

# The Potential of a Unified Korean Armed Forces

## A Cultural Interpretation

COL MICHAEL EDMONSTON, USAF

*Since the foundation of the South Korean state in 1948, the rhetoric of unification has occupied a prominent place in its official vocabulary. Unification with the North was always presented as the great national goal, which any government should pursue at any cost.*

—Andrei Lankov, Director, Korea Risk Group

This article examines the prospect of a future unified Korean Armed Forces through the lens of culture. Korea provides an interesting subject for cultural study for a few reasons. First, the desires of South and North Koreans suggests that unification, while presently unfeasible, is likely at some point in the future. In the words of the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff about Korea, “Eventually, peoples do tend to unify, one way or another. It just has to be managed closely and carefully to avoid armed conflict.”<sup>1</sup> Second, American commitment to stability on the Korean Peninsula demands that the United States take some responsibility for what happens to the militaries of both sides if Korea unifies. Consequently, recommendations for American foreign and military support follow speculation on the possible military outcomes of a Korean unification.

This article first looks at three possible unification scenarios for the Republic of Korea (ROK/South Korea) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea): how they might unfold and what the consequences might be for security and stability on the Korean Peninsula. These scenarios include gradual reform leading to peaceful unification, war on the Korean Peninsula, and collapse of the North Korean regime and/or government. Regardless of the scenario, I assume that South Korea ultimately dominates the unification process. Therefore, I focus more on ROK strategies for unification in those scenarios, rather than those held by the DPRK. I also consider whether the current status quo is a possibility for the long term.

Second, the article explores the potential military outcome of Korean unification in terms of two variables: the fate of the North Korean People’s Army (KPA) in a ROK-dominated unification process, and the character of unified Korean Defense Forces (KDF) in a democratic, unified Korea.<sup>2</sup> My approach is both speculative and advisory. I examine the impact of different unification scenarios on the likelihood of the KPA being integrated into a unified military and follow

with a look at the KPA's expected contribution to the unification process should Korea wish to preserve peace within and project strength to its neighbors.

In exploring the character of a unified KDF, I examine three aspects that concern or derive from the respective cultures of the two Korean militaries. These aspects include operational culture, military sociology, and military professionalism. I speculate on each aspect based on the current security environment and how that environment can be expected to change during and after unification. Furthermore, I make recommendations for ROK (and later unified Korean) policy toward a KDF, with the objectives of promoting national unity and regional stability. Finally, I close the article with six recommendations for US policy and military support to the ROK during and after unification that promotes global and regional security but also respects ROK (and later unified Korean) national and military culture.

### **A Note on Culture**

A useful definition of “culture” for this study is “the total of the collective or shared learning of [a] unit as it develops its capacity to survive in its external environment and to manage its own internal affairs.”<sup>3</sup> In the Korean context, the cultural unit is the nation. However, military forces embody a culture within a culture because their shared learning is unique. This learning takes place in a combat environment rather than a national one (though civilians can also experience combat), and their internal affairs are highly structured and tailored to accomplishing assigned missions. These missions drive them not only to survive in the combat environment but also to triumph over the enemy—in cases such as Korea's, the opposing military forces. It is in this context that I explore the military outcomes of national unification—outcomes that depend somewhat on the unification scenario, but not wholly. These potential scenarios are the next topics of this article.

### **Korean Unification Scenarios**

To set the stage for a discussion of military outcomes of unification and the potential for a unified Korean armed forces, this section examines the nature and security implications of three possible unification scenarios: gradual reform leading to peaceful unification, war on the Korean Peninsula, and collapse of the North Korean regime and/or government. The article also considers whether the status quo is a possibility for the long term, concluding that it may not be.

### ***Gradual Reform Leading to Peaceful Unification***

B. H. Liddell Hart wrote that the problem for “grand strategy” is “the winning of the peace.”<sup>4</sup> For North and South Korea, unification is one way of winning the peace, but their national strategies for going about it are different because of the distinct identities, values, and preferences for national security belonging to each side. Nevertheless, there have been mutual agreements in the past pointing toward the possibility of a peaceful unification. Key instances of cooperation include the 1972 joint agreement between Pyongyang and Seoul “that reunification would occur peacefully without foreign interference” and the 2018 Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula in which the two countries’ leaders committed to “bring a swift end to the Cold War relic of longstanding division and confrontation.”<sup>5</sup> The commitment includes willingness to hold meetings with the United States and China for establishing a peace agreement in place of an armistice agreement at the border between the Koreas. However, there are no timelines associated with this agreement, making it little more than a gesture of goodwill.

