The Role of Multilateralism:  
Germany's 2+4 Process and Its Relevance for the Korean Peninsula

Hanns W. Maull, University of Trier

The comparable experience of Korea and Germany since the 1950s as divided nations has attracted much mutual attention, and German unification has often been used as a yardstick for analysing the problems and implications of unification from the vantage point of the two Koreas. This brief paper focuses on a so far rather neglected aspect of this analogy: the external dimensions of unification, and specifically the relevance of multilateralism for embedding Korean unification within a stable regional order.

The starting point of this analysis, and its fundamental assumption, is that the Korean peninsula has begun to undergo a process of fundamental change and transformation, which eventually will lead to some form of unification of the two Koreas within the next decade. The external aspects of this process to us seem sufficiently close to the process of German unification to explore this analogy. Our conclusion is that multilateral co-operation, which played a central role in the external aspects of German unification, in the case of Korea has already, and in the future may well increasingly, come into its own as an important dimension. We also feel that the development of multilateral co-operation in North East Asia offers much better prospects for regional peace and stability than arrangements built primarily on unilateralism and bilateral alliances.

1. Korea and Germany in World Politics: Similarities and Differences

The fate of Germany and Korea during the Cold War era shows many striking parallels, but also important differences. Both need to be kept in mind if one wants to assess the utility of multilateralism to the situation on the Korean peninsula.

**Similarities**

Among the striking similarities between the two countries are their respective geopolitical positions, their fate of division during the Cold War, but also the continuing attraction of national unity and, indeed, processes of change towards unification which have begun to be felt in Korea as well as earlier on in Germany, the far-reaching implications of how Germany and Korea respectively are united for regional and even for global peace and stability. The similarities further extend to the issues to be resolved in the context of unification and the relevance of multilateral co-operation in this process. Let us discuss these similarities briefly in turn:

1) Both Germany and Korea occupy particularly **sensitive geopolitical positions**. Germany is at the heart of Europe, with few natural barriers impeding either access to Germany or expansion from there. Korea is precariously poised between the three major powers in North East Asia, China, Japan and Russia, and is similarly open to entry and exit. Both Germany and Korea have thus historically been battlegrounds for geopolitical competition between external regional and even world powers (as during the Cold War).

2) Both Germany and Korea were **divided by the Cold War**. Neither division was intended: both Germany and Korea were meant to remain united, but were separated as a consequence of the interplay of hostile forces between East and West on their respective territories. In Germany, division came about as the initially strictly temporary expedient of occupation zones froze into two opposed states; in Korea, the initial division came about in rather the same way, but it was then reinforced by the outcome of the Korean war.

3) Both Germany and Korea occupy pivotal geopolitical positions in their respective regions; the specifics of their unification therefore have important **implications for regional and global order**. Put differently, the way the two countries are anchored into their regional environment to a large extent defines that environment: a loosely embedded Germany or Korea will invite competition for influence and/or unilateral efforts by those countries themselves to enhance their security, while a firmly anchored Germany or Korea would contribute to regional stability.

4) Even many of the specific **issues to be resolved** in the context of unification are similar for both Germany and Korea. Thus, for both countries unification could not be
achieved without some kind of formal international agreement - a peace treaty or some substitute for it. In both cases, unification implied (or, in the case of Korea, will imply) the need to clarify the territorial confines of the new entity. For both Germany and Korea, the position regarding weapons of mass destruction would require clarification, and for both, unification implied the need to integrate and demobilise the two respective military establishments. For Germany and Korea, unification required clarification of the future of foreign troops in their respective countries. For Germany and Korea, unification raised the problem of rehabilitating and modernising the backward half. Finally, the unification of both Germany and Korea needed to be embedded in a robust and sustainable framework of regional order so as to prevent any destabilisation originating from inherent changes in relative power and influence.

5) Finally, many of these specific issues could be resolved only multilaterally. **Multilateral co-operation in principle thus acquired considerable importance** in addressing the external (and some internal) aspects of unification. Multilateralism also clearly was very important in bringing about German unification, and it has also come to play an increasingly important (if by comparison clearly much more modest) role in the case of Korea.

**Differences**

These many parallels and similarities should not blind us, however, to some important differences between the two cases:

1) While Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries has been an expansionist power which challenged the regional and global status quo, Korea throughout its history has practically never tried to expand beyond Korean territory but has been preoccupied with holding its own against the two overwhelming powers in its immediate neighbourhood, China and Japan. As a consequence, there never has been a "Korean question" in relation to the regional order in North East Asia in the way the German question had preoccupied European politics since at least the 17th century: the question of how to avoid German preponderance and hegemony in Europe. This should facilitate the task of finding sustainable arrangements for regional order in North East Asia as compared to Europe.

