

POLITICAL FUTURE OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA: AN ATTEMPT AT FORECASTING*

RAFAŁ WIŚNIEWSKI

TRANSLATED BY

ALICJA JANKOWIAK

KATARZYNA KUZIEMKO

SUPERVISED BY:

JEROEN VAN DEN BOSCH

article
abstract

IN THE ARTICLE A SCENARIO-BUILDING METHOD DEVELOPED BY R/EVOLUTIONS IS BEING EMPLOYED FOR THE ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA. KEY FACTORS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF BOTH KOREAN STATES ARE IDENTIFIED AND ANALYZED. SELECTED VARIABLES HAVE BEEN RANKED ACCORDING TO THEIR IMPORTANCE AND PROBABILITY. ON THIS BASIS SEVERAL SCENARIOS CONCERNING THE FUTURE STATE OF INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS HAVE BEEN CREATED. THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO IDENTIFY AND EXPLAIN THE OPERATION OF KEY VARIABLES SHAPING EVENTS IN ONE

* This article develops and supplements a previous article by the author entitled: "Scenariusze dla Korei- integracja, konfrontacja czy chaos?" in „Stosunki Międzynarodowe we współczesnym świecie: regiony i problemy,” M. Grabowski (ed.), Cracow, 2011.

OF KEY HOTSPOTS OF CONTEMPORARY ASIA. THE AUTHOR CHOSE NOT TO FOCUS STRICTLY ON CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY, AS MANY DIFFERENT ACTORS CAN INFLUENCE THE FUTURE OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA. HOWEVER THIS DIMENSION IS BROUGHT UNDER ATTENTION AND HAS A PROMINENT PLACE AMONG THOSE VARIABLE INFLUENCING THE POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THIS REGION.

KOREA, SCENARIO-BUILDING,
DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA,
INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS, NORTH-EAST ASIAN
SECURITY, GREAT POWER RELATIONS
IN NORTH-EAST ASIA

keywords

For about sixty years now, the Korean peninsula has been one of key hotspots in Asia. Since Korea was divided by the USA and USSR in 1945, permanent instability has been the main characteristic of the region. Periods of relative stability have regularly alternated with more or less serious crises. In the last decade the events taking place in that key geopolitical region of Northeast Asia drew the attention of the international community and global public opinion. Korea's role and importance in international relations (both on the regional and global scale) originates from various factors, the most important ones being: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the geopolitical importance of the peninsula and the role of a wider Asian region in the contemporary global order.

Nuclear tests in 2006, 2009 and 2013 confirmed beyond all doubt the status of North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea – DPRK) as a nuclear power. The state also possesses an extensive arsenal of ballistic missiles that are effective as means of delivery for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). It is important to remember that nuclear and missile technologies are one of the few attractive export products made in DPRK, which creates favourable conditions for other states to obtain them. As a result, it is not strange that North Korea is the main target of the international (especially American) non-proliferation policy.

““

ONE COULD RISK CLAIMING THAT FROM THE POINT OF REGIONAL SECURITY THE DIVISION OF KOREA INTO TWO STATES BENEFITS THE STABILIZATION OF THE ENTIRE REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER

Established within the Cold War structure of regional relations, the division of Korea into two hostile states was actually another stage of rivalry among the neighbouring powers to control the peninsula as a territory where spheres of influence meet. The American scholar Nicholas Eberstadt described Korea as the “cockpit of East Asia,” seeking analogy with the position of Belgium as the “cockpit” of Europe until the middle of the 20th century.¹ The clue of this concept is to understand a “cockpit” as a border territory that separates spheres of influence of external powers and serves as a battlefield in their conflicts. Korea played that role already at the end of the 16th century when the Japanese leader Hideyoshi started his unsuccessful campaign of continental conquest on the peninsula.² Towards the end of the 19th century Japanese leaders drafted plans of building a new Asian empire and decided that taking control of Korea (called “the dagger pointed at the heart of Japan”³ by a Prussian adviser to the Japanese army) by a foreign power would be one of the most serious threats to the security of the Empire. Yet, China still remembers well that the Japanese continental expansion (which climax was an attempt at gaining control over all of China) started with subduing (and finally annexing) Korea. The same pattern affected the course of the Korean War (1950-53). The US decision about military intervention resulted to a large extent from the will to protect Japan from the communist threat. On the other hand, the People’s Republic of China got directly involved in the conflict when the danger became real as the “imperialist forces” started reaching the border on the Yalu River. One could risk claiming that from the point of regional security the division of Korea into two states benefits the stabilization of the entire regional security order. That is because in this situation two traditional antagonists, China and Japan, are neighbours of the Korean state that is either an ally (between PRC and DPRK) or at least does not pose a threat (Japan – Republic of Korea). As a result, it can be assumed that the future status of Korea is crucial for the international order in the Asian region. On the other hand, the region is becoming more and more clearly one of the key global power centres. Above all, this is a result of its economic dynamics. The world’s second and third economies (China and

1 Eberstadt 2001:129.

2 Deng Yong 2008: 40

3 Pyle 2007: 91.

Japan respectively) with respect to the nominal GDP value are situated in Asia.⁴ The region’s economic importance also influences its political and military position in the global order, and for this reason the way events on the Korean peninsula develop is not only crucial for Asia, but also on the global scale.

