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Toward a Free and Unified Korea—Resolving the Korea Challenge at Its Source

Robert Joseph chaired the Free and Unified Korea working group that developed the findings, conclusions and policy recommendations contained in this report. The other members of the working group were Nicholas Eberstadt, James Flynn, Hyun-seung Lee, Michael Marshall, David Maxwell, and Greg Scarlatoiu.

Executive Summary

The division of the Korean Peninsula is one of the most critical unresolved legacies of World War II. What was intended as a temporary administrative line hardened into a permanent geopolitical fault line. More than 70 years after the Korean War, the peninsula remains divided between a thriving South and an impoverished, totalitarian, nuclear-armed regime in the North.

This paper presents the findings and recommendations of the Free and Unified Korea (FAUK) working group. It argues that a free and unified Korea is not a distant or speculative ambition. Rather, it represents the only durable pathway to eliminating the nuclear threat, protecting human rights, and completing the unfinished work of Korean independence.

For three decades, U.S. and international policy toward North Korea has centered narrowly on denuclearization. Yet North Korea's nuclear arsenal continues to expand rapidly, its missile capabilities have advanced dramatically, and its human rights abuses remain systemic and severe. The underlying national security and humanitarian challenges of the peninsula cannot be resolved without addressing the structural reality of division itself.

Re-establishing unification as the strategic end state of U.S.–ROK policy requires moving beyond the limitations of a denuclearization-first paradigm and adopting a comprehensive framework that incorporates security, human rights, economic integration, and civil society engagement. It also requires preparing responsibly for potential political change on the peninsula and confronting persistent myths that portray unification as either impossible or prohibitively costly.

A unified Korea—democratic, nuclear-free, economically integrated, and grounded in a shared historical identity—would advance long-term U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and fulfill the aspirations of the Korean people.

The Unfinished Korea Question

The division of Korea in 1945 was not an expression of Korean self-determination or political choice. It was imposed by the victorious powers at the end of World War II. The dividing line at the 38th parallel was intended as a temporary military demarcation. Instead, it became the defining fracture of modern Korean history.

The Korean independence movement of 1919 was not simply anti-colonial; it was also aspirational. It called for a unified, sovereign nation grounded in universal principles of freedom and equality. Contemporary initiatives such as the modern Korean Dream movement and the civil society coalition Action for Korea United (AKU) draw on that legacy as the basis for a comprehensive national vision for a unified Korea.[1]

On the 80th anniversary of Korea's 1945 liberation, AKU founder and author of the seminal book, "Korean Dream," Dr. Hyun Jin Preston Moon noted that the aspirations of the independence movement remained unfulfilled. Korea was liberated, but not unified—independent, but not whole.[2]

The consequences of division remain profound. The peninsula continues to host one of the most dangerous security environments in the world, combining nuclear weapons, unresolved military confrontation, and a system of political repression unmatched in scale. The result is a divided and dangerous peninsula that continues to include:

- A nuclear-armed regime in Pyongyang;
- An unresolved armistice in place of peace;
- A persistent risk of regional escalation;
- Systematic crimes against humanity in the North.

For the United States, the Korea question is not peripheral. It was the first armed conflict of the Cold War. The U.S.–ROK alliance that emerged from it has become a cornerstone of regional stability. But the conflict itself remains structurally unresolved.

Why Denuclearization Alone Has Failed

For over 30 years, U.S. and international diplomacy have focused overwhelmingly on the "denuclearization" of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. It has been the highest priority and often the only priority. Agreements were reached, violated, renegotiated, and abandoned. Yet throughout this period Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities continued to expand at an accelerating rate.

Underlying this approach was the belief that the magnitude and urgency of the nuclear threat required placing denuclearization above all other concerns. Issues such as human rights, internal political change, and the long-term future of the Korean Peninsula were treated as secondary matters to be addressed later.

The record of the past three decades demonstrates the failure of the denuclearization first policy. Negotiations that focus narrowly on nuclear weapons cannot succeed when the weapons themselves are central to the regime's survival strategy. For the Kim regime, nuclear weapons provide deterrence, coercive leverage, domestic legitimacy, and international recognition.

As a result, denuclearization negotiations have repeatedly failed because they attempt to separate the nuclear issue from the nature of the regime that possesses the weapons. The regime's political structure and its nuclear arsenal are inseparable.