2) Both Germanies had been closely integrated in dense webs of multilateral co-operation and integration in Europe. In the case of East Germany, this integration
was artificial and could not be sustained, as it could not sufficiently take roots in East German society. In West Germany, however, this integration both reflected and in turn solidified profound changes in society and political culture. In the case of Korea, such multilateral ties are much less developed and almost exclusively confined to global institutions. The politically dominant external relationships are the bilateral security ties of South Korea with the United States and - traditionally - those of North Korea with both China and the former Soviet Union. (Part of the transformation of the situation on the peninsula has been the unravelling of North Korea's security alliance with the former Soviet Union and, to some extent, even with China).

3) As a result, only in the case of Germany did multilateralism really constitute an important condition facilitating unification. Multilateralism made German unification possible: it provided essential reassurance for Germany's neighbours, constrained Germany's freedom and provided anchors to German foreign policy behaviour.

4) Unification in the case of Germany also acted as a catalyst for multilateral co-operation and integration in Europe and across the Atlantic. There thus developed a virtuous circle, in which the progress of multilateralism produced further impulses towards both the deepening and widening of multilateral co-operation in the Euro-Atlantic region.

2. The Case for "2+4"- Multilateralism in Korea

We thus note a very significant difference in the actual importance of multilateralism in Germany and Korea, even if we compare the situation before German unification with that of Korea today.3) This difference can, of course, easily be explained in terms of differences between the two cases and their regional setting. Still, this leaves North East Asia with a relatively deficient (or at least sub-optimal) array of policy instruments. As many observers from both within and outside Korea have noted, more multilateralism for North East Asia in principle would be desirable - not because of any inherent practical or normative advantage of multilateralism but because important dimensions of the challenges in North East Asia could be addressed more comprehensively through multilateral co-operation and integration. This is why:

1) Multilateralism would facilitate the necessary mutual accommodation of interests and objectives, as it would diminish the risks of polarization and broaden the opportunities for trade-offs, hence for package deals. For example, even CSBMs
between the two Koreas would benefit from multilateral backing through external actors, as this could reduce mutual suspicions, provide additional incentives for good behavior and add deterrents through possible additional sanctions in case of breach of agreements.

2) The interests of the external powers (China, the US, Japan, arguably Russia) are fundamentally compatible with each other: all are concerned with stability and thus prefer the status quo over changes, but all would also prefer peaceful and orderly change towards a new status quo acceptable to all of them to uncontrolled, possibly highly dangerous forms of change. The power which probably has to lose most is the US, with its major influence over the peninsula as a whole - but this position is risky (the American troops in Korea are highly exposed in case of war, and would probably suffer major casualties), and the US has such a dominant position in world affairs that it could afford some regional erosion of influence (as long as this would not directly translate into more influence for a potential challenger to US world power). Hence, the task is to work out a new, sustainable regional security order built on clearly defined, limited and constrained influence of outside powers on the Korean peninsula, combined with an "open door" to all, that is: open regional and global economic interactions.

3) The conflictual issues on the peninsula, as far as outside powers are concerned, are not necessarily antagonistic. In fact, they are rather unlikely to be so, as recent developments show: shared interest in stability much outweighs conflict over influence. Polarization could arise only out of perceived threats to vital Chinese security concerns emanating from a strong and forward-oriented US military presence on the peninsula or a US-Korean-Japanese alliance directed against China (or a Chinese-Korean-Japanese alliance directed against the US). Those scenarios seem rather unlikely. In fact, tensions over Korea between the powers are much more likely to arise out of the consequences of: nationalism and political fragility and/or the quest for status in world affairs. Those problems cannot be addressed directly through international arrangements, but multilateral co-operation and multilateral institutions could perhaps contribute to dampening and defanging such tendencies, and the configuration of revealed interests and objectives would not, as we have seen, per se impede multilateral initiatives but actually facilitate them.

4) In short, the configuration of revealed interests, objectives and even strategies of external powers on and around the peninsula does not equate a zero-sum game;
there is therefore no need to invent one, and - assuming a degree of political
prudence on all sides - accommodation seems much more likely than confrontation
over Korea. The diplomatic trick would be to transform what often, if wrongly, still is
perceived as a zero-sum game explicitly into a positive-sum game. This would seem
to be all the more appropriate as this would be consonant with the dominant logic of
this age, the logic of globalisation. Put differently, shying away from advancing
multilateral co-operation would go against the grain of important socio-economic and
cultural trends, would this incur considerable material disadvantages and could even
undermine the very foundations of developmental advances in the region.