However, a question to ask here is whether the conclusion of a political agreement would be the beginning or the end of unification. According to the South Korean model, an agreement to unify the two states would follow a period of gradual reform not only in political areas but also in nonpolitical ones. The model incorporates three basic steps: “reconciliation and cooperation between the ROK and the North,” the “establishment of a Korean commonwealth,” and “complete integration of Korea through a democratic election.”<sup>6</sup>

Many of the political means of accomplishing these steps do not exist at the present time, so the ROK government has entrusted a longer-term, more subtle strategy to its Ministry of Unification.<sup>7</sup> This ministry aims to break down the psychological barrier between the two sides through economic revival in North Korea, the welfare of ROK citizens, and a thriving Korean culture—all of which contribute to building a foundation for national unification. The tasks associated with this strategy emphasize trust-building, small-scale projects, and practical measures.<sup>8</sup> Denuclearization and fostering relevant dialogue between the United States and North Korea are part of trust-building, and the administration of President Moon Jae-in counted the US–DPRK summits in Singapore and Hanoi during the presidency of Donald Trump as among its successes in the drive toward unification. Projects and practical measures carried out by the Ministry of Unification are incredibly diverse, spanning inter-Korean exchanges, settlement of humanitarian issues, joint cultural initiatives, settlement support of defectors, and educational programs.<sup>9</sup> The holistic approach reflects South Korea’s identity

as a liberal, democratic state, the cultural value it puts on interdependence and cooperation, and its broad approach to national security.

The commonwealth—step two of the South Korean model—builds gradually through advances in “diplomacy, economy, and security,” as well as the promotion of unified stances in “non-political areas,” toward conditions that would permit democratic elections and the establishment of a fully unified Korean government.<sup>10</sup> At that time it will be necessary to decide upon the fate of the KPA and the future of North Korea’s national defense architecture.

Of course, it is naïve to believe the North Korean regime in power today would tacitly agree to the South Korean model. Before the regime agrees to abide by the tenets of the model, it would likely have to dispose of its *Juche* (“self-reliance”) philosophy, its military-first policy, and the idea of *byungjin* (“the simultaneous development of North Korea’s economy and its nuclear weapons”)—all of which are pillars of the regime’s power.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the DPRK has its own model for unification—a model that is purportedly peaceful but that puts political agreement before rather than after reforms in other areas.

The DPRK model for unification, first advanced by Kim Il-sung, seeks to establish a central national government known as the Democratic Republic of Koryo that has “equal participation from both sides based on mutual tolerance of differences in ideologies and counterparts.”<sup>12</sup> The formula for reaching that model begins with a confederation of two governments that come together to direct political, diplomatic, and military affairs.

This plan sounds accommodating to South Korea, but Jacques Fuqua offers a different critique. He cites one of the principles of the model as an “overhaul of the South Korean government . . . to ensure its ‘full democratization.’”<sup>13</sup> This is clearly democratization in the socialist view, not the democratization that allows for citizens to elect a government and hold it accountable for its decisions. Consistent with this interpretation is the model’s requirement for South Korea to “abrogate its decades-long security relationship with the United States and fundamentally discard the democratic basis of its government.”<sup>14</sup> Fuqua also notes that the model offers no phases by which the confederation should form or a means by which it unifies into a single government. The model therefore appears to be a weak government like America’s original Articles of Confederation. If true, the interpretation begs the question of how North Korea will accomplish its version of “democratization.”

One should not dismiss the possibility of North Korea using military force to accomplish its political objectives. Although Young-ho Park believes “the North Korean view of national unification has been defensive” since the late 1980s and particularly in the wake of the reunification of Germany, the North Korea expert

Joseph Bermudez points to the KPA to suggest otherwise.<sup>15</sup> He writes that the KPA has devised “a number of basic interrelated political and military conditions” that “underlie [its] offensive war strategy and belief that victory in a war of reunification is possible.”<sup>16</sup> These conditions stem from lessons learned in the Korean War and the KPA’s perception of the ROK and the United States. The lessons include a quick war that prevents outside assistance, military isolation of Seoul, and exploitation of America’s perceived intolerance for high combat losses.<sup>17</sup> The odds of the DPRK actually carrying out such an attack are slim in light of its military capabilities and realization that the ROK and the United States have trained together for 65 years to oppose it. However, the possibility should not be discounted, and Park cites periodic North Korean provocations as evidence.<sup>18</sup>

### ***War on the Korean Peninsula***

The most likely precipitating event in a war scenario of unification is a military attack against the South at an opportune moment in response to a “precipitative” or even an accidental event.<sup>19</sup> The North may launch the attack while its military is still strong and the United States is distracted with another conflict. In such an event, it is fairly certain that the ROK and its allies would prevail, but not without substantial casualties.<sup>20</sup>

War with North Korea would bring to bear the manpower, technology, and strategies described in the discussion on national security preferences. Beyond a certain threshold, the aim of each side is likely to be unification of the country. For the ROK and the United States, that threshold has historically been the successful execution of the existing combined operational plan into its combat operations phase.<sup>21</sup> If the US–ROK alliance enters into that phase, deterrence has failed, as have attempts at preventing escalation following expected North Korean provocations.