In the studies of international relations (and social sciences from a wider perspective), forecasting is a risky undertaking due to the complex and highly dynamic character of the research subject, and the number of factors that influence it. For the purpose of this article, the scenario-building method designed by the team of R/evolutions journal will be applied. With the method, there are 6 stages in the forecast creation:

1. Defining the research subject.
2. Identifying the main variables that influence the direction of further evolution of the process under analysis.
3. Defining and analyzing microvariables that shape each of the main variables.
4. Ordering variables (main and micro) according to their importance to the processes under analysis.
5. Building scenarios by combining different variable evolution variants.
6. Defining “black swans”⁵ that can considerably change the character of the process under analysis.

It has to be underlined that the fundamental scientific “product” created by applying this method are not the final scenarios, but a list of key variables that influence the process being analyzed. The compilation and analysis of this list makes it possible to understand the process better, as well as interpret its evolutionary potential correctly.

1. DEFINING THE RESEARCH SUBJECT

The basic structure of the political order on the Korean peninsula was established in 1945 when the two superpowers that won the World War

4 The Economist 2010a.

5 „Black Swan” – a concept introduced by Nicholas Taleb in his book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*; it concerns events and phenomena which are so untypical that are practically unforeseeable on the basis of common experience and that have far-reaching social, political and economic consequences, at the same time they are relatively easy to explain and rationalize once they have occurred.

II – the USA and USSR – decided to temporarily (as was assumed at that time) divide Korea into two control zones, which was meant to order the process of accepting the capitulation of Japanese troops. In time, separate centres of political power developed on both sides of the 38th parallel and, supported by their ally powers, claimed their right to control all of Korea.⁶ The war in the years 1950-1953 did not yield any solution. It is worth remembering that the agreement signed on July 27th, 1953 in Panmunjom was not a peace treaty ending a war, but just an armistice. According to the governments and societies of both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea, there is one Korean nation that was temporarily (although this situation has endured since 1945) divided into two opposing political entities. However, neither side considers this situation as permanent and undertakes unification as their long-term objective, at least according to their declarations. Simultaneously, due to the geopolitical and historical conditions mentioned above, Korea remains an object of interest and considerable influence of external powers. The PRC, Japan, Russia and the USA all have their crucial political, military and economic interests in this region. As a consequence, the political future of Korea cannot be considered without taking into account the interests and policies of these states.

It is possible to indicate six fundamental actors that will be present in the political order that defines the future of the Korean peninsula – two Korean states and four external powers (which are reflected in the structure of the so-called six-party talks on the denuclearization of the peninsula). The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea aim at achieving their basic interests – security, development and legitimacy (in this case – exercising power over the entire peninsula).⁷ External powers likewise act within the same categories of interests in Korea, although to a different extent. Due to the geopolitical and historical factors described

“

THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE NORTH
KOREAN REGIME INCLUDE ELEMENTS OF
MARXIST-LENINIST THOUGHT, KOREAN
NATIONALISM OF A STRONG CHAUVINIST TINGE,
TRADITIONAL VIEWS ON SOCIAL LIFE ACCORDING TO
CONFUCIAN IDEALS, A PERSONALITY
CULT AND MILITARISM

⁶ Ostaszewski 2006: 305-306.

⁷ Kim Samuel S. 2007: 114.

above, the future power arrangement in this region is of primary importance for China's and Japan's security. For the United States, peace on the Korean peninsula is one of the elementary indicators of stability for the entire Asia Pacific region. The external powers' interests of development regarding this area stem from the fact that a potential escalation of the conflict would involve very negative consequences for the economic development of the entire region due to the interruption of commerce and foreign investment streams, so important for Asian export-oriented economies. The interests concerning legitimacy are not so much involved here when it comes to third-party states; yet at this point it is important to make a remark on the position of the USA. Namely, the threat posed by North Korea legitimizes the presence of American troops on the peninsula (and their wider presence in the entire region). A peaceful resolution to the conflict would question the sense of a continued US military presence in Korea, and as a result also in Japan, which would have significant consequences for the entire US regional policy where this military factor plays a crucial role.