3. The State of Multilateralism in Korea

The logic of multilateralism has indeed made itself felt over the last few years. The
transformation of the situation on the peninsula, which is result of the economic and political
failure of the North Korean system, began in the early 1990s and has gained momentum
since the nuclear crisis of 1994. In parallel, we can observe a rapid proliferation of
multilateral processes focused on Korea - which is not to deny that the burden of managing
the crises of transformation has largely been carried by the United States and its bilateral
diplomacy. Tellingly, however, the US has itself invoked multilateralism as part of its overall
strategy.

There are four different forms of multilateral logic involved: collective defence and collective
diplomacy; confidence- and security building measures and preventive diplomacy; economic
rehabilitation of North Korea; and peace making.

*Collective defence and diplomacy: TCOG*

The principal multilateral mechanism for co-ordinating American, South Korean and
Japanese policies towards North Korea has been the Trilateral Co-ordination and Oversight
Group (TCOG). Established in 1999 at ministerial level, TCOG has consisted of regular
meetings between senior officials from the three foreign ministries. TCOG has been a
multilateral tool for conducting diplomacy towards the DPRK, but it has implicitly also
functions of collectively defending against the threat to regional stability posed by
Pyongyang. More broadly, this "minilateral" framework bringing together the three countries
has also acquired genuine collective security aspects through the revisions of the US -
Japan Revised Defence Co-operation Guidelines, which have shifted the previously strictly
bilateral security and defence co-operation between Tokyo and Washington towards
collective defence including South Korea. This shift has been underpinned by a substantial expansion of bilateral security co-operation between South Korea and Japan.

**CSBM and Preventive Diplomacy: ARF, ASEAN+3**

CSBMs and preventive diplomacy have been key ingredients in the region-wide security dialogue which has been conducted since 1993 in the context of the ASEAN Regional Forum. The ARF has repeatedly touched upon developments on the peninsula, and in 2000 North Korea formally joined the ARF. Another official context with potential to contributing to confidence-building and preventive diplomacy has been the recently institutionalised annual summit meeting of the ASEAN heads of state and government and the three North East Asian states China, Japan, and South Korea, which has begun to spin off trilateral co-operation on specific issues between the three North East Asian participants in that process. Japan, in particular, has also been keen to establish and institutionalise an North East Asian Security Dialogue at a sub-regional level - so far, however, without success.

**Rehabilitation cum CSBM: KEDO, missiles, and reconstruction**

The third dimension of multilateralism involving the Korean peninsula at the surface is economic, but in fact involves political and security aspects, as well. This is most obvious in the case of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation KEDO: KEDO is a multilateral institution created to implement a bilateral agreement between Washington and Pyongyang, which trades the abolition and dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme against two civilian nuclear power plants and intermediate deliveries of heavy fuel oil to enhance North Korea's electricity generating capacity. KEDO has many overtones, but its focus is on supplying energy to North Korea and promoting political change between the two Koreas, and between the North and the United States. Similarly, international food aid for North Korea has had both immediate humanitarian, but also political and even security objectives: none of the outside powers had any interest in a - potentially highly destabilising and dangerous - collapse of North Korea.

North Korea has also been angling for a broadly similar arrangement as with KEDO on its missile production capabilities, and Washington and Pyongyang came quite close to a deal in the last days of the Clinton Presidency. If political developments permit or demand it, there could develop more broadly based international efforts at rehabilitating the North Korean economy. The World Bank and the ADB would have important roles to play in this, as would
Japan, which is still negotiating a settlement with North Korea involving colonial and war times indemnities.

**Peace making: Four Party Talks**

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is a need for a multilateral mechanism to design and implement a peace agreement for the Korean peninsula. This agreement would be a cornerstone, or possibly even the basic document, for the new regional political order in North East Asia. Formally, North Korea is still at war - both with the South, and with the United Nations. The Armistice Regime, signed in 1953 by North Korea and the UN, but not by South Korea, has never been superseded through a formal peace treaty. First step towards this were taken in the early 1990s, with the Joint Declarations of 1991/2 and the entry of the two Koreas into the UN. In 1996, South Korea and the United States jointly proposed Four Party Talks between the two Koreas, China and the United States. The proposal was accepted by the other two, and the Four Party Talks have been convened eight times until mid-1999 to discuss a peace agreement. South Korea has also proposed, much to Russia’s and Japan's delight, the association of Japan and Russia to the process, although Seoul and Tokyo seem to have somewhat different conceptions of how those 2+4 talks would actually work. So far, North Korea and China have been hostile, or at least lukewarm, to this notion of broadening or supplementing the Four Party Talks.