The 2023 report, "National Strategy for Countering North Korea," published by the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP), similarly concluded that the current policy framework has been fundamentally misaligned with the strategic realities of the peninsula. It argued that the focus on arms control and negotiations has obscured the deeper issue: the persistence of a totalitarian regime that prioritizes regime survival above economic development, human rights, or international stability.[3]

The lesson is clear. Durable denuclearization will not occur unless the political structure that generates the nuclear threat changes. A comprehensive strategy must therefore address the broader question of the peninsula's future.

Unification is not an alternative to security policy and denuclearization. It is the completion of it.

The Korean Dream: Historical and Cultural Foundations

A sustainable unification strategy must incorporate both geopolitical and cultural dimensions. The Korean Dream framework situates unification within Korea's founding ethos of *Hongik Ingan,* often translated as "living for the greater benefit of humanity."

This ideal, embedded in Korea's origin narrative, has historically served as a unifying moral compass across regional, political, and ideological divides. It parallels universal principles articulated in democratic founding documents and reflects Korea's long civilizational continuity.

The appropriate framework therefore presents unification not as absorption or conquest, but as the fulfillment of an interrupted national mission. It emphasizes shared heritage across North, South, and the global Korean diaspora and envisions a unified Korea rooted in democratic values and civic participation.

This cultural grounding is essential. Unification framed solely as a security imperative cannot generate the broad societal support necessary for long-term success. Framed instead as historical completion and national renewal, it becomes a project capable of mobilizing citizens across generations.

Civil society plays a central role in implementing this vision, transforming principles into practice. Broad-based coalitions such as Action for Korea United demonstrate how grassroots engagement can revitalize unification discourse even amid public apathy. Government policy can create enabling conditions, but lasting legitimacy must come from society itself. For this reason, unification must ultimately be Korean-led and civil society-grounded.

Confronting the Myths That Impede Unification

A series of persistent myths has discouraged serious strategic planning for Korean unification.

Myth 1: Unification Will Trigger War

Critics argue that pursuing unification risks regime collapse, civil war, and uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons. Yet the current system itself carries substantial instability risks. A brittle totalitarian dictatorship armed with nuclear weapons and governed by opaque succession dynamics cannot be considered a stable long-term equilibrium.

Responsible planning to move toward unification reduces risk by preparing for potential contingencies. Avoiding planning simply increases the dangers associated with sudden change.

Myth 2: China Will Never Allow It

Another common but dubious claim is that China would categorically oppose Korean unification under a democratic government. While Beijing's interests must be considered, permanent acceptance of a destabilizing buffer state is not the only strategic option.

A carefully managed transition accompanied by diplomatic engagement and clear deterrence considerations could address many of China's concerns while preserving the broader stability of the region.

Myth 3: A Unified Korea Would Drift from the United States

Some analysts suggest that Korean nationalism could lead a unified Korea to distance itself from the United States. In reality, a Korea that achieves unity with sustained international support is likely to value those alliances that helped secure its sovereignty. Simply put, there is no feasible security alternative to the U.S.-led alliance system if a unified Korea is to flourish and thrive. Without active involvement and deep integration in the U.S.-led international security architecture, a unified Korea cannot succeed, economically or politically.

Shared achievement tends to strengthen, rather than weaken, strategic partnerships.

Myth 4: Unification Is Too Expensive

Economic fears are among the most powerful obstacles to public support for unification. Comparisons to German reunification often dominate public debate. However, South Korea today is one of the world's most advanced economies, with private wealth estimated at roughly $10 trillion. Global capital markets contain tens of trillions of dollars seeking productive investment opportunities.

With careful institutional design, infrastructure investment, and international participation, the reconstruction of North Korea can generate substantial economic returns rather than unsustainable fiscal burdens.

Myth 5: North Koreans Will Not Accept Freedom

Some assume that North Korean society is too isolated or politically conditioned to adapt to democratic institutions. Yet the experience of defectors and escapees demonstrates remarkable adaptability, resilience, and entrepreneurial energy once individuals are exposed to open societies.

Modern history repeatedly shows that populations long subject to authoritarian rule can rapidly embrace political and economic freedom when given the opportunity.

National Security Imperatives[4]

From a national security perspective, the persistence of the Kim regime presents enduring risks not only for the Korean Peninsula but for the broader Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

North Korea's military posture, combined with its nuclear and missile capabilities, create the constant possibility of miscalculation or escalation. At the same time, the regime's internal fragility raises concerns about instability and the security of its weapons of mass destruction.

Security experts such as David Maxwell have emphasized that long-term stability on the peninsula will ultimately depend on internal transformation within North Korea. Efforts to expand information access, support North Korean civil society networks, and encourage internal change can help create the conditions for peaceful transformation.