For the DPRK, the threshold beyond which it will pursue unification can only be guessed at. Kim Jong-un seems to suggest the threshold is very low, but if one believes Kim Jong-un is rational in his decision-making—and there is an abundance of evidence from past provocations that he is—any quote to the contrary is more likely bravado than real intention.<sup>22</sup> The likelihood of the conflict favoring a ROK-US victory once US assets begin flowing into the theater after the first few months of combat makes it doubtful the regime will cross it. The wild card is, of course, the possibility of North Korea employing its nuclear weapons. The North is most likely to use nuclear weapons in a situation where ROK forces have crossed the 38th parallel, since such an invasion would pose the greatest threat to its existence. Therefore, it is to the benefit of the ROK–US alliance to take out any DPRK launch facilities at the start of the conflict, if possible. Taking out North Korean leadership will also be helpful for staving off a nuclear attack, since the

nature of the regime would seem to favor an assertive nuclear command and control structure—one that places the authority for execution in the hands of a select few political leaders.<sup>23</sup>

If such a decapitation of the regime is possible and use of nuclear weapons is no longer a credible threat, the political questions for pursuing unification become what sort of power any remaining government officials have to continue prosecuting the war. The military question likewise becomes what degree of cohesiveness exists in the North's remaining fielded forces. The answers to these questions are similar to those following the other possible scenario leading to a ROK-dominated unification: North Korean collapse.

### ***Collapse of the North Korean Regime and/or Government***

There are two types of collapse that could take place in North Korea: collapse of the regime, and collapse of the entire government. Clearly, the ROK will be able to spur political unification much easier when both happen. However, interviews that Korea scholar Bruce Bennett conducted in 2016 with a dozen North Korean elites who defected to South Korea suggest the former is much more likely than the latter.<sup>24</sup> In his book *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Totalitarian Politics*, Patrick McEachern makes a similar conclusion following an investigation of changes in the DPRK's government over time. Drawing from a wealth of translated North Korean materials, McEachern states that, unlike the government under Kim Il-sung, the government under Kim Jong-il began to feature a more dispersed authority among individuals and institutions. As a result, Kim Jong-Il had to play the cabinet, the military, and the workers' party against each other to maintain power.<sup>25</sup> While there is evidence Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power somewhat, it is likely that removal of Kim Jong-un—either from within or from outside the country—would unleash that intra-government competition into the open in a bid for national leadership. Efforts at unification would have to confront this possibility.

Furthermore, even if ROK military forces are able to take over Pyongyang and prevent a replacement North Korean government from coming to power, there is a high likelihood of an insurgency in the countryside that will stymie stabilization efforts. Bennett contends that only the willingness of South Korea to offer safety, security, position, and wealth to North Korean military elites nationwide will remove this obstacle. However, doing so may be unpopular on both sides of the border because of the perception that those elites have exploited the population.<sup>26</sup>

These difficulties are among several reasons that some scholars are not optimistic about the potential of a North Korean collapse scenario to result in unification. The eminent Korea scholar and Columbia University political scientist Samuel S.

Kim states it is not realistic to expect that “South Korea has both the will and the capacity to absorb a collapsing North Korea politically, militarily, economically, socially, and culturally.”<sup>27</sup> Jacques Fuqua writes further that absorption of North Korea following its collapse is not a shortcut “to a multifarious process as complex as unification, which at once comprises human emotion, ideology, national security and well-being, and feelings of nationalism.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, he suggests there are no shortcuts to unification at all.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is important to distinguish between political unification and the sense of imagined community that the scholar Benedict Anderson<sup>30</sup> uses to define a state. The latter definition is what makes unification so multifaceted. South Korea’s unification model attempts to create this imagined community between the two Koreas ahead of political unification, potentially extending the timeline for decades. A North Korean collapse holds potential for the order to be reversed, so that the building of a unified Korean nation in the minds of its citizens follows the formation of a single government. The hasty formation of that government following either war or collapse of the DPRK is the thought behind a 2014 *Economist* article titled “Korean unification is less likely to be gradual and peaceful than nasty, brutish, and quick.”<sup>31</sup> However, there is another option for the future of the Korean Peninsula as well.

### *Continued Status Quo*

According to the status quo scenario, North Korea continues to survive indefinitely through a combination of rent-seeking, the pursuit of increasingly capable nuclear weapons under the military-first policy, regional brinkmanship, and inducement of concessions from the West.<sup>32</sup> The regime’s resilience over the last few decades in overcoming domestic catastrophes and its “intransigence and vituperative behavior” in the face of external pressures suggest the status quo scenario is perhaps even more likely than war or collapse.<sup>33</sup>

The one factor that seems to suggest the status quo cannot continue forever is that it has never really worked in North Korea’s favor and appears unlikely to do so in the future. As Michael Cohen states: “Pyongyang has lived with an unfavorable status quo for sixty years.”<sup>34</sup> Its best response to change existing conditions since developing nuclear weapons is what is termed nuclear compellence—“threats to respond with retaliation to the continuation of the status quo.”<sup>35</sup> However, in their treatise on nuclear compellence (also called “nuclear coercion”), Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann argue from historical cases that “threats to use nuclear weapons for coercion usually lack credibility,” and even the possession of nuclear weapons do not significantly increase the chances that compellence of any type will be successful.<sup>36</sup>

However, Kim Jong-un's situation may not give him other options. Onerous sanctions, the continuing contraction of the North's economy relative to the ROK's, the further obsolescence of its weapons systems, and the increasing difficulty of preventing information about the outside world from reaching the population may cause North Korea's economic and geopolitical position to become more desperate with time, leading to even more escalatory threats.<sup>37</sup> These trends, paired with North Korean possession of a nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the United States, could make Kim Jong-un more willing to take risks in brinkmanship. If the United States or the ROK is unable to persuade Kim that any actions the US–ROK alliance takes in response to North Korean provocations are purely defensive, or else either power purposefully undertakes offensive action to force him to back down, another war on the peninsula becomes more likely.