— 2. MAIN VARIABLES AND MICROVARIABLES

Taking into account the structure of the political order currently present on the Korean peninsula, it is possible to assume that the most important variables that can define its political future are the following:

1. The ability of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's regime to survive
2. National unity policy pursued by Republic of Korea
3. Policy of external powers

2.1. ABILITY OF THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S REGIME TO SURVIVE

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea fits the classic model of totalitarianism created by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Carl Friedrich⁸ perfectly. North Korea has all the six characteristics of totalitarianism listed by these authors, i.e.:

- Power in the hands of a dictator/mass party
- Official ideology

⁸ For more information, see: Scobell 2006: 3-38.

- All-pervasive terror
- State monopoly over the use of force
- Centrally planned economy
- State monopoly on provision of information

The political system of North Korea is extremely centralized. The key point of the entire structure of power is the present Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. His position combines the highest office of the state (First Chairman of the National Defence Commission), of the party (First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party) and highest military rank (Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army). The preamble of the DPRK constitution clearly defines that the state follows the assumptions of the "juche" ideology formed by Kim Il-sung. Despite its shy attempts at reforms, North Korea still possesses one of the last truly centralized command economies in the world. Although not fully effective, control over access to information still remains one of the most important instruments to exercise power. Thus, it is possible to assume that, despite some changes in comparison with the rule of Kim Il-sung, the DPRK continues to be a classic totalitarian state with an exceptionally high level of state control over the lives of its citizens and little perspective of internal reforms.

The ideological foundations of the North Korean regime include elements of Marxist-Leninist thought, Korean nationalism of a strong chauvinist tinge, traditional views on social life according to Confucian ideals, a personality cult and militarism.⁹ The *juche* concept plays the role of official state ideology in this case. The exact meaning of the *juche* term, as well as the content of the idea are a subject of various interpretations by researchers. Most often, the concept is translated as "self-sufficiency." According to this concept, the external world is a source of continuous and lethal threat to the independence and success of the Korean nation. In order to defend themselves effectively, the Koreans have to devote themselves to work for the state and against all odds pursue self-sufficiency that will allow them to eliminate dependence on any external force. These ideas include



IN THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA THE SIZE OF THE SELECTORATE IS ESTIMATED AT BETWEEN 500 AND 2,000 PEOPLE HOLDING KEY POSITIONS IN THE PARTY, MILITARY AND STATE INSTITUTIONS.

⁹ Based on: Scobell 2006: 25-30; Byman, Lind 2010: 51-54.

a strong chauvinist, or even racist, element; the Koreans are depicted as people who are good and sensitive by nature, and are incessantly oppressed by bad and ruthless foreigners. The "suryong" concept of the supreme leader plays a crucial role here, justifying the dictatorship by subsequent members of the Kim family. As the Koreans are like children by nature, helplessly facing the dangerous external world, they need a father who will provide them security and show them the way of development. References to the traditional Korean understanding of family are clearly visible here. The official ideology strongly underlines the fact that subsequent representatives of the Kim family are entitled to exercise power in the state through their revolutionary heritage and merits of the clan. This leads to a conclusion that it is the supreme leader that guarantees the existence and effective operation of the state, and the supreme leader's title is assigned to the Kim family by tradition. An innovation introduced by Kim Jong-Il is a concept of *songun* ("military first"). It is a logical consequence of the previous assumptions. If North Korea is incessantly threatened by powerful external forces, the most important state institutions are the armed forces. This idea justifies Kim Jong-Il's political decision about basing his power on the military to a greater degree and justifies assigning this institution a privileged status and a considerable part of limited state resources.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is called a party-military state.¹⁰ It reflects the fact that the Supreme Leader's power is based above all on two institutions, i.e. the Korean Workers' Party and the Korean People's Army. Kim Jong-Il assigned the leading role to the armed forces, which was reflected in the above-mentioned idea of *songun*. The motivation behind such policy remains an object of speculation. It is possible that, according to the dictator, the armed forces are an institution that is better organized, loyal and generally more effective than the party and government bureaucracy. Another reason could be the will to ensure oneself the loyalty of the main armed force in the state. It is worth remembering that as an ex-guerrilla, Kim Il-Sung had unquestionable standing among military men, whereas both his son and grandson had no practical military experience.

