Declaration with Helmut Kohl in 1989. These events, paired with the increasingly determined protests in East Germany, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9th, 1989. The huge wave of East Germans fleeing to the west led to Germany developing a

10 Kelly, "The German-Korean Unification Parallel," 457-458. Also see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

11 See, for example, Jong-Chul Park and Joseph Harte (eds.), *Inter-Korean Relations and the Unification Process in Regional and Global Contexts* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2015).

multilateral plan to control the process of unification. Before the actual unification talks started, therefore, diplomatic channels had already been very busy. Not only did Britain and France, who were rather skeptical of German unification at first, have to be convinced, but Soviet concerns about unified Germany's position within Europe had to be addressed as well.

1. Future Political System

There are several reasons why the decision about the system of united Germany was crucial for a successful unification. The GDR's willingness to bow to FRG's system certainly mattered a great deal. First, we need to ask why the GDR played a relatively passive role in the process of shaping future Germany. With the waning of the Soviet influence on the entire Eastern bloc, it officially confirmed in a joint declaration between Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl that "[t]he right of all peoples and states to freely determine their own destiny [...] must be ensured."¹² Announced even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, this statement suggests that the Soviet Union would not stand in the way of the change in the GDR and thus would not support the GDR leadership to suppress its people. The June 1953 uprising in Berlin had already shown that East Germany needed the Soviet Union to bring the crowds under control. With the increased indignation due to the failing political system, the majority of the East German population was either no longer convinced of their own system or felt that, in an election, the GDR system would never be accepted. With the GDR having neither political legitimacy nor any leverage to negotiate, the way for a liberal-democratic constitution was wide open.

Although Germany's future system of government was largely seen as an internal matter, it also had the potential to affect the surrounding

12 "Gemeinsame Erklärung von Helmut Kohl und Michail Gorbatschow [Joint Declaration by Helmut Kohl and Gorbachev]," June 13, 1989, Centre virtuel de la connaissance sur l'Europe [Virtual Knowledge Center on Europe], https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/joint_declaration_by_helmut_kohl_and_mikhail_gorbachev_bonn_13_june_1989-en-a9d70aaa-b730-455a-8ce4-a0a0525b7de2.html.

countries. On the one hand, a sudden turning away from socialism by the GDR would most likely have a negative impact on the Soviet Union. With its own political and economic crisis at home, the Soviet Union could not afford such a setback in its sphere of influence. The FRG realized this in the late 1980s and used it to convince the Soviet Union of the Western cause during the reunification talks.

However, the groundwork for this venture was undertaken before reunification was even seriously discussed. In particular, the FRG's financial resources were tapped to improve its ties with the Soviet Union.¹³ During the reunification talks, as a result, the Soviet Union gave in and accommodated the FRG to a certain extent in order not to lose the latter's economic support.¹⁴ The so-called "package deal" negotiated between the two parties was conducive to the decision to release the economically weak GDR and accept the proposed FRG system. The package deal included, among other agreements, that a loan of several billion German Mark would be released if the Two Plus Four talks successfully concluded, and that the united Germany would continue pursuing the economic commitments of the GDR.¹⁵ In return, the Soviet Union agreed not to drag out the Two Plus Four negotiations, hand over its Four Power sovereign rights, and leave the NATO issue to Germany.¹⁶

From the west, on the other hand, the three Allied Powers (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) had already stated in the "Convention on relations between the Three Powers and the Federal Republic of Germany" of 1952 that a unified Germany should have a liberal-democratic constitution like the FRG.¹⁷ For the U.S., the decision

13 Randall Newnham, "The Price of German Unity: The Role of Economic Aid in the German-Soviet Negotiations," *German Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (1999): 425.

14 *Ibid.*, 426.

15 *Ibid.*, 430.

16 *Ibid.*, 432.

17 "Convention on relations between the Three Powers and the Federal Republic of Germany," May 26, 1952, Centre virtuel de la connaissance sur l'Europe [Virtual Knowledge Center on Europe], <https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2003/>

on the future political system of a united Germany was quick and swift, as having a stable liberal democracy in the heart of Europe was highly preferred for multiple reasons. First, a prosperous Europe offers good opportunities for international trade—especially if the US is expected to have an active role in shaping the new market structure within a united Germany. Right after WWII, the US started its quest to realize its ideal of a free and open economic market and, therefore, the future of Europe.¹⁸ In that spirit, the U.S. advocated for Germany to become an "economic unit" and supported economic unification, meaning that the Allies should work together to build up the German economy. Furthermore, the United States advocated that the zones occupied by the Allied Powers should not be abused to create a separate political and economic society in each zone, but rather that the whole of Germany should be united economically in order to realize the reparations payments and the reconstruction of Europe.¹⁹ When the unification talks finally started, the FRG was enjoying great economic success, in contrast to the economically rather weak GDR.