If such a war does lead to unification, the fate of the KPA and the character of unified Korean Defense Forces will be at the forefront of Korean nation-building efforts. These are the respective subjects of the next two sections.

### **Military Outcomes: The Fate of the Korean People's Army**

This section speculates on the fate of North Korea's military under South Korea-led unification in different unification scenarios, as well as how a unified Korea should deal with the KPA if the state is to preserve peace within its borders and project strength to its neighbors. The section explores the degree to which the KPA might be integrated into a unified Korean armed forces; distinguishes between short-, medium-, and long-term employment of the KPA in a unified Korea; and makes recommendations regarding how to assimilate the KPA into a unified military. For purposes of this discussion, "short term" is one to two years, "medium term" is three to five years, and "long term" is greater than five years. In this section, "integration" refers primarily to the organizational incorporation of the KPA, whereas "assimilation" is concerned more with the psychological transformation KPA members would need to undergo to serve effectively in the armed forces of a democratic society. Assimilation, therefore, is more dependent on cultural change.

First, regardless of the means by which unification occurs, the KPA is unlikely to be integrated on a large scale into a single Korean military. Even if the political will exists to leverage the military as an institution for promoting national unity and identity, conditions following unification—short of an unforeseen external threat to the Korean Peninsula—will favor a large reduction in forces that discourages integration.

Second, however, the means of unification is still likely to determine the manner and degree of integration. Gradual unification under the South Korean model will provide the most favorable conditions for carefully managed, peaceful inte-



gration of any significant scope. These conditions are control of both the time and spatial elements of unification, which in turn are more likely to provide the opportunity to accommodate local North Korean political and military elites whose support will be needed for making integration succeed. This assertion is based both on scholarly analyses of the politics and sociology of the North Korean military and conclusions made from studies of other countries in which military integration has followed civil war.<sup>38</sup>

Collapse is the next most likely scenario to afford peaceful integration of the KPA on a significant scale. The ROK Armed Forces may have a valuable role to play in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and administration of the KPA in the absence of DPRK leadership. Out of this mission will come the potential task of assimilating KPA members into the KDF. However, there are at least two factors that cast doubt on the prospect. First, in such a scenario, unification is likely to be an intervening condition in the military outcome, which depends more on the past relationship between the two Koreas than on the collapse itself. This relationship is likely to be less amenable to the integration of the KPA than if it had grown under the South Korean model of gradual unification. Second, it is possible that collapse of the regime could end in either a military takeover or an internal power struggle—especially considering that a complete collapse of the state is unlikely. Considering these potential outcomes, a collapse of just the regime might be the grounds of renewed civil war rather than the result of it, should the ROK intervene.

A renewed Korean War scenario will likely prevent assimilation of most if not all of the KPA into a unified military—at least in the short to medium term. The priority will be stabilizing and returning security to areas where fighting has taken place—a task that is likely to be too enormous for South Korea to take on alone. Therefore, international assistance will be crucial for stabilizing North Korea—and perhaps the entire peninsula—in the event's aftermath. Foreign powers intervening in North Korea during or following a war will likely seek a more influential voice in the fate of the KPA than during a collapse scenario, and the United States in particular will bring lessons from past nation-building efforts to bear on the issue. Exactly what these lessons are may depend on the administration in power, but from experience in Iraq and Afghanistan the US government will likely recommend against letting KPA members fade back into society with their weapons.

This is a good lesson regardless of the unification scenario, and it points to another aspect of the KPA's fate in the short term. In the intervening period between active North Korean control of its means of national defense and the assertion of control by a new unified government, there are several missions the KPA can assist with. These include security details at northern military bases, disposal of

certain weapons, border patrol, and humanitarian assistance—all missions that will help stabilize the state and lessen the burden on outside countries whose military forces would be less welcome in the former North Korea.<sup>39</sup> In particular, border patrol and humanitarian assistance may require ROK supervision considering reports of North Korean abuse against refugees in the past. Regardless, in view of the ROK's "projected demographic shortfalls," it is almost essential that the KPA assist with those missions. The KPA will also be more familiar with its own facilities, weapons, and equipment than the ROK armed forces or military forces contributed by outside countries would be.

Employing the KPA in these missions will also provide the ROK opportunities to prepare North Korean military forces for assimilation in the long term—if not into the KDF, then into society. Since the North Korean army has traditionally assisted the population with planting and harvesting during critical times, funneling many of its junior members into such jobs on a more permanent basis may be an available alternative to assimilating them into the KDF.<sup>40</sup> Assuming it is possible to arrange for such workers to be paid for their tasks, the choice may also assist with stabilizing the North's economy, particularly in the event of a collapse.

For those in the KPA who are interested, deemed worthy, and able to be accommodated into the KDF, the stabilization period will be useful for assimilating them. First, the ROK armed forces will have to shake from the KPA's collective mentality an image of the South as a population to be liberated. Depending on the manner in which unification unfolds, this task may be easy or hard. Regardless, it may take time to persuade the KPA of South Korea's peaceable intentions. Without regular access to media sources outside the country, mirror-imaging and government propaganda has likely shaped their perceptions of the ROK for decades.