On the basis of the analysis presented above it is possible to enumerate the most important factors that influence the ability of DPRK's regime to survive:

- **Succession of power.** Leadership change is the most difficult and potentially most dangerous political process in each non-

¹⁰ Scobell 2006: 4.

democratic system. The totalitarian features of the North Korean system exacerbate this problem even further. Taking into account the assumptions of the *suryong* concept and the widespread cult of personality involving subsequent members of the “dynasty,” the issue of whether North Korea can function as a state without the leadership of one of the Kim family members remains open. Admittedly, two successful successions of power have already taken place within the regime, yet it is still unknown whether this tradition can be effectively continued. In this context, it is interesting to know the stories of refugees from the DPRK about the continued worship and respect towards Kim Il-sung and a yet more distanced attitude towards his successor.¹¹

- **Unity of the ruling elite.** In the past, the alleged factional divisions within North Korean ruling elite were an object of intensive speculations. However, unambiguous evidence for the presence of independent and competing factions in the DPRK’s political system have not been gathered.¹² Although particular institutional players beyond doubt have their own interests and preferences in the area of formulation and execution of state policy, the central position of the Supreme Leader seems to rule out deeper divisions. The issue of maintaining this state of affairs remains open. At the same time, the unity of the ruling elite is one of the pillars of the DPRK regime’s stability.
- **Ability to gain financial resources to maintain the “selectorate.”** While leaders of democratic states are ultimately politically accountable to the electorate, leaders of undemocratic states base their power on a much narrower “selectorate” (a group of the most important state and party officials, military leaders etc.) that controls the structures of power.¹³ In the case of North Korea the size of the selectorate is estimated at between 500 and 2,000 people holding key positions in the party, military and state institutions. Subsequent leaders from the Kim family ensured themselves their loyalty by assigning them a privileged status and guaranteeing them access to luxury goods that are inaccessible for average citizens. Given the disastrous state of the economy, illegal operations by secret services and foreign aid, often extorted by blackmail, are considerable sources of revenue for continuation of this policy.

11 Scobell 2006: 15.

12 Scobell 2006: 22.

13 Byman, Lind 2010: 58-59.

As long as the leader owns resources for maintaining the special status of the elite, its loyalty towards him is highly probable.¹⁴

- **Maintaining state monopoly on access to information.** An important factor that influences the stability of the regime and its ability to survive is a high level of political indoctrination of the society and its isolation from the external world. Information is not controlled as tightly as it was during Kim Il-sung’s rule, which is due to technological progress and increasing corruption among state officials. Nevertheless, the level of control in the area of ideas by the authorities is extraordinarily high. Maintaining this level will be an important determinant from the perspective of the regime’s survival.

2.2. NATIONAL UNITY POLICY PURSUED BY REPUBLIC OF KOREA

In a simplified approach, the history of the South Korean policy towards its neighbour can be divided into three fundamental stages. The period between 1945 and 1998 was generally characterized by mutual hostility and a confrontational approach towards North Korea. The turning point came when Kim Dae-jung was elected president and his administration formulated a new concept of the policy towards the antagonistic regime. The so-called “sunshine policy” was based on the pursuit of dismantling the Cold-War structure of relations on the peninsula and improving the relations with DPRK by means of economic cooperation. This line was continued by President Roh Moo-hyun as the “policy of peace and prosperity.” In total, in the years 1998-2007 South Korea provided North Korea with economic aid of about 3.5 billion dollars. This policy was founded on the assumption that with time extensive economic cooperation and cultural exchange would lead to less hostility between the two Korean states, as well as to reforms and an opening in the DPRK. In spite of many symbolic gestures, above all two summits of the leaders of both states, these aims have not been achieved.¹⁵

In 2007, it was Lee Myung-bak, the candidate of the conservative Great National Party, who won the presidential elections in the Republic of Korea. He proposed a new vision of the relations between the Koreans. It could be described as a policy of conditional cooperation. Its main objective

14 Byman, Lind 2010: 60-64.

15 Kim Hong Nack 2008: 3-4.

was to denuclearize the peninsula. In order to achieve this, he decided that cooperation with the USA and Japan had to be closer. The desired final effect was to arrive at a united Korea, based on democratic and free market rules. Any humanitarian and economic aid would depend on verifiable progress on the way to denuclearization and other positive gestures by the DPRK.¹⁶ The politics of Park Guen-hye, the subsequent president of South Korea elected in December 2012, coming from the Saenuri party, previously known as the Great National Party, is still under development. However, it is possible to assume that it will be a continuation of the fundamental strategic directions of her predecessor.

The most important variables which need to be monitored regarding South Korea's policy are:

- **The state of the economies of both Korean states.** Despite the role of reunification on the peninsula in the officially proclaimed South Korean policy, there is no doubt that estimated costs of this process are an issue of concern not only for the government but also for society as a whole. In the report prepared in the end of 2007 for the budget committee of the National Assembly, the costs of reunification were estimated at 0,8 – 1,3 trillion USD.¹⁷ In aim to realize the range of difficulties concerning politics, economy, society and even culture which could be driven by reintegration of both societies, it is worth comparing it with the reunification of Germany, an example often mentioned in this context. According to the calculations of the Bank of Korea the differences in GDP per capita between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic shortly before the reunification were at 2:1, in the case of South and North Korea it is 17:1.¹⁸ Therefore, South Korea's leaders could arrive to a conclusion that the reunification will be a case of their national interest only if the North Korean economy becomes a subject of certain reforms and the economic discrepancy between both states becomes smaller. It also means that a decline of the economic situation in the South would not support an atmosphere of reunification.
- **State of social attitudes and the configuration of political forces.** Contrary to North Korea, South Korea has a democratic political system which means that a strong impact on foreign policy is given

