

TWO LESSONS FROM THE GERMAN UNIFICATION

by Wook Kim

North-South Korean relations are currently in a stalemate, and the North Korean system is being faced with a high degree of uncertainty, from both the political and economic aspects. Given this unstable and uncertain situation on the Korean peninsula, what should be the direction of the new administration's North Korea and unification policy? Many expect the new administration's policy initiatives to break the current conflictual situation, and thus to bring peace and stability to the peninsula. In order to meet these high expectations, it seems useful to ponder the political implications of the German unification. More specifically, the German unification provides us with two precious lessons, one negative and the other positive.

A Negative Lesson: The Implausibility of Unification-by-Absorption

Reflecting the various political and economic difficulties on the part of North Korea, there seems to be a growing expectation in the South that the North's instability could lead to a unification-by-absorption. This expectation, however, seems to be more the result of naivete and wishful thinking, rather than objective analysis. If one looks at the matter more carefully, a unification-by-absorption is highly unlikely.

First of all, although the Kim Jong-il regime is clearly in crisis, the possibility that the current crisis will be followed by a sudden collapse of the political system is low. In the absence of reliable information on the North's internal power politics, no one can say with

confidence that the Kim Jong-il regime will collapse in a short while. Moreover, even if the regime collapses, it is more likely to result in a simple power transition from Kim Jong-il to another segment of the current elite (e.g., the military) rather than a complete collapse of the entire political system. A regime collapse must be distinguished from a system collapse.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that the collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime will be followed by the collapse of the system itself. Then, the question becomes, "Would the system collapse lead necessarily to a Korean unification by the South's absorption of the North?" Many ordinary people as well as some scholars would nod their heads. They have probably been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the German experiences where the collapse of East Germany was immediately followed by the West's absorption of the East.

Against this popular belief, however, such a scenario is not plausible. It is wrong to simply assume that Korea would follow the German path in the event of the North's system collapse, since Korea's present situation is quite different from Germany's situation in 1989. A more careful examination of the German unification process reveals that there existed at least three internal conditions that made the unification possible.

First, East and West Germany maintained continuous contacts and cooperation before the unification. This was pivotal not only in alleviating distrust between East and West Germans, but also in letting East Germans know for themselves what truly goes on in West Germany. In particular, the effects of Western TV channels being broadcast in the East cannot

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be overemphasized.

Second, there existed an alternative group of leaders within the Communist Party of East Germany who could replace the Honecker regime. They were younger, more practical, and more reform-minded. Without these alternative forces, the Leipzig mass demonstrations by East Germans in October 1989 might not have led to the collapse of the Honecker regime, and subsequently a peaceful German unification. No one can tell for sure what would have happened.

Third, West Germany at the time of unification possessed both strong economic capabilities and the diplomatic skills necessary to secure international cooperation on the German unification. Of course, Gorbachev's perestroika and the end of the Cold War were critical external factors that made the German unification possible. At the same time, however, we should not overlook the fact that West Germany was able to take full advantage of this external environment with its economic and diplomatic power.

Coming back to the situation in Korea, do we have these internal conditions necessary for a peaceful unification-by-absorption? Contacts and cooperation between North and South Korea are far from sufficient. No one can tell whether there exists in the North a reform-oriented power group as an alternative to the Kim Jong-il regime. There is also a lingering doubt on the South's diplomatic capability to induce neighboring nations' cooperation and consensus on the Korean reunification.

Under this situation where the necessary conditions are not satisfied, there is no guarantee that the collapse of the North Korean system will lead to a unification-by-absorption. A more likely consequence of the system collapse is extreme chaos and a power vacuum in the Northern region, which will be followed by foreign intervention (most likely by China and/or

the US) to create a new political system in the region. One important negative lesson we should draw from the German unification is that under the present situation in Korea a German style unification-by-absorption is not a likely outcome.

A Positive Lesson: Brandt's Ostpolitik

Once we distance ourselves from the wishful thinking, we suddenly realize that unification must be approached from a long-term perspective. Unification cannot be achieved in one day no matter how strong or ardent the zeal for it. Instead, it must be viewed as a long process that involves continuous efforts to satisfy its preconditions one by one. This long-term and step-by-step approach to unification could be observed most clearly in Brandt's Ostpolitik, which laid solid foundations for the later unification. It is in this early part of the process that we should take a truly positive lesson from the German unification.

The German unification process started with Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik. As the leader of the Realpolitik line within the Social Democratic Party, he became the chancellor of the coalition government in 1969. At that time, the Cold War system was firmly established, and under its influence both East and West Germany pursued their own self-centered unification policies, thus making conflict inevitable. Brandt recognized, however, that peace could not be secured under the given situation, and that without peace and stability the daily accumulating economic wealth of West Germany would be meaningless. Upon his inauguration, therefore, he started whole new policy initiatives, aimed at securing peace in Germany. He proposed a "one nation, two states" policy, while officially denouncing political unification.

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In line with this new policy direction, the coalition government pursued many specific policy programs. In diplomatic terms, it attempted to improve relations with East European nations. In its relations with East Germany, the government actively pursued diverse forms of economic contacts and assistance. For example, the Western government paid a considerable amount of money (around 7.8 trillion DM from 1972 to 1989) to the Eastern counterpart on the condition that West Germans could use the East's highways for free when they traveled to Berlin. In other words, Brandt sought to secure political stability and peace by solidifying economic relations with East Germany.

This policy direction was also followed by the coalition government that was formed in 1982 between conservatives (Christian Democratic Party) and moderates (Liberal Democratic Party). In 1983 and 1984, the government provided East Germany with around 2 trillion DM through a consortium of West German banks. In return, East Germany eased its border control and removed automatic fire systems and mines in the border area. Moreover, the government also continued to pursue diverse forms of economic cooperation with East Germany, including the construction of Volkswagen's engine assembly line in East Germany.

One can say rather paradoxically that the German unification started with Brandt's denunciation of political unification. By officially giving up political unification, West Germany was able to strengthen contacts and cooperation with East Germany, which later became the foundation for the unification. Without these prior contacts and the resulting buildup of confidence between East and West

Germany, the German unification might have not been possible.

Policy Implications: "Economic" Cooperation for "Political" Stability

The implications of the German experiences for Korea are straightforward. Under the present situation of sheer conflict, it might not be such a good idea for us to talk too much about political unification. Rather than helping to bring us a unified Korea, it could deepen the already deep distrust between North and South Korea. It could be a wiser policy, therefore, to accept the North as it is, and on that basis strengthen mutual contacts and cooperation. Such a policy could serve a dual purpose: it could be not only a means of securing peace and stability "at present," but also an important foundation for the eventual unification "in the future."

At the center of various forms of inter-Korean contacts and cooperation is economic cooperation. Many people have already argued for the strengthening of economic cooperation with the North on the principle of "politics-economics separation." For those of us who have felt uncomfortable about separating the two seeming inseparables, now the German experiences provide us with an alternative rationale. "Economic" cooperation also makes "political" sense, as it is instrumental for "political" stability at present and "political" unification in the future. Therefore, whether it decides to separate politics and the economy or not, the next administration cannot help but encourage economic and other forms of inter-Korean contacts and cooperation on a steadier basis. **VIP**

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