Second, to make the KPA effective members of unified Korean military services, the ROK must imbue into them a spirit of cooperation with other countries and an attitude relatively free of social prejudice. While North Korea's military had worked secretly with other countries such as Syria and Iran to help them develop certain capabilities, the idea of collective security is foreign to the concept of *Juche*.<sup>41</sup> Norms for the equal treatment of military subordinates regardless of social background may also be absent in the KPA, so some degree of reeducation may be necessary for any to serve in the ROK armed forces.

Third, it will be necessary to disengage KPA members from the propagandized notions that the DPRK is the only true Korea and the Kim family is its rightful ruler. The dependence of three generations of Kims largely on maintaining a god-like image and possessing a strong military for power suggests that if a ROK-dominated unification scenario does unfold, the family will be out of the picture.

Moreover, its legacy will likely be absent from the heritage of a unified Korean military. The next section explores what the character of this military might be like.

## **Military Outcomes: The Character of Unified Korean Defense Forces**

The character of the KDF will depend not only on inter-Korean dynamics—to include different national cultures—but also on regional geopolitics, how unification unfolds, and cultural differences between the South Korean military and the KPA, should the latter be integrated to some degree into a unified military. Accordingly, the first aspect of unified Korean military character is called “operational culture.”

### ***Operational Culture***

“Operational culture” encompasses what I call “orientation” and “role,” terms I have taken from a military typology set forth by the authors Anthony Forster, Timothy Edmunds, and Andrew Cottey in their study of postcommunist militaries. Based on their construct, today’s South Korean military, sometimes called the “South Korean Defense Forces” (SKDF), is “territorial defense”—that is, “primarily oriented toward national defense but also capable of contributing in a limited way to multinational power projection operations.”<sup>42</sup> For national defense, the SKDF focuses almost exclusively on the North Korean threat. However, the SKDF have participated in foreign operations periodically since sending two divisions to Vietnam in support of US objectives there in the 1960s. Therefore, aside from taking on domestic assistance roles before South Korea became a full-fledged democracy in the late 1980s, the SKDF has prioritized the role of national security against external aggression.

With regard to the North Korean threat, however, there are limits to carrying out this role independently. Per bilateral agreement, the United States still maintains operational control of ROK forces if war breaks out against North Korea. Some argue the delay in passing this control to the SKDF retards its emergence as a fully sovereign military. However, for the ROK to assume wartime control, three conditions must be met. There must be “a security environment” conducive to transfer, “the right mix of capabilities to lead combined ROK-US forces,” and “capabilities that can address North Korean nuclear and missile threats in the early stages of a regional provocation or conflict.”<sup>43</sup> The latter two of these conditions suggest the SKDF cannot be sovereign until it is fully capable against the North. However, attitudes in both SKDF leadership and the Korean Parliament regarding defense funding priorities may have to change before operational control transfer can be achieved.<sup>44</sup> If a crisis erupts in the North that leads to military

conflict and the United States still has wartime control, the SKDF may lose face. However, losses on the battlefield against the DPRK would have a much worse effect should the SKDF be ill-prepared to lead the fight. The most likely scenario in war against North Korea—and perhaps the best solution if the United States still has wartime control of operations—is that US Forces Korea hand over control to the SKDF as combat concludes and stability operations begin. This will be a gradual transition that is dependent on conditions in each North Korean territory. As the transition takes place, new or expanded roles are likely to open for the Korean military that mold its future operational culture as a unified force.

These roles are important to prepare for because of the likelihood of unrest in the North in any unification scenario, and they will be formative for a future KDF. First, the SKDF should prepare to expand its power projection role so that it can rotate forces in and out of North Korea regularly. Second, it will increasingly take on the role of domestic military assistance, to include providing basic services to the most beleaguered members of the North's population, augmenting governance where civilian authority is lacking, establishing security in the case of insurgent activity, and coordinating with Seoul in the conduct of an information campaign targeting the North Korean population.

The last effort is key. A lengthy counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign may follow a renewed war with North Korea, since total military victory will be both difficult and undesirable. South Korea will have to pay for whatever it destroys in the process of subduing the North. Pursuing a strategy of annihilation would also lose South Korea the moral high ground. Any destruction in North Korea resembling the “Highway of Death” that the US coalition left behind in Kuwait after Operation Desert Storm should be avoided. It would be much better for the SKDF to disable its opponent using nonkinetic or even nonlethal means, if possible. In any case, the words of Clausewitz are worth noting here: To lay the seeds for a healthy operational culture in a unified Korean armed forces, SKDF forces will need to examine the situation in North Korea and “establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”<sup>45</sup>

In any scenario that is not entirely peaceful, the SKDF—and later the KDF—may also need to be prepared to address security threats from China. Of the three external powers previously discussed in the context of Korean unification besides the United States, China is the most likely to intervene in North Korea during collapse or war. ROK and especially US military intervention in either scenario would violate China's policies of “peace and stability” and “resolution of issues through dialogue and negotiation” on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the

SKDF or KDF may need to yield to diplomatic efforts by Korean and US governments with China to smooth the path to full political unification.