16 Kim Hong Nack 2008: 5-6.

17 Foster-Carter 2008: 14.

18 Lankov 2008.

“

HAVING AN ALLY ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA BRINGS SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIC BENEFITS TO CHINA SUCH AS A BUFFER ZONE SEPARATING THE NORTH OF CHINA FROM THE SOUTH OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA AND JAPAN WHERE AMERICAN MILITARY FORCES ARE STATIONED

by the main political parties and public opinion. Currently, South Korea's political scene is dominated by two parties: centre-right Saenuri Party and centre-left Democratic United Party. In relation to the policy of national unity, the two parties declare seeking the same goal – peaceful reunification – but differ in approaches to achieve it. The right-wing party, generally speaking, supports the policy of conditional cooperation led by President Lee while the left-wing one refers to achievements of the policies led by both President Kim and President Roh. During so called *sunshine policy*, insecurity of public opinion in the South towards their neighbours in the North went down significantly.¹⁹ However, it is worth mentioning that recent military attacks conducted by North Korea have influenced South Korean politicians and society. Especially after the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, 2010, even the Democratic United Party criticized the government for its rather indecisive reaction.²⁰

- **Foreign policy strategy of ROK.** Regarding the context in which the policy of national unity is formulated and executed, an international orientation adopted by the South Korean government has a significant importance. During the Cold War, ROK's place in the US Asiatic alliance system determined a confrontational character of relations with DPRK and PRC. During Kim Dae-jung's and Roh Moo-hyun's governments, allied relations weakened and a switch to the policy of "strategic independence" became real; according to this policy Seoul should have occupied a neutral position with an equal distance to all regional partners.²¹ As a result, relations with China improved considerably what disturbed the United States and Japan. Then, President Lee Myung-bak led a policy of strengthening relations with the United States. The realization of one of the two most often postulated strategies – the

19 Lankov 2008

20 The Economist 2010b.

21 Cha Victor D. 2003: 110-112.

continued participation in the American system of alliances or the “strategic drift” among regional powers – has a vital impact on external powers’ approach concerning perspectives of reunification of Korea. Japan and the United States would like to see Korea as a friendly ally while China would rather prefer a “neutral” state.

2.3. EXTERNAL POWERS’ POLICY

For the future of Korea, interests of three external powers – the People’s Republic of China, Japan and the United States – are especially important. Also, the Russian Federation plays a significant role here (which is proved by its participation in the six-party talks). Nevertheless, Korea generally occupies a relatively low position in the Russian foreign policy not to mention that the Russian influence on the Korean peninsula is significantly smaller comparing to the other three powers.²²

Firstly, the People’s Republic of China formally remains the only ally of North Korea. Currently, a lively discussion is taking place in China regarding the right direction of further policy towards North Korea.²³ At the same time, China supports the regime of Kim Jong Un through provision of economic aid. Having an ally on the Korean peninsula brings significant strategic benefits to China such as a buffer zone separating the north of China from the south of the Korean peninsula and Japan where American military forces are stationed. Moreover, threat posed by North Korea constitutes a valuable asset in conflict concerning Taiwan’s status. If there was a military confrontation, the possibility of establishing a “second front” on the Korean peninsula would influence decisions of the United States about military intervention.²⁴ Furthermore, Chinese leaders worry about instability which would be a result of North Korea’s collapse. Some might think that in a situation of crisis, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army could enter the territory of its neighbour in aim to stop a wave of refugees and secure weapons of mass destruction.²⁵ Not only China but also the other mentioned actors view the perspective of reunification of Korea as extremely uncertain. Anxiety is revealed above all by continuing presence of American forces in the region as well as disagreements of historical nature with South Korea concerning the interpretation of Goryeo’s history. It was a kingdom which extended over the territory of

22 Weitz 2010.

23 Glaser, Snyder, Park John S. 2010.

24 Dingli Shen 2006: 19-20.

25 Glaser, Snyder, Park John S. 2010: 19-20.

contemporary North Korea and a part of Chinese Manchuria. Both China and South Korea suppose that attempts at appropriating kingdom’s heritage for needs of modern nationalism may constitute a prelude to territorial claims.²⁶

Secondly, the functioning of a friendly government (or at least not hostile) on the Korean peninsula is a matter of significant importance for the national security of Japan. Additionally, North Korea is currently seen as a real and the most serious external threat. The identity of the North Korean regime was mostly established in opposition to the Japanese occupation. Moreover, Pyongyang’s policy in recent years (missile tests, acknowledgement of abduction of Japanese citizens and many threats towards Japan) is proof for Japanese leaders and society that this threat remains real. It is also worth remembering that the relations between Japan and South Korea are not perfect either, which is above all a result of the difficult history of these countries and also relates to a territorial dispute concerning the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Japanese policy towards Korea should be also analyzed in view of tensions and rising competition between China and Japan.