Perhaps the more important reason why the West had an uncompromisable interest in the future political system of the unified Germany was the ideological conflict. With Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union, the slowly changing Eastern Bloc, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War was coming to an end, but this did not mean that the advancement of communism had completely stopped. A Germany that was doing economically well was not only good for the American and European market, it was also intended to make West Germany attractive and draw in the Eastern Bloc.²⁰ Thus, it was the top priority of the U.S. in Germany—as it was in South Korea—to not allow any room for communism

10/1/b1885d93-c91a-4fa7-80bd-e1d3b3171b87/publishable_en.pdf.

18 John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 586.

19 J.F. Byrnes, "Restatement of Policy on Germany," September 6, 1946, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://U.S..usembassy.de/etexts/ga4-460906.htm>.

20 John Gimbel, *The American Occupation of Germany: Politics and the Military 1945–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), 255.

and to contain the Soviet's influence. For the U.S., it was strategically imperative that Germany, which was to play an important and integrated role in the growing European community, did not advocate a socialist system but had similar values and principles as the rest of Western Europe.

2. Alliance Relationships

The prevalent international post-war system, the Cold War period (1947–1989), was a bipolar system between the Soviet Union and the United States and has been a defining characteristic of the period.²¹ Ironically, however, the U.S. pursued a multilateral security framework as opposed to bilateral relationships. Not only was the U.S. a supporter of the interconnectedness of European countries, but it tried to avoid bilateral entanglements. Rather, it was interested in building up an international network of security and trade. Germany's security framework was obviously one of the most important issues on which both the U.S. and the Soviets wanted to have their own way. In 1955, about ten years after the end of WWII, the FRG joined NATO; as a counter-reaction, the GDR joined the Warsaw Pact as a founding member. Therefore, the affiliation of a united Germany was at issue during the Two Plus Four talks.

Aside from economic advantages that come with an extended international market, the U.S. and the participating European countries would have several benefits from being in a security regime. Based on the definition of Robert Jervis, a security regime limits nations' behavior due to their belief that other nations reciprocate under common rules, principles, and norms.²² The multilateral community of the European countries could be seen as such a security regime. Within the context of security regimes, the reasoning behind the countries' decision to support a certain governmental system in Germany gets clearer.

21 John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security* 10, no. 4 (1986): 127.

22 Robert Jervis, "Security Regimes," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 357.

One of the preconditions for a security regime's formation is that they all share not only a similar understanding of what the security regime is but also the value it holds to each participant.²³ This is important because if one party suggests that the other one does not cherish the security cooperation as much as it does, the cooperation cannot last long. Thus, the stability of the security regime depends on the shared value and consequently the trust in the regime and the willingness to uphold it. Within the European context, it means that the European states and the U.S. expected that united Germany would continue to have the governmental system of the FRG since it resonated more with their values and principles than the GDR's system. With the geopolitical location of Germany in the middle of Europe, it was only advantageous for the other European nations for a unified Germany to also be a part of the existing security regime. Upholding a security regime—especially during the Cold War—can bring stability. On the economic front, the Soviet Union was less skeptical about the increasing independence and self-determination of the Eastern Bloc. A genuine concern for the Soviet Union, however, was the expansion of NATO and the spread of liberal ideas.

According to Jervis, a security regime can only be formed if none of the participating states support the idea of expansion as a means of security. Gorbachev believed that if the unified Germany became a member of NATO, it would not expand beyond the eastern German border. Therefore, he did not perceive Germany as a NATO member posing a fundamental threat to Soviet security. In the end, Gorbachev let himself be coaxed into giving Germany the free choice of which alliance it wanted to belong to through several deals which were made on several occasions, such as the NATO ministerial meeting (1990) in Scotland and a private talk between President Gorbachev and Chancellor Kohl.²⁴ Some specific arrangements were agreed upon, including one stipulating that the Soviet groups would have a longer period of time to withdraw from the GDR in

²³ Ibid., 361.

²⁴ Georg Julius Luy, "Two plus Four: A Diplomatic Masterpiece," *New Zealand International Review* 36, no. 2 (2011): 10.

an orderly fashion and until that was the case that no NATO structures or the *Bundeswehr* [Federal Defense Forces of Germany] would be allowed to encroach on the GDR's territory. Also important for the Soviet Union was the reduction of the *Bundeswehr* to a certain size and that Germany signed the Non-proliferation Treaty.

3. Security Issues

The size and makeup of the unified Germany's military was another topic that stirred some discussion in the Two Plus Four talks. Multiple options were discussed for deciding on how to proceed concerning the military power of Germany. The post-war decision not to completely demilitarize was still valid, yet there was still the question of how big of a military a unified Germany was allowed to have and also what kind of weapons were tolerated. It was a delicate question for the Soviet Union, particularly because the issues of Germany's alliance and self-determination were closely linked. If they were to allow Germany to join NATO, this could potentially mean that NATO would try to station nuclear weapons in Germany.