In the longer term, perhaps over a period of decades, there is one additional role that a unified Korean military will take on: that of nation-building, defined here as inculcating national values into military members. The focus of nation-building will initially be any KPA members that transfer into the unified forces, but ultimately it will extend to recruits. Although the ROK still conscripts South Koreans to defend against the North, most advanced democratic nations have moved away from using the military as a nation-building institution.<sup>47</sup> A unified Korea would be unique if it continued to do so. However, in order to bridge the cultural, social, and economic gaps between the North and South after unification, the government should look at military service as one option through which young adults can develop social responsibility and a sense of patriotism in the new state. This prospect touches on the military's sociology, which is the next cultural aspect of military character discussed in this article.

### ***Sociology***

For the purposes of this article, “military sociology” is defined as the “peacetime character” of a military force and is primarily concerned with the issue of KPA integration: how the integration process will affect the military's social and organizational makeup, the success of the KDF's post-unification roles, and the military's relationship to the society from which it draws its members.

First, it is possible following a renewed war or a lengthy COIN campaign in North Korean territory that a unified Korean government will choose not to integrate any former KPA in its armed forces. After keeping enough KPA personnel on various posts to maintain security and accountability of weapons and equipment during stability operations and the transition to political unification, the SKDF may discharge them and hopefully connect them with means of civilian employment. A unified Korea largely under South Korean leadership may justify the decision in the name of military efficiency and effectiveness as well as the generally antagonistic view the SKDF holds toward the KPA.

Alternatively, there may be government leaders in Seoul who see “military integration . . . as a means for making renewed civil war less likely by reducing fear” in the minds of North and South Koreans.<sup>48</sup> Incorporating some personnel from the KPA would also “reduce the number of former fighters who have to be disarmed and integrated into the society.”<sup>49</sup> The government will have to weigh the economic and societal burden of integrating the KPA into the KDF against that of integrating them into society by finding them civilian employment. The number of those incorporated into the KDF is likely to be very small regardless. However, any degree of

incorporation will pit more immediate pragmatic considerations against questions about identity and ideology in the two Korean militaries. However, concepts of purely North Korean identity may be less developed in the mind of a KPA private or sergeant than in the mind of a colonel or general officer. Therefore, the more junior ranks will be more easily molded by reeducation and training.

A third possibility—selective incorporation of KPA members up to senior leadership—is most likely in the case of a gradual, peaceful unification process. Leaving certain senior KPA leaders in place may be a concession to the North in exchange for accepting more democratic means of governance in the establishment of a Korean commonwealth—the second step of the South’s unification formula. After all, formation of the commonwealth assumes separate responsibility for security.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, as Bruce Bennett has concluded, accommodating Korean military elites is a precondition to peaceful unification.<sup>51</sup> Leaving them in charge of their military organizations or giving them authority over new units that form after unification may be easier than finding positions of similar influence for them in the civilian world and more ethical than just paying them off. However, it is important for leadership in a future KDF to ask whether former South Korean military members would be willing to serve under a commander from the North. Alternately, if KPA commanders are to continue leading only KPA members, will there be an unhealthy bifurcation of hierarchies in the KDF? On one hand, units with members of similar national background may have higher group cohesion. On the other, the most successful examples of military integration after civil wars have penetrated to the individual level rather than just the unit level.<sup>52</sup>

In the long term, integration of senior leaders into the KDF after unification should probably be the exception rather than the rule. It may be necessary to keep a few in the short term for their expertise in certain military missions that the ROK or unified government needs to better understand. However, the burden of reeducating them into the principles of serving under a democracy will more than offset the benefits of maintaining their expertise. Instead, it would behoove the government to find civilian positions of influence for them that have minimal political consequences.

Therefore, selective integration of only the more junior members is the preferred course of action. For them, “the importance of ideological and political values” will fade against the group cohesion that develops from serving alongside others with a military mindset.<sup>53</sup> As Florence Gaub concludes, “the military as an organization embeds . . . men in a surrounding that emphasizes, just like the values [of service], similarities over differences, and provides a common basis for understanding and cooperation.”<sup>54</sup> That said, any KPA members that serve in the

KDF should be volunteers—that is, those with a positive disposition to serve under South Korean leadership—at least after the initial period during which they are needed to maintain security of weapons and facilities. A unified Korea may choose to pursue conscription in the former North Korea at a later time, but forcing KPA members to serve after their state ceases to exist may undermine progress toward peace on the peninsula. Doing so may also compromise professionalism in the ranks, which is the next aspect I speculate on and make recommendations for the character of a unified Korean military.