Thirdly, the United States perceives North Korea as the second most serious threat (after Iran) to its policy of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. Even with the preferred regime change in the North and the reunification of Korea (the more peaceful the better), these issues remain a concern for the United States – as for other actors. It is incredibly difficult to predict results of unification for US interests. For instance, what will be the future international orientation of a reunited Korea? It is not clear that the Republic of Korea would remain an ally of the United States after its reunification.

Thus, the most important variables on which the direction of external powers’ policy depends are:

- **General state of relations among regional powers.** If regional relations are characterised by tendencies towards cooperation and the main actors support friendly relations among themselves, it will be more probable to create a common and compromising attitude towards the future of Korea. On the other hand, if tensions and insecurity concerning the above-mentioned security interests grow, it seems that the preservation of status quo or, in the most extreme case, a military confrontation will be more probable.

26 Savage 2008: 54-55.

- **Chinese policy towards Korea.** Results of the afore-mentioned discussion led in China concerning the preservation of alliance with North Korea remain crucial. There are some concerns that without Chinese aid the regime of the Kim dynasty could no longer exist. Moreover, for the perspective of reunification, the state of relations between China and South Korea is still important.
- **Level of Japan’s integration with the region.** Japan vastly integrated with its neighbours (above all China and South Korea) would be less likely to oppose the reunification of Korea, even if it led to the withdrawal of American forces from the region. Equally important is how Japan is perceived in the region. Opinions that Japanese leaders used the threats posed by North Korea as a pretext to initiate remilitarization are frequent.
- **Regional policy of the United States.** There is no doubt that the future of Korea will be influenced by the state of relations between the United States and China as well as the level of the United States’ involvement in the alliances with Japan and South Korea.

3. RANKING OF VARIABLES

In the author’s opinion, the hierarchy of the main variables shaping the political future of the Korean peninsula according to their importance could be presented as follows:

1. Ability of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s regime to survive.
2. Policy of external powers
3. National unity policy pursued by Republic of Korea

Such a hierarchy is a result of the fact that all actors are actually interested in preserving the status quo on the peninsula. Despite that the current situation is not optimal for South Korea’s or the external powers’ interests, risk and uncertainty related to the possibility of changes are more important than potential benefits which could be brought by this kind of process. Thus, North Korea has the biggest political and diplomatic “freedom of manoeuvre” among all actors. Others react to DPRK’s actions rather than trying to press their own preferences. As a result, the most important variable influencing further development of events on the

peninsula is in fact the future of DPRK regime. This issue is followed by the external powers’ policy as the latter factor is characterized by the greatest dynamics and potential variability. The third position is occupied by the policy of national unity pursued by ROK, as it seems to be the most stabilized and relatively predictable phenomenon.

Every main variable is shaped by some micro variables which can be ranked as follows:

Ability of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s regime to survive
1. Unity of the ruling elite
2. Ability to gain financial resources to pay the “selectorate”
3. Maintaining state monopoly on access to information
4. Succession of power

The most important factor – the unity of the ruling elite – is considerably determined by the capacity to secure funds to pay the *selectorate*. Therefore it is safe to assume that this factor is of key importance and also the most susceptible to change. It is also worth indicating that funding the *selectorate* as well as the national monopoly of information are the only factors that may be influenced (at the certain level, though) by external actors. As the second succession of power (at the turn of the year 2011) was successful, this micro variable may be currently seen as the least important. However, there is no doubt that this issue will appear once again and will significantly grow in importance. Therefore, among all variables, the succession of power remains the most unpredictable.

External powers’ policy
General state of relations among regional powers
1. China’s policy towards Korea
2. The United States’ regional policy
3. Japan’s level of integration with the region

In general, relations among concerned regional powers depend on their policy. In the foreground, there is China’s position while having potentially the greatest influence on North Korea. It is also worth mentioning

that the regional policies of the United States and Japan are more often described as a reaction to China's moves. In fact, regional relations in North-East Asia are gradually more influenced by interactions between regional policies of China and the United States. Among the three external actors analyzed in this article, Japan has the fewest means of influence on processes taking place on the Korean peninsula.