Preparing for political change is therefore a central national security requirement. Such preparation should include contingency planning for stabilizing the peninsula in the event of regime collapse, securing nuclear, chemical and biological materials, and coordinating closely with allies.

A unified Korea would eliminate one of the world's most dangerous nuclear flashpoints while strengthening the strategic architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Transformation as Strategic Opportunity[5]

The economic case for unification is frequently misunderstood. North Korea's poverty reflects catastrophic policy choices rather than inherent economic incapacity. Decades of isolation, centralized planning, and military prioritization have produced widespread deprivation despite the population's high literacy rates and strong cultural emphasis on education.

Economic analyses by scholars such as Nicholas Eberstadt emphasize that North Korea's economic failure is primarily the result of systemic policy mismanagement rather than a lack of human potential or natural resources. The North's labor force, natural resources, and geographic position represent significant latent economic assets. North Koreans are Koreans, but their talent, drive and enterprise are shackled. Their potential is widely underestimated today, just as that of South Koreans before the ROK's economic takeoff.

The reconstruction of North Korea should therefore be understood not as a purely humanitarian project but as a long-term development opportunity. Infrastructure modernization, energy grid revitalization, and integration into regional supply chains could generate substantial economic growth.

For the United States and its allies, a unified Korea would strengthen trusted supply chains in semiconductors, batteries, shipbuilding, and advanced manufacturing. It would reduce vulnerability to economic coercion and expand opportunities for regional economic cooperation.

Unification should therefore be understood not as the transfer of wealth from South to North, but as a process of strategic economic integration that benefits all Koreans.

Human Rights and Strategic Legitimacy[6]

Human rights concerns in North Korea have too often been subordinated to short-term diplomatic priorities, particularly nuclear negotiations. Systematic repression is not incidental—it is central to its structure and a pillar of the regime's survival.

Human rights advocates such as Greg Scarlatoiu have emphasized that raising awareness of the regime's abuses is essential both morally and strategically. Expanding information access, documenting crimes against humanity, and supporting the voices of North Korean defectors help undermine the regime's monopoly on information.

Elevating human rights within policy planning strengthens internal awareness within North Korea while aligning international policy with democratic values.

Supporting North Korean voices abroad, promoting information flows into the country, and ensuring accountability for crimes against humanity can reinforce both moral credibility and long-term strategic effectiveness.

Policy Actions for U.S. and Allied Decision-Makers

Given the strategic, economic, and moral case for unification, the Free and Unified Korea working group recommends that policymakers take the following steps:

1. **Officially define unification as the strategic end state.**
   U.S. and ROK policy documents should explicitly identify a free and unified Korea as the primary objective, ideally with Japan's support, building on the 2023 Camp David trilateral agreement.[7]
2. **Integrate human rights into security strategy.**
   Human rights advocacy should be incorporated into broader policy planning rather than treated as a separate and secondary diplomatic track.
3. **Establish a joint transition planning mechanism.**
   The United States and South Korea should create a standing body responsible for contingency planning related to WMD security, humanitarian response, and economic integration.
4. **Strengthen civil society engagement.**
   Governments should provide support to Korean-led civic initiatives that promote dialogue and preparation for unification.
5. **Counter myths through public diplomacy.**
   Public diplomacy initiatives should address misconceptions about unification by highlighting updated economic modeling and strategic analysis.
6. **Engage regional stakeholders.**
   Diplomatic channels should be maintained with China and other regional actors to reduce misunderstanding and manage potential transition scenarios.
7. **Prepare financial architecture.**
   International financial institutions should begin contingency planning to identify mechanisms that can facilitate investment and reconstruction in a unified Korea.

Conclusion: From Crisis Management to Resolution

For decades, U.S. policy has focused on managing the Korean challenge—deterring conflict, maintaining alliance cohesion, and responding to periodic crises. But management is not resolution. The structural anomaly of division remains. The nuclear threat continues to expand.

The human rights crisis continues. These conditions represent not a stable equilibrium but a continuing source of strategic risk.

A free and unified Korea offers a path toward durable peace, regional stability, and the fulfillment of the Korean people's longstanding aspiration for unity and freedom. The Korea question remains unfinished. It is time to approach it not merely as a recurring crisis to be managed and contained, but as a historic challenge to be resolved.

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About This Publication

Global Peace Foundation's policy papers present research, analysis, and recommendations on critical issues affecting peace, security, and national transformation. Drawing on the expertise of policymakers, scholars, and practitioners, these publications seek to advance informed dialogue, encourage collaboration, and contribute to practical policy solutions.

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