In the meantime, however, there were already discussions in the international community, independently and beginning even before the German reunification discussion, about controlling the military and weapons arsenal. At the beginning of 1989, the first official negotiations on arms controls in Europe took place, which resulted in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 1990. One of the primary goals of the CFE was "to prevent military conflict in Europe [...], strive for stability and security [...], and replace military confrontation with a new pattern of security relations."²⁵ Similar to security regimes, arms control in international relations can be considered a tool used to create more stability and security. In this sense, arms control can be seen as a

25 "Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe," November 19, 1990, *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/9/14087.pdf>.

cooperative security measure through which involved parties commit to the reduction of arms in order to avoid a possible escalation. In theory, countries agree on arms control on the ground of "mutual consent for mutual benefit."²⁶ The arrangement agreed upon during the German unification process was different from mutual arms control. Germany, in fact, traded its rights for arming in exchange for the external support for its unification. Germany giving up the possibility to produce and use nuclear weapons and reducing the size of its military were the costs that Germany was willing to bear.

Successful arms control also has the advantage of transparency and establishing a bi- or multilateral relationship in which otherwise secret and sensitive data is being exposed to foreign powers.²⁷ The treaty states that it will "provide notifications and exchange information pertaining to its conventional armaments and equipment"²⁸ and that every participating state is authorized to conduct inspections, ensuring the accuracy of the information a state has provided. Accordingly, it can be monitored whether Germany or any other party that has signed the CFE treaty, complies with the requirements. Although Germany maintained a low-key presence in the military arena during the post-war period, some countries might have felt uncertain about a rapidly unified Germany. With the assurance that Germany would adhere to the NPT as well as the CFE and that its military would be limited to a certain size, concerns and fears were appeased. Since Germany was given a free choice to join NATO, they also did not necessarily have to rely on nuclear deterrence or a big army with huge artillery. Thus, stability and further integration into the international community was preferred over the traditional deterrence strategy.

Despite the risks and costs of German unification, the benefits of the aspect of arms control in the Two Plus Four treaty indeed outweighed the

26 Jeffrey Arthur Larsen, *Arms Control: Cooperative Security in a Changing Environment* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 4.

27 Ibid., 5.

28 "Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe."

losses for Germany and the surrounding states. Subsequently, the limitation of military size within the framework of the upper limit set in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe was incorporated into the Two Plus Four treaty. This included a limit on the size of the military to 370,000 (ground, air and naval force) and was to be continuously restricted until this number was reached within the next few years.²⁹

The very discussion of rearming Germany was a sensitive issue in the international community, let alone the presence of nuclear weapons there. Thus, the possession of nuclear weapons by other countries, such as France and Great Britain, also seemed to be enough for the European security system to be considered safe in the sense of deterrence. In case of a threat, Germany could always rely on its neighboring states and fellow NATO members to be protected through their nuclear umbrella. This aspect presumably was also well received by the Soviet Union. If Germany had started storing nuclear weapons or even worse, start producing them, it would have meant a geographical encroaching of a nuclear threat toward Russia and make the weapon arsenal of NATO even stronger and more dangerous. With Germany signing and upholding the NPT, the incentive for them not to become a nuclear country due to the European security framework is important for the stability and peace of the international community even beyond Europe's borders.

IV. Korean Unification and the Two Plus Four Treaty

1. Future Political System

Even though the Koreans both claim unification as the ultimate goal, they both have a different understanding of how that should be achieved and what a unified Korea should look like.³⁰

²⁹ "Treaty on the Final Settlement with respect to Germany."

³⁰ Henri Féron, "Proposing a Model of Reunification to Solve the Korean Nuclear Crisis," in *Pathways to a Peaceful Korean Peninsula: Denuclearization, Reconciliation and Cooperation*, eds. Kyung-ok Do, Jeong-ho Roh, and Henri Féron (Seoul:

While they both proclaim unification in their constitutions, one can observe the different connotations that are connected to their ideas of unification by simply reading their respective constitutions. For instance, South Korea openly states that they want to unify the peninsula based on a political system that is "free and democratic," and thus pushing forward the principle of liberal democracy for a unified Korea. North Korea is slightly more subtle in expressing in its constitution how the unification is to be realized. Article 9 of its constitution states that its goal is to achieve "complete victory of socialism in the northern half," thus, not directly indicating the wish for a unified *socialist* Korea. Nevertheless, the word "reunification" is already mentioned five times in two short paragraphs in the preamble, and it is stated that the unification of the Korean Peninsula is the ultimate goal sought by the Supreme Leader. who devotes all "his work and endeavors entirely to its realization."³¹ One could also read into the statement that they want "unification and great national unity,"³² that the end goal might be to spread socialism across the whole peninsula. Thus, despite unification taking a high priority as written in the constitution, it is this subtle undertone that indicates what a preferred unification would look like.