National unity policy pursued by Republic of Korea

1. State of social attitudes and the configuration of political forces
2. State of economies of both Korean states
3. Foreign policy strategy of ROK

As South Korea is a democratic state, social attitudes and their derivative – the configuration of political forces – are considered as the most important variable shaping the South Korean policy of national unity. This factor is also potentially the most susceptible to changes. In addition, the character of relations between the two first variables mentioned above is ambiguous. There is no doubt that the perception of reunification costs is an important issue taken into consideration by the South Korean elites and society. However, it is difficult to perceive a direct relation between the state of South Korea's economy and the attitude towards the neighbour in the north. What is equally important is the way of perceiving the violations of human rights in North Korea as well as a potential danger of North Korea towards its neighbour in the South. Finally, the international orientation of South Korea seems to be the least subjective to change for now because of the growing consensus on the maintenance of the alliance with the United States.

4. SCENARIOS

Regarding the analysis of the microvariables presented in this article, it is now possible to present the following sectoral scenarios related to the development of each main variable.

North Korea's regime	Relations among external powers	South Korea's policy
Maintenance of stability	Uncertain stability (much mutual mistrust)	Stability and continuity
Gradual weakening	Agreement	Isolation from North Korea
Sudden collapse	Intensive competition/ open hostility	Attempt at harmonic reunification (through a peaceful agreement)
Efficient adaptation to economic conditions		Attempt at aggressive reunification (through regime change in the North)

Scenarios concerning the macro level – the processes of the political situation's development on the Korean peninsula treated as a whole – constitute various combinations of sectoral scenarios as presented above. Despite the fact that they are many, in the author's opinion they may be limited to five essential scenarios, listed beneath according to the degree of their probability.

- I. **Maintenance of the status quo** – in other words, stability and consolidation of the current relations on the Korean peninsula. As it was mentioned, this scenario, although not entirely optimal for all actors except North Korea, is acceptable for them.
- II. **Chaos** – according to this scenario, a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime is possible. It would force other actors to react, what might present significant difficulties in coordination.
- III. **War/prolonged confrontation** – this scenario assumes the development of situation towards a prolonging escalation of tension provoked by actions of one actor or more. As a result, a politico-military crisis would be prolonged which, in extreme cases, would lead to an open military confrontation.
- IV. **Peaceful reunification, led by Koreans** – this scenario is a result of a combination of changes (or reforms) in North Korea and probably the return to the practices of *sunshine policy* in South Korea. It also suggests that the initiation of reunification process, its conditions, pace and execution would be led mostly by Korean people.
- V. **Reunification led by the international community** – scenario comparable to the latter, although led by external powers.

The presented list of scenarios is not in any case exhaustive. What is more, scenarios might occur concurrently. For instance, reunification led by the international community as a consequence of war or prolonged crisis might happen.

5. BLACK SWANS

This part is devoted to the identification of some phenomena and processes that are unlikely, but *might* occur on the Korean peninsula. The degree of their probability currently seems to be low but they might significantly influence the development of the subject of prognosis.

- **Massive protests/rebellion in North Korea** – despite the totalitarian character of the North Korean regime which strongly reduces a probability of political transition through social protests or civil war, the possibility of protests cannot be wholly excluded.
- **Policy of “reforms and opening” in North Korea** – the regime of the Kim dynasty aims to maintain the full control over society which is seen as the base of its power. Consequently, the regime remains insensible to suggestions of its Chinese allies who point out that adopting the policy of “reforms and opening” in the economic sphere, as they have done, is useful. It is also worth mentioning that the initiation of serious economic reforms in North Korea would without a doubt have serious consequences for regional relations.
- **South Korea’s abandonment of the reunification policy** – division of the peninsula accepted by South Korea as a permanent state would lead to the re-evaluation of inter-Korean relations. Probably, both Koreas would be obliged to create separate national identities. This scenario cannot be fully excluded regarding not only the atmosphere of anxiety in the South concerning possible costs of reunification but also alienation of both societies.
- **Deep economic and/or social crisis in South Korea** – one of the main aspects of the current political configuration on the Korean peninsula is a significant economic supremacy of South Korea over its neighbour in the north as well as the consolidated character of the South Korean democratic system. A serious economic and/or political crisis would without a doubt influence all main variables analyzed in this article.
- **South Korea’s alliance with China or Japan** – so far, prognoses were based on the presupposition that South Korea maintains the alliance with the United States or likely opts for a policy of independence. Despite the fact that a close alliance of South Korea with China or Japan is currently quite improbable, if this scenario occurred, it would have an essential impact on inter-Korean relations. Possibly, an alliance with China might facilitate reaching an agreement about the reunification of the peninsula while an orientation towards Japan might provoke the opposite.
- **Russia’s return as a key actor** – as mentioned before, the Russian Federation is not included in the analysis because of its weak position in the North-East Asia and limited influence on the Korean peninsula. However, if Russia regained the position of an important player in the region, calculations regarding the policy of external powers towards the Korean peninsula would change as the number of actors increased.
- **Change in China** – this factor should be understood mainly as a fundamental change of attitude the Chinese authorities have towards Korean issue and a re-evaluation of Chinese interests on the peninsula. It might be a result of the change of policy direction led by current regime or change of power in China, for example by following a democratic path.
- **Regional integration** – one of the most important factors supporting the status quo on the Korean peninsula is the divergence of attitudes and policies followed by each and every external power and South Korea. It makes the creation of a common position towards North Korea impossible and leaves North Korea with a significant liberty of shaping regional relations. If, through the progress of integration in North-East Asia, there was at least a partial harmonization of interests and attitudes by key actors, it would considerably influence the development of the political situation on the Korean peninsula.