### ***Professionalism***

Military professionalism concerns characteristics inherent to the institution such as expertise, responsibility, and corporateness—qualities defined by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Soldier and the State*—as well as the understanding and acceptance of a clear boundary between military and political authority.<sup>55</sup> Between South Korea's founding and its democratization in the late 1980s, three factors encouraged the SKDF to periodically transgress American-accepted civil-military professional boundaries. These factors were the North Korean threat, economic instability, and the SKDF's domestic popularity. However, the same North Korean threat, along with the professional influence of the US military and the fact that ROK military coups were generally “non-hierarchical,” helped preserve a high degree of professionalism within the SKDF that continues to this day.<sup>56</sup> That level of professionalism will be sustainable during unification and in a unified Korean armed forces if those forces can accomplish three things: effectively employ principles of mission command in stabilizing and securing North Korea, disarm and integrate former KPA members peacefully, and yield political decisions to a future unified Korean government once it is effectively in place.

The first two recommendations address how the SKDF can best demonstrate the professional characteristics of expertise, responsibility, and corporateness in carrying out two expected tasks during unification. “Mission command” is “the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based on mission-type orders.”<sup>57</sup> Whether the ROK military conducts operations into North Korea at an advanced stage of peaceful unification in the wake of a DPRK regime collapse, or as part of a wartime coalition, it will encounter dynamic situations in which it will need to rely on its organizational, technical, and leadership expertise. As the image-bearer of the ROK and an institution that will interface with some of the North Korean population before most other government institutions, it will need to remember that its responsibility is for the security and welfare of that population as much as for South Korea's. Finally, the corporateness of the SKDF should reinforce its unity in carrying out assigned missions.

Disarming and integrating former KPA members narrows the professional focus to a group with shared values and norms more similar to the ROK military's own than those of the general North Korean population. This comparison will likely be more accurate the more specialized the KPA member is within the military profession, since entry into specialized jobs takes place through competitive selection, disciplined self-selection, or both. However, even for the basic recruit, "the military occupation provides its personnel with a stronger alternative in identity terms than do other institutions."<sup>58</sup> It is up to the SKDF to capitalize on such common bonds for promoting peace and convince the KPA of benign intentions during disarmament.

However, the SKDF should also expect to encounter a much different psyche from its own, particularly after a war or collapse. "Nowhere else does the army mirror its society's problems more clearly," explains Gaub, "than in post-conflict states."<sup>59</sup> Ideally, an information campaign targeting the KPA will precede disarmament, preventing surprises on the ground. The campaign should encourage local political and military leadership to become a stabilizing influence rather than a resistance force. However, the SKDF should anticipate renegade actions and respond in a way that is proportional, de-escalatory, and out of necessity. Doing so will set a positive precedent for the professional heritage of a unified Korean military.

Yielding political decisions to the ROK government—the third recommendation in this section—is a humble recognition of what does not fall within the military's expertise. The SKDF may be called upon to initiate governance in areas where it does not exist after a war or collapse. However, Seoul will likely have plans for cities and towns to transition to civilian governance once they have met certain conditions of stability and security. It is important for the SKDF and the KDF after it to recognize ahead of this transition that "military governments do not bring economic development or political democracy and often result in the eventual weakening of the military itself."<sup>60</sup> While the developmental state model of economic growth under Major General Park Chung-hee in the 1960s might offer a counter example to this assertion, the question is whether a military government is necessary to provide the needed stimulus for the lengthy task of closing the economic gap between North and South in unification. South Korea has come too far as a democratic state to risk the military's professionalism again for achieving economic growth.

Nevertheless, the SKDF may be able to assist the local North Korean population alongside the KPA. Such considerations will benefit the domestic professional image of the future KDF in North Korea, even if there is a short-term sacrifice in terms of the expertise and corporateness embodied in more exclusively military roles.



## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have proposed that transitioning peacefully to unitary statehood from a condition of suspended civil war between the two countries is daunting enough that unification through war or the collapse of North Korea appears more probable. Regardless of the scenario, a unification process largely dominated by South Korea appears almost determined.

As the second half of this article maintains, the manner of unification is likely to be formative in the fate of the North Korean People's Army and the character of a unified Korean armed forces (the KDF). Gradual reform offers the best opportunity for the ROK military to integrate the KPA. War or state collapse offers less opportunity because of the increased chances of hostility and irregular warfare in the aftermath of either scenario.

However, even following the outbreak of war there are reasons to integrate some portion of the KPA into a unified Korean military. As a national institution bearing the state's image, the military is perhaps the most suitable vehicle from which to begin building the new Korean nation. Integrating the subjugated state's forces is a viable means to do so provided they can be reeducated into the societal and professional military values of a democracy like South Korea. Military integration will also demonstrate solidarity toward the population of both states, provide sustained employment to a number of personnel during the expected economic upheaval of the transition, and alleviate North Korean concerns that the SKDF is just an occupying force. Moreover, studies have shown that military cohesion tends to override former national allegiances when integration takes place at the individual level.

The SKDF can also prepare for unification in the role of domestic military assistance, assisting the KPA with economic support to North Korean territory, even if these activities temporarily compromise professionalism and capability in more exclusive roles. At the same time, the SKDF should brush up on irregular warfare capabilities through exercises simulating the aftermath of war or North Korean government or regime collapse. US training would be valuable in this capacity. This is but the first of several recommendations for the United States in helping to create an environment for the peaceful integration of select members of the KPA into a unified Korean military, that is, should Korea unify in the future.