Connotations aside, both countries state that they want a peaceful unification. How this peaceful unification shall be reached and if there are honest efforts to work on any solution to that is rather unclear. In the German case, the unification ultimately happened by absorption. Even though there were the Two Plus Four discussions where the details of the unification were negotiated, it was the FRG who swallowed the GDR in the end. The latter was forced to adapt to the West German way of living overnight. Of course, the option of absorption is also on the table for the two Koreas. For them, however, there are multiple problems that would

Korea Institute for National Unification, 2017), 261.

31 "Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 1998," *Constitute Project*, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Peoples_Republic_of_Korea_1998.pdf.

32 Ibid.

make unification by absorption a scenario not preferable by the majority—including the international community.

With President Moon Jae-in's election in May 2017, the Sunshine Policy made a comeback after its termination had been officially declared in 2010 by the South Korean Unification Ministry.³³ Instead of trying to achieve unification, Moon's version of the Sunshine Policy focuses on increasing inter-Korean cooperation.³⁴ The political stance on approaching the other party is important as it can reflect the bargaining stance and trigger different reactions from the other party. For instance, a Sunshine Policy-like stance may reduce the degree of hostilities, and there may be more inter-Korean communication which incites the hope that a spill-over effect will occur. This strategy, however, can also be easily exploited by the other party.

According to Annisa Pratamasari, the change in North Korea's behavior since 2018 to be more active in the international community and open to communication is mostly due to the struggling North Korean economy, which has suffered from a series of international economic sanctions.³⁵ Hence, Kim Jong-un's willingness to gradually open up his isolated country was due to his fear of losing power rather than a sudden positive response to the Moonshine Policy. A soft-line approach like the Moonshine Policy has the potential to reluctantly improve the inter-Korean relationship and to potentially nudge North Korea to be more open toward possible summits with other countries. Even though a soft-line approach does not automatically open up North Korea or have it submit to South Korea, a hardline approach might be an even worse choice. Moreover, the constant change of the president's favored approach is another factor that makes unification talks difficult due to South Korea always changing its *Nordpolitik* and priorities.³⁶

33 Ministry of Unification, "*White Paper on Korean Unification 2010*."

34 J. James Kim and Sanghwa Hong, "Moon's Foreign Policy Priorities in Words and Deeds," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2020, 9.

35 Annisa Pratamasari, "Kim Jong-Un's Change of Stance: North Korea's Rapprochement for Peace in 2018," *North Korean Review* 15, no. 2 (2019): 28.

36 Jai Kwan Jung and Chad Rector, "South Korea's Reunification Dilemmas,"

Yet, the question is if South Korea seeks unification by absorption due to the negative effects that would come with it, such as a huge financial burden estimated to be around \$200 billion to \$500 billion.³⁷ The option of absorption through a collapse is also one of the less favored unification options by the public, as a survey shows as compared to a peaceful unification by negotiation.³⁸ Furthermore, how likely is it that North Korea will collapse? Based on the fact that North Korea has already endured, among other things, the fall of the Soviet Union, several famines, and the great loss of the Supreme Leader twice, the probability that similar events will not bring down the North Korean system seems relatively high.

Moreover, it should be considered that North Korea is currently politically very strong,³⁹ and the current Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un, seems to have a better grip on North Korea than ever before. This can be seen above all in the fact that he appears extremely self-confident internationally and demonstrates power, has successfully brought nuclear power to North Korea, and is also not impressed by sanctions imposed on North Korea as a consequence of previous provocations such as illegal missile tests. This suggests that North Korea is unlikely to fall in the near future without the active intervention of external influences. Accordingly, the absorption of North Korea initiated by the fall of North Korea is not likely under the current circumstances.

Another way to reunify Korea, which has already been proposed by the two countries themselves, would be to build a unified Korea with the transitional solution of a confederation or federation. In a confederation, North Korea and South Korea would be associated with each other yet still

Asian Politics & Policy 4, no. 4 (2012): 502–503.

37 Tae-hwan Kwak and Seung-ho Joo, "The Future of the Korean Peninsula: Unification and Security Options for the 21st Century," *Asian Perspective* 23, no. 2 (1999): 172.

38 Chung-min Lee, "A Peninsula of Paradoxes: South Korean Public Opinion on Unification and Outside Powers," May 13, 2020, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21.