Rafał Wiśniewski is a PhD student at the Strategic Studies Department at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. He is also a member of the R/evolutions editorial team. His academic interests include international relations in Asia, military aspects of international security and defense economics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Byman, Lind 2010** Byman, D., Lind J., "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea", *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2010, p. 44-74.
- Cha Victor D. 2003** Cha, Victor D., *South Korea Anchored or Adrift?*, in: *Strategic Asia 2003-04: Fragility and Crisis*, R. J. Ellings, A. L. Friedberg, M. Wills eds., The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, 2003.
- Deng Yong 2008** Deng, Yong, *China's Struggle for Status The Realignment of International Relations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.
- Dingli Shen 2006** Dingli, Shen, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", *China Security*, no. 4, 2006.
- Eberstadt 2001** Eberstadt, N., "Korea," in: *Strategic Asia 2001-02 Power and Purpose*, R. J. Ellings, A.L. Friedberg (eds.), The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, 2001.
- Foster-Carter 2008** Foster-Carter, A., "North Korea-South Korea Relations: Sunshine Deepened, only to Dim?" *Comparative Connections*, 2008, vol. 9, Nr.4, (http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/0704qnk_sk.pdf). (Accessed 9-06-2013)
- Glaser, Snyder, Park John S.2008** Glaser, B., Snyder, S., Park John S., *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor, Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea*, a joint report by: Center for Strategic and International Studies & U.S. Institute of Peace, 3-01-2008, (<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/Jan2008.pdf>). (Accessed 27/12/2010)
- Kim Hong Nack 2008** Kim, Hong Nack, "The Lee Myung-Bak Government's North Korea Policy And the Prospects for Inter-Korean Relations", *International Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-23.

- Kim Samuel S. 2007** Kim, Samuel, S., *The Two Koreas: Making Grand Strategy amid Changing Domestic Politics*, in: *Strategic Asia 2007-08, Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, A.J. Tellis, M. Wills (eds.), The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, 2007.
- Ostaszewski 2006** Ostaszewski, P., *Wojna Koreańska 1950-1953* (The Korean War 1950-1953), in: *Konflikty kolonialne i postkolonialne w Afryce i Azji 1869-2006* (Colonial and Postcolonial conflicts in Africa and Asia 1869-2006), P. Ostaszewski ed., Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa/Warsaw, 2006.
- Pyle 2007** Pyle, K.B., *Japan Rising The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose*, Public Affairs, New York, 2007.
- Kuo Mercy, Marble 2007** Kuo, Mercy, Marble, A.D., "China in 2020: Bridging the Academic-Policy Gap with Scenario Planning", *Asia Policy*, no. 4, 2007, pp.1-52.
- Lankov 2008** Lankov, A., "Staying Alive, Why North Korea Will Not Change", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2008, pp. 9-16.
- Savage 2008** Savage, T., "Big Brother is Watching: China's Intentions in the DPRK", *China Security*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2008, pp. 53-57.
- Scobell 2006** Scobell, A., *Kim Jong Il and North Korea: The Leader and the System*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2006, (<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=644>). (Accessed 27-12-2010)
- The Economist 2010a** *Japan as number three Watching China whizz by*, "The Economist", 19-08-2010, (<http://www.economist.com/node/16847828>, (27-12-2010).
- The Economist 2010b** *Tensions on the Korean peninsula From sunshiners to hardliners*, "The Economist", 9-12-2010, (http://www.economist.com/node/17681037?story_id=17681037). (Accessed 27-12-2010)
- Weitz 2010** Weitz, R., *What Russia can do on North Korea*, (<http://the-diplomat.com/2010/12/22/what-russia-can-do-on-north-korea/>). (Accessed 27-12-2010)

find out
where are we from

R/evolutions: Global Trends &
Regional Issues,
Volume 1, Issue 1, June 2013.
Copyright by R/evolutions Research
Center, Poznan, 2013
r-evolutions.amu.edu.pl