### **Recommendations for US Foreign Policy and Military Support to the ROK during Unification**

As a stabilizing force in the dynamic northeast Asia region and South Korea's most enduring ally, the United States will play a vital role during and after any

Korean unification scenario. It should support a unifying Korea in a way that continues to deter external regional aggression, upholds the US–Korean alliance, and respects Korean culture, to include culturally determined aspects of the Korean military. The following six recommendations stem from this broad guidance.

Emphasize the enduring value of the US–ROK alliance for regional security, not just to defend against the DPRK. In accordance with the first condition, the ROK alliance should be the springboard from which the United States supports unification. The December 2017 US National Security Strategy states that its “alliance and friendship with South Korea, forged by the trials of history, is stronger than ever.”<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, since 2002 the United States and South Korea have promoted their alliance as a vehicle to improve stability in the region, not just on the peninsula.<sup>62</sup>

Urge the ROK to make unification dependent upon denuclearization, peaceful inter-Korean dialogue, a phased political process, and continuance of a limited but assertive US military presence in the ROK. For the United States, denuclearization is a global issue, not just a regional one.<sup>63</sup> However, some Korean scholars believe South Korea may be willing to press ahead with peaceful reforms leading to unification without the need for North Korea to fully denuclearize first.<sup>64</sup> If the unification process proceeds in this order, North Korea is likely to use its nuclear arsenal as leverage in the unification process, clouding discussions about common Korean culture and heritage that might promote unity. The United States should therefore push for denuclearization ahead of inter-Korean political agreements leading to unification. Only a continued US military presence in the ROK is likely to achieve this outcome, and it has the added benefits of preempting “the need for Japan to re-militarize” and acting as “a wedge to offset both China and Russia from bullying Korea on political issues.”<sup>65</sup>

Push for resumption of six-party talks if unification is imminent and include the future of a unified KDF in Asian security architecture discussions. If Korea unifies, the United States may have an opportunity to revitalize the Six-Party talks among the two Koreas, the United States, China, Russia, and Japan that took place between 2002 and 2009. These talks previously centered on denuclearization, and restarting them under the auspices of Korean unification has the potential to finally resolve the nuclear issue.<sup>66</sup> For the talks to take place, it is assumed that North Korea will have already collapsed, been gradually reformed, or been beaten in a war. Therefore, there should be little disagreement on *whether* the peninsula should be denuclearized. Rather, *how* to dispose of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and facilities will be the center of the debate. This decision being made, it will be easier to discuss how to build a regional security framework around a unified Korea. The US-led 2+4 talks that took place in Europe following the reunification of Germany is one possible model. Although there isn’t a common

regional identity like that undergirding the European talks, part of the discussion centering on unified Korea should be whether the current Asian architecture needs to change to preserve regional stability.<sup>67</sup>

Retain a deterrent and balancing role for the US military against the DPRK and China during unification. Intervene to secure or destroy the North's nuclear weapons (if not already accomplished) should war break out or collapse ensue. The United States' balancing role stems not only from its manpower commitment and nuclear umbrella but also from overlapping Korean and US missile defenses and cross-domain deterrence among cyber, space, and the traditional physical domains. If war breaks out or North Korea collapses, nuclear deterrence in particular may be less effective, since the North Korean government is more likely to lose control of its arsenal and proliferation of weapons becomes more likely. This is a situation to be prevented, if possible.

Be prepared to assist the ROK with stability operations in North Korea, but in a way that respects culture. Considering that the United States will be sharing the wartime burden and at least have an advisory capacity, it may exert pressure on the ROK to shape unified armed forces according to its own mold. There are positive and negative aspects to this pressure. On the positive side, the United States has successfully integrated a diverse population into a military that is second to none professionally. This success has lessons for integrating the KPA. On the negative side, the United States may urge the ROK to adopt policies toward the KPA that leave local ROK military personnel at odds with local civilian and military leadership in the former DPRK. Granted, the military is perhaps the best institution through which to pursue North–South social integration since it is nationally based and not locally based. However, policy consequences may still be localized, and they will be felt long after US influence is gone.<sup>68</sup> For example, the United States and its military should consider the KPA's usefulness in taking on economic assistance roles such as agricultural planting when making recommendations for disbanding or integrating it.

Support the ROK's democratic, free-market narrative. This is a narrative that most of the world can resonate with and from which the ROK has emerged as an economic and political success story. Despite the rise of China, this story will continue to challenge the North Korean narrative, which really only resonates with an internal audience. Despite the apparent resiliency of the DPRK across decades, South Korean culture has been gradually seeping into North Korean society, and the effects are only known from the reports of defectors. It remains to be seen whether the status quo will continue, whether gradual reform will take place leading to unification, or a violence-laden scenario drives change on the peninsula. Regardless, culture will undoubtedly play a major role in the outcome. ♣

### **Col Michael Edmonston**

Colonel Edmonston is a 2000 graduate of the USAF Academy and has a PhD in Military Strategy from Air University. As an Air Force officer, he has served as a B-1 and MQ-1 pilot as well as a Northeast Asia Foreign Area Officer. He is currently the Director of Warfighting Education at the LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education at Maxwell Air Force Base. In summer 2022, he will PCS to Fort Leavenworth to be the Air Force Element Director there.

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