39 Féron, "Proposing a Model of Reunification," 269.

act independently and have no actual collaborating institutions with laws only applying to specific sectors. In contrast, in a federation, a centralized institution would exist with also, for example, a joint military force and special laws only applying to the joint institutions. If the two Koreas aimed toward unification based on a confederation or federation, there would be multiple difficult aspects that would intersect with each other. One crucial aspect is the compatibility of sovereignty and (political) ideology. It is unlikely that the current leadership under Kim Jong-un would allow the abolishment of socialism. A more realistic option for the unification negotiation could arise if new leadership emerges. Since Kim's successor has not yet been named and officially announced, there might be a chance that the absence of a Supreme Leader might lead to South Korea having access to the new elite, which is more open to building a confederation without socialism.⁴⁰

Generally, the South Korean population has shown in opinion polls that they would prefer the concept of a confederation, especially the young generation, with the trend increasing in the years 2020 and 2021.⁴¹ At the same time, it has also been expressed that if peaceful coexistence is possible, the option of no unification at all is preferred over all options.

For the Korean case, it also applies that how South Koreans see North Koreans and vice versa would most likely affect how they approach each other and thus how negotiations are done. It is even harder for Koreans to achieve a true sense of equality between each other without one feeling superior to the other or feeling dispensable. There might be a sense of dominance from South Korea due to their economic prosperity compared to North Korea, just like what was observed between the FRG and the GDR. Moreover, the Cold War imprinted particular images of the other regime into people's minds.⁴² The Korean War has amplified this demonization

40 Bruce W. Bennett, *Alternative Paths to Korean Unification* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 52.

41 Sang-sin Lee et al., "KINU Unification Survey 2021," *Korea Institute for National Unification*, July, 2021, 10–11, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/87cb5812-a81a-4fdc-824c-8d359544e8f7>.

and practice of othering each other. Moreover, due to North Korea isolating itself on a very strict level, it is difficult on the one hand to establish contact on a societal level between the two countries and, on the other hand, to generally have an insight into the true culture of the respective other.

Even though Germany was split as well, with a guarded wall separating the two sides, there were still many (cultural) meeting places. For instance, it was possible for East Germans under strict surveillance to be in contact with relatives from West Germany, visit them, and also to watch television broadcasted by West German TV stations.⁴³ North Koreans, however, do not have the possibility to consume South Korean entertainment legally or be in contact with relatives in South Korea or generally outside North Korea. To be that isolated does not only weaken the connectivity to the country where one is living but also fosters the idea of "the other" being unreachable.

China does not wish for any tensions to rise between North Korea and South Korea and officially supports a peaceful unification.⁴⁴ Despite their official stance, the costs of uniting the peninsula would be very high for China as well, no matter how the unification would happen. As seen with the German example, a unification by absorption is not only a rather unbecoming choice of unifying but also incredibly costly for the absorbing country. With the German unification costing over \$680 billion,⁴⁵ a Korean unification under the condition that one country would absorb the other would cost higher than the German unification.⁴⁶ Hence, unification

42 Ingrid Miethe and Hee-Young Yi, "The German unification as a process of dominance culture and its implications for the situation in South Korean society," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 444.

43 Rainer K. Silbereisen, "Psychological Challenges of Unification-Selected Results and Thoughts on Korea," *Historical Social Research [Historische Sozialforschung]* 41, no. 3 (2016): 303.

44 Hun-bong Park, "China's Position on Korea's Unification and US Forces Korea," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2010): 120.

45 Kwak and Joo, "The Future of the Korean Peninsula," 172.

46 For a thorough analysis of the different parameters which influence the costs, like, for instance, the pace of the unification, see Charles Jr. Wolf and Kamiljon T.

would not only cost South Korea in the first few years after the absorption immense amounts of money but would also bring chaos and stagnation to its own economy. China has been the main import partner and export partner of South Korea, with the United States coming in second. A stagnating and possibly struggling Korean economy would also have negative effects on international trade, thus clashing with the Chinese economy. Consequently, a stable economy of a divided Korean Peninsula, in contrast, would be preferred by China,⁴⁷ which is why a socialist Korean Peninsula governed by North Korea is not desirable for them. In the long-term, a unified Korea with a South Korean system would be beneficial for China, yet, it would have to get over the chaotic and sluggish phase of post-unification first, which does not seem like something China is willing to do due to its profit-oriented system. Regarding the system of a unified Korea, China's position most likely covers their unofficial stance on the "how" of the unification.

Unsurprisingly, the United States is seeking a reunification of the Korean Peninsula under a democratic liberal system. Convinced of its own system, this was also implemented in South Korea when the United States occupied the southern half of the Korean Peninsula after WWII. The United States is constantly trying to stabilize the political situation in East Asia and control the North Korean (nuclear) threat. This suggests that a unified Korea under North Korean control, especially with the current circumstances, i.e., nuclear weapons and the current North Korean system, is not only undesirable but would also be seen as a threat. Moreover, even if a unified Korea were denuclearized, it is likely that, even then, the socialist regime would not be wanted. That the values of liberalism and democracy are desired was also explicitly conveyed in a White House statement endorsing the U.S.-ROK alliance with the goal of a "peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy."⁴⁸ Furthermore, with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine,

Akramov, *North Korean Paradoxes, Circumstances, Costs, and Consequences of Korean Unification* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), 27–44.

