



# Whither Korean Unification in the Aftermath of the North Korean Rocket Launch?

by Ingolf Kiesow

*On April 14, following the condemnation of North Korea's rocket launch by the United Nations Security Council, The Foreign Ministry of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stated that "the DPRK will never participate in the talks any longer nor it will be bound to any agreement of the six-party talks..., the DPRK will bolster its nuclear deterrent for self-defence in every way." The other five countries participating in the six-party talks, however, are nonetheless likely to put strong pressure on North Korea to come back to the negotiating table. The food situation is worsening and contradictions between the needs of the population and military ambitions make the decision-making process in Pyongyang difficult. The Kaesong Industrial Complex has been a promising Confidence-Building Measure but it can also become a symbol of the end of ambitions to reunify Korea.*

## Reasons to be concerned

On April 14, the United Nations inspectors at the Yongbyong nuclear reprocessing plant were asked to leave North Korea with immediate effect. This resulted in that the six-party talks, which have represented the only meaningful way of solving the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, have ended without yielding any positive results, at least for the time being.

Summing up the reactions of the other five countries participating in the six-party talks, it seems that they all believe that it is in their interest that the talks be continued and also – albeit possibly to a lesser degree – that it will be possible to restart them. This, however, will depend entirely on whether North Korea is prepared to restart the talks, which is probably very much in the direction that North Korea had wanted events to develop, but the question remains when and under what conditions a restart of talks can be accepted.

By tradition the populations of both South Korea and North Korea are extremely nationalistic. Striving for reunification has been regarded as a sacred duty for every citizen on both sides of the line of armistice since the end of hostilities in 1953. Economic and social development in the South has, however, slowly weakened this feeling of moral duty and many younger people do not attach the same importance to the issue of reunification compared to the older generations. Moreover, the costs of reunification are estimated to have become too high for South Korea, who would have to bear the economic burden. Such attitudes are, on the other hand, regarded as traitorous, shameful, and immoral in the North, where the regime will nonetheless have to be careful before it abandons what it regards as

its only guarantee against being “engulfed” by the South, be it by force or by peaceful integration. That guarantee lies in the possession of nuclear weapons, which represents its only remaining bargaining chip. According to a statement by the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, published by the (North) Korean Central News Agency, “the army of the DPRK has never pinned any hope on the six-party talks from their outset but closely followed the moves of the U.S. and Japanese aggressors and the Lee group of traitors.” Judging from that statement alone, it seems that the Army only sees the six-party talks as a way to buy more time, not to solve the basic question of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula.

## Food and foreign currency

The North Korean military is, however, not the only sector with an influence over decision making. The Workers' Party and government agencies also have a say, and for many of them it is more important to consider how much North Korea can improve its economic situation by negotiating. A time of bargaining and “negotiating” by means of declarations and public statements can be expected between the participating countries of the six-party talks for the next half a year or so, and decision-makers in Pyongyang are likely to take much time in finding a course between mutually incompatible demands from the different sectors in North Korea.

The World Food Program (WFP) has maintained a small office in Pyongyang since the years of severe food shortages during the 1990s. In 2008, the WFP made its first new major field study regarding the situation in North Ko-



rea and found that food supply is again deteriorating: “Even with anticipated commercial imports and currently pledged food aid, the country will experience a cereal shortfall of 836,000 tonnes for the 2008/2009 marketing year, leaving 8.7 million people in need of food assistance.” The WFP subsequently made an appeal to the international community for donations to a renewed food aid program, but the response has been very slow – so far only 4.5 per cent of the requested sums have been given and the WFP is renewing its appeals. (see <http://www.wfp.org>).

The renewed food shortage comes at an inconvenient time, when North Korea is experiencing worse problems than usual with its balance of payments. This shortage of foreign currency has, of course, effects also on the import of fuel, raw materials, and machinery for the North Korean manufacturing industry. Therefore the income that North Korea derives from its share of production results at the factories in Kaesong has a high value for the economy. During 2008, the Kaesong Industrial Complex produced goods with a value of US\$ 251 million. The total value of production since the start of operations in 2005 amounts to US\$ 525 million, according to South Korea’s Unification Ministry.

## The Kaesong Industrial Complex

On April 16, North Korea issued a message suggesting an inter-Korean meeting at Kaesong for April 20, saying that it would notify the South of “an important matter” concerning the Kaesong project. The South Korean negotiating team arrived in Kaesong but the two sides failed to agree on where to meet, with the result that the North Koreans did not reveal their intended message.

The negotiations about Kaesong could result in events of historic importance. In spite of the present political climate, in a long term perspective never before have so propitious conditions existed in the form of increased people-to-people contacts (namely because of the existence of the Kaesong project) for a step-by step improvement of first economic and then political and finally military measures to build confidence between North and South Korea, in a manner that could resemble the process between China and Taiwan.

The South Korean managers at Kaesong have a very delicate task in dealing with their North Korean workers and co-managers, however. On the one hand they have to impart lessons on how to operate factories and make profit and, on the other, they have to avoid the danger of being accused of anti-government propaganda. Many discussions

have been conducted and many high officials from Pyongyang, both military and civilian, have visited Kaesong to determine whether the activities there are a threat to order in the North Korean state and/or if the value of learning is so high for future North Korean factory managers that they should be permitted to continue. Some of them may, however, have overstepped the line of caution and the whole project might now face intervention. Indeed, it may be deemed that too many North Koreans may have gone too far in defending “foreign ideas” in Kaesong. The danger of ideological conflict is illustrated by the case of a South Korean worker, who has been detained in Kaesong for having criticized the North Korean regime. He is kept isolated and no South Korean representative has been allowed to see him.

The companies who participate in Kaesong have on the other hand shown a great deal of patience and a stubborn good-will and sacrificed a great deal of money in their struggle to make the project survive through difficult times, high costs, and complicated regulations. Their patience has been strained already. If they now would find that the project was to be closed down or to operate under unacceptable conditions, they are likely to feel deceived and react with bitterness and will not likely undertake such projects again. Public opinion in South Korea is likely to react in the same way. That is likely to signal the end of anything that resembles reunification. It can happen faster than most North Koreans are likely to realize. All parties should be more aware of the danger of “unintended consequences.”

## Inter-Korean relations

In the two Koreas, structures are drifting apart. The process is slow, but it has already far-reaching consequences. More than sixty years of separation have changed the concept of being “Korean” in ways that are increasingly different. Separation has been more total, societal changes in the two states have been deeper, and more time has passed compared to the situation when the two Germanies were reunited. The process of reunification was difficult enough for Germany to carry through in a short time frame. It will be a great deal more complicated for Korea. It will necessitate careful preparations on both sides. Yet such inter-Korean negotiations on the subject are becoming more and more difficult to imagine.

This is of importance not only for the two Koreas. A continuation of the present situation, with two competing states on the peninsula with different and incompatible systems, will always engender an element of instability and



insecurity for Northeast Asia. The neighbors, China, Russia, Japan, and USA (with its navy and the island group of Guam within the region), have consequently a stake in the continuation of a process of rapprochement, not confrontation, between the two Koreas (and between North Korea, USA, and Japan). There is still a chance for the two Koreas to embark upon another effort to improve relations on a new track that would lead to gradual normalization, beginning with economic cooperation. It would be a tragedy if it is lost. Another opportunity looks unlikely to appear. That is also a reason why the four other members of the six-party talks should reflect more seriously, than they have hitherto, upon whether or not and under what conditions a process of normalization between the two Koreas could lead to some kind of reunification without being contrary to their interests. It is not only North Korea that has reason to consider the seriousness of the situation, but the long-term perspective should be given more attention by all.

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