47 Park, "China's Position on Korea's Unification," 120 and 126.

which started on February 24, 2022, old feelings of anti-socialism could resurface, which would further heighten opposition to a unified Korea governed by North Korea. The Japanese attitude towards the future political system of a unified Korea is somewhat in line with that of the United States. In itself, Japan knows that reunification can change the political and power dynamics between countries, especially in East Asia, for the better or worse. Therefore, Japan prefers that if the two Koreas are unified, it should be under a South Korean system.⁴⁹ Due to the geographical proximity and historical background, Japan would be very affected if a unified Korea were to be oriented towards China rather than Japan and the United States. It can be deduced from this that Japan and the United States would jointly stand for a liberal-democratic system in any negotiations concerning the future Korean system.

2. Alliance Relationships

An important aspect of the Two Plus Four discussions was Germany's opportunity to choose from several options: the decision between being a neutral country, joining NATO, the Warsaw Pact, or becoming a member of both. The situation the two Koreas are in differs greatly from the German situation. Neither North Korea nor South Korea is part of such a multilateral alliance comparable to NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Hence, there are no big camps a unified Korea would have to choose between. Rather than solving the question of multilateral alliances, the topic of bilateral connections would have to be discussed.

From a purely ideological point of view, China naturally has a great interest in the survival of the North Korean system and the future of the Peninsula.⁵⁰ Moreover, considering their geographic location, their

48 "Joint Vision for the alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," June 16, 2009, *The White House*, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/joint-vision-alliance-united-states-america-and-republic-korea>.

49 John O. Magbadelo, "Japan and the Two Koreas: The Challenges and Prospects of Confidence-Building," *World Affairs* 10, no. 2 (2006): 83–84.

shared history, and the similarity of their governmental system, it is not surprising that North Korea generally regards China as an alliance partner and vice versa. Yet, China does not support North Korea unconditionally and unquestioningly. China is South Korea's largest trading partner. At the same time, South Korea is China's second-largest importer and fifth-largest exporter. The Korean Peninsula under the socialist system of North Korea would therefore have an extremely negative impact on China's economy and stand in the way of China's current growth course. Furthermore, it can be assumed that tensions in the international arena would increase exponentially if the Peninsula were to come under socialist control.⁵¹ Hence, even strong historical ties and political similarities are not enough to win China as a supporter of a socialist unified Korea.

A unification discussion would put China in a difficult position. China needs to ensure its safety and interests, some of which tend to be pro-North Korea while others are more favorable to South Korea. The implication is that China, like North Korea, would welcome it if the USFK did not have any presence within a unified Korea. However, it also means that China, like South Korea, has economic interests that would not be feasible in a socialist Korea. Despite all this, it would be beneficial to slightly restructure the dynamics in a Two plus Four discussion following the German model. We argue that, regarding unification negotiations for the Korean case, China could be the preferred mediator and negotiation leader rather than the United States. The very reason that China has so many conflicting interests could make China a good mediator to represent the interests of both sides. Of course, it should not be forgotten that these interests are first and foremost China's interests, which also happen to overlap in some respects with those of the United States, North Korea, and South Korea.

Just as the Soviet Union was uncomfortable with the strong alliance between the FRG and the United States, North Korea and China are wary of a strong U.S.-ROK alliance and the associated U.S. military presence and

50 Kwak and Joo, "The Future of the Korean Peninsula," 186.

51 Park, "China's Position on Korea's Unification," 125.

collaboration. Since North Korea is a heavy critic of this alliance, it would be the main focus of discussion during a unification process, and it would have to be decided how and in what way compromises could be reached regarding this issue. In 1989, North Korea even imposed the condition that any unification talks would only take place after the assertion that no more joint military exercises by the U.S.-ROK alliance would be carried out in the future,⁵² showing how high a priority the U.S.-ROK alliance is in North Korean politics. However, South Korea has relied on the United States and continues to do so in many aspects of its national security, for instance, benefitting from an extended nuclear umbrella.

South Korea and the United States could try to convince China and especially North Korea that the U.S. military would leave the South Korean half and would under no circumstances enter North Korean territory—nor any other foreign military forces. Of course, this is only possible provided that the reunification takes place either in the form of a confederation, a federation, or a (peaceful) absorption. This could serve as taking one step toward trying to ease North Korean and Chinese fears like it was in the case of Germany. However, North Korea is in a different security situation than the Soviet Union was then. For one thing, the Soviet Union had to withdraw troops from a Soviet satellite state, whereas the USFK is stationed on foreign territory and is a perceived threat by North Korea. The possible threat of NATO moving further geographically toward the Soviet Union cannot be compared to having American troops in their own—united—country.

Each of the two Koreas' alliances and relations with other countries is also linked to the long history between each other accompanied by tense relations and occasional hostilities between the parties. While China has a strong connection to North Korea based on ideological similarities and post-war engagement, China also maintains a strong economic relationship with South Korea. The United States, on the opposite end, is in a close diplomatic and military alliance with South Korea, while relations with

52 Chong-sik Lee, "Political Change, Revolution, and the Dialogue in the Two Koreas," *Asian Survey* 29, no. 11 (1989): 1034.

North Korea are always tense, as the latter perceives the U.S.-ROK alliance as threatening. Neither China nor the United States would like it if North Korea or South Korea have a particularly strong bond with the respective other and would try to intercept if that is the case.⁵³

For successful reunification, all these parties would have to be willing to compromise and see reunification as an acceptable arrangement. Since a multilateral security regime is unlikely to emerge in East Asia, an alternative would be for a unified Korea to enter the Non-Aligned Movement and thus declare complete neutrality. This could not only alleviate the security concerns of the neighboring countries but also mitigate unified Korea's fear of being trapped in the balance of power politics among the great powers.⁵⁴

3. Security Issues

For the Korean case, in particular, denuclearization, or at least the monitoring of nuclear weapons, is much more complex than in Germany due to a different security environment. However, a peaceful Korean unification that can be accepted by the international community, like the German unification was, will only be successful if the nuclear question can be solved, and, consequently, North Korea would not be regarded as a threat anymore. North Korea's issues, such as its governmental style, its isolationist habits, and a weak economy, have hindered its ability to see eye to eye diplomatically with superpowers and great powers, for instance, the United States or China. Its desire for legitimacy and equality could also be translated into its intention to possess nuclear weapons. Considering North Korea's tense and threatened position in the international community, North Korea seems to deem it necessary to own nuclear weapons to deter foreign threats in order to defend its sovereignty.

53 Emma Rafaelof, "The China-North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 24, 2022.

54 Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo (eds.), *One Korea: Visions of Korean Unification* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

North Korea might believe that in order not to become subjugated by other nations, especially Euro-American countries, they needed to be recognized as a sovereign nation. They could achieve this through conforming to global norms and standards as much as possible and thus building a nation-state through owning nuclear weapons like other powerful countries. For North Korea, however, nuclear weapons have become much more than a symbol of power, deterrence, and that of a modern state. The fall of the Soviet Union marked the point at which nuclear weapons became North Korea's post-Cold War identity project.⁵⁵ On the one hand, North Korea's nuclear identity is built on the fact that an ever-present threat – primarily from the United States – ⁵⁶justifies nuclear weapons in order to maintain the country's security. By giving into the role of the victim, North Korea creates a space of understanding, especially in its own country, in which not only the *we-versus-the-other* discourse is strengthened but also the nuclear program is seen as indispensable. On the other hand, for North Korea, nuclear weapons are also a source of pride. The fact that the country was able to assert itself against international headwinds regarding the nuclear program not only shows strength but also reinforces the feeling of autonomy since North Korea decided on its own to become a nuclear country and has successfully achieved this.

An attempt to make North Korean nuclear technology possession and usage more transparent and controlled was taken in 2003 with the so-called Six-Party Talks. These talks describe a series of multilateral discussions held several times, starting from 2003 until 2007. Participants were North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia, China and the United States. Originating from North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT in 2003, the Six-Party Talks were used to find a solution to various international security concerns arising due to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Eventually, further talks failed as the six parties failed to implement any agreements,

55 Eric J. Ballbach, "North Korea's Emerging Nuclear State Identity: Discursive Construction and Performative Enactment," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 14, no. 3 (2016): 393.

56 Ibid., 398–403.

and North Korea continued testing its missiles despite the UN Security Council's condemnation.⁵⁷

One of the main causes of the Six-Party Talk's failure was discrepancies in end goals, mistrust, and misunderstandings between the parties and especially between the United States and North Korea. One misunderstanding that caused irritation and could be avoided in the future was the lack of clarity in official statements and the agreements reached in those multilateral discussions. In the Joint Statement of the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks in 2005, it was officially stated that North Korea would use nuclear energy only for peaceful purposes and would receive in exchange a light water reactor (LWR) at "an appropriate time."⁵⁸ Whilst the other parties thought of 'an appropriate time' as a very much later time after North Korea would give up its nuclear program, North Korea took it that it would first receive the LWR before its own actions.⁵⁹ Sensitive issues like these should have been specified and talked through in multilateral discussions. Naturally, vagueness in diplomatic treaties and agreement gives countries the opportunity to conclude them in the first place, using the vagueness as a strategy to avoid settling the detail. As a consequence, each country has the liberty to interpret the statements to its own advantage. However, to avoid misunderstandings like what happened in the Six-Party Talks, a right balance between specification and vagueness needs to be found for a successful implementation of agreements.

Another factor that could lead to better chances of success would be future Six-Party Talks taking place within the framework of Korean reunification, as there would be a different group dynamic there than those

57 Hanns Günther Hilpert and Oliver Meier, "Facets of the North Korea Conflict: Actors, Problems and Europe's Interests," *SWP Research Paper* 12 (2018), 9.

58 "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing," September 19, 2005, *U.S. Department of State Archive*, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>.

59 Virginie Grzelczyk, "Failure to Relaunch?: The United States, Nuclear North Korea, and the Future of the Six-Party Talks," *North Korean Review* 8, no. 1 (2012): 16.

same talks taking place outside of that framework. In the first Six-Party Talks, the dynamic between the parties could be seen as rather problematic since the talks were designed for five parties to get North Korea to denuclearize and thus effectively outnumber North Korea. North Korea was, therefore, faced not only with five discussion parties but also two opposing superpowers – China and the United States. This creates not only a numerical asymmetry but also an asymmetry in the power structure.

Accordingly, it should not be surprising if the weaker party, in this case, North Korea, seeks to strengthen its own position during the course of negotiations.⁶⁰ A different power structure symmetry would be achieved if a new round of multilateral talks on arms control took place within the framework of the unification. In this scenario, it would first be with the more flexible end goal of controlling a unified Korea's nuclear energy and weapons, rather than getting rid of it completely. And second, other countries might be more open to a unified Korea owning nuclear energy if North Korea itself is not considered a rogue state anymore, thus decreasing the threat of it actually using nuclear energy as a weapon.

Various tensions in the international community have arisen these past few years, which lead to the participants having different agendas that might affect any unification or arms control talks. For instance, with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is questionable how much time and resources Russia is able and willing to spend on possible multilateral talks revolving around a Korean unification or arms control. Furthermore, it is also debatable if some parties – especially South Korea, Japan, and the United States – even approve of Russia participating in any multilateral discussions. Meanwhile, a period of strained inter-Korean relations also seems to be emerging due to the hardline approach of the newly elected South Korean president, who is facing a North Korea that is heavily provoking with ICBM tests. Notwithstanding any tensions, however, the individual parties still have a strong incentive to participate in multilateral

60 Frank R. Pfetsch, "Power in International Negotiations: Symmetry and Asymmetry," *Négociations* 16, no. 2 (2011): 42-45.

discussions on arms control and unification talks. In spite of its provocative behavior, North Korea should be interested in participating in talks that it could use, for example, to ease UN sanctions or to receive humanitarian aid, as North Korea has not been spared from COVID-19 and its economic consequences.⁶¹ The difficulty, however, will be that North Korea officially recognizes the emergency and consequently accepts the aid.

V. Conclusion

The Korean Peninsula has been divided for over seven decades now, with no reliable indicators that unification is in sight. This article compared the circumstances of German unification in 1990 with a hypothetical Korean unification, with a specific focus on the Two Plus Four treaty. As mentioned at the outset, this paper sought to draw lessons from the German experience with regard to addressing some important security issues that are inherently international. By the nature of its division, the possible Korean unification will inevitably be an international process. In fact, Korean unification is becoming more challenging as it will be more internationally contested than Germany's experience. With the recent shift in global geopolitics, the importance of international factors has become much more critical than ever before.

While we recognize that too many factors in Korea are different from Germany, and thus a reunification based on the German model would be unwanted, we also claim that the Two Plus Four treaty serves as a useful framework to identify issues that will be most contentious to create a blueprint for a possible future unification of the two Koreas. In section III, we have carefully analyzed how Germany navigated through some of the most contentious issues, including what a unified Germany would look like, with whom it would align, and how much military power it would

61 Ki-joon Hong, "The Six-Party Talks in the Post-Kim Jong-Il Era: An Emergent Path toward a Northeast Asian Security Mechanism," *North Korean Review* 8, no. 2 (2012): 118.

pursue. We have also discussed conditions under which agreements on such important issues were made. As we have seen, the negotiations leading to the finalization of the Two Plus Four treaty were full of unpredictability and uncertainty. Only the right combination of a favorable international environment and strategic movements from FRG made the unification possible. It would be difficult to expect that to happen on the Korean peninsula today, but we can adjudicate between possible options to choose from by looking at the German experience. If a multilateral security framework does not exist in East Asia, for example, the best alternative would be to pursue the permanent neutrality of a unified Korea.

On a more general note, the process leading up to Germany's unification also provides a glimmer of hope. The window of opportunity for German unification emerged in an unexpected way with the Soviet's demise in the late 1980s. FRG was able to seize the opportunity as it had been implementing an active engagement policy with GDR and the rest of the Communist bloc. For South Korea, therefore, we suggest that it should strive to maintain a consistent position with regard to the North so as to wait for the right moment for a more active unification strategy. If there were any lessons we could draw from the German experience, they are of an international nature rather than a domestic one.

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