4. The Prospects for Multilateralism in Korea

There thus has been a significant advance of multilateralism in North East Asia in recent years. But, as mentioned already, this advance has been ephemeral: in substantive terms, crisis management has been conducted on the basis of bilateral diplomacy - between Washington and North Korea, resulting in the Geneva Framework Agreement; between Washington and Japan, resulting in a shift of bilateral defence co-operation towards collective defence and collective deterrence for the Korean peninsula; and between South and North Korea through the "sunshine policy" and the bilateral rapprochement following the summit in June 2000.

**Obstacles**

Why has multilateralism not been able to play a more significant role? The principal reasons are the reluctance of the key players, Washington, Beijing, and Pyongyang, to turn to multilateral solutions. To be sure, the US and China both have accepted participation in
multilateral processes, and the US even helped set up some of them as part of its overall strategies of managing change on the peninsula. Yet Washington has been, in the word of Oknim Chung, an "opportunistic" multilateralist, while Beijing has been a "reluctant" multilateralist. Even South Korea and Japan, which have championed multilateralism in and for East Asia as a way to advance regional peace and stability, have not been beyond dumping multilateral strategies in favour of bilateral or even unilateral policies if they felt this suited their interests better. One of the missing ingredients of multilateralism in North East Asia thus has been belief: the belief that multilateralism offered opportunities to promote regional peace and stability which existing bilateral approaches could not.

**The need for multilateral advances**

Yet there is an urgent need for promoting multilateral co-operation, both as a supplement and, in the longer term, even as a possible alternative to existing arrangements, which build on balance of power and US military, economic and technological dominance. The principal reason why present arrangements will probably be increasingly deficient and dangerous is simply change: change of a very important magnitude. There can be little doubt that international relations are undergoing fundamental transitions along their three dimensions: at the level of state power, US supremacy will erode, while China's power will rise. At the level of international economic relations, China will join Japan and the EU as an important player in a complex, highly institutionalised multipolar order, while at the transnational level, state power will continue to be challenged and dissipated by the growing power of non-state actors and even individuals. The net result will be an erosion of US supremacy, the diffusion of power in the system, and hence an increasing need for multilateral co-operation to realise desired developments and defuse risks and threats to regional or global peace and stability. To rely on US superiority and balance of power in such an increasingly complex and integrated world is asking for trouble: the vision of an Asian future modelled after the kind of power politics which Europe pursued so disastrously in the late 19th and early 20th century could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Creating a viable regional order**

Yet as we have argued above, there is no reason why East Asia's future should look like Europe's past. The challenge for East Asia will be to design and develop a viable regional order, which is in tune with the requirements of a thoroughly globalised economy, of increasingly dense transnational interactions of all kinds, and of a world in which increasingly destructive weapons will be available to ever smaller groups of people for use over ever
longer distances with ever greater precision, and transnational anomies (such as environmental destruction, organised crime and diseases) will demand ever more political attention. In this tasks, Europe's achievements, but also its failures may provide valuable lessons to East Asians. Indeed, Europe may even have a (limited, but nevertheless important) direct contribution to make to this project.

5. The Role of Europe in a Korean "2+4 Process"

Any future European contribution to peace and stability in East Asia would need to consider European stakes in that region. They are, in fact, more substantial than is presently recognised in Europe itself, though awareness of the strategic interconnectedness of the two regions clearly is growing on both sides - witness the ASEM process. In fact, Europe already does contribute, modestly but significantly, to peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia, but it could and should do more still.

Europe's stakes

Europe's interests in North East Asia clearly are not vital, but important. The region is an important economic partner for the EU. Even more important, however, are Europe’s indirect stakes in East Asia's peace, stability and prosperity. Political turmoil in North East Asia could easily have global economic repercussions through international financial markets, which in turn could affect trade flows and worldwide levels of economic activity. Given the somewhat precarious state of both the South Korean and the Japanese economy, the danger of a deteriorating spiral - ignited either by political instability or economic deterioration and fed by insufficient international responses to stabilise the situation - seems real enough.

Even the collapse of North Korea alone could have serious regional and even global repercussions. Depending on the scenario, such a collapse could push the crisis management capacities of the two countries most immediately involved, South Korea and Japan to the brink. If they failed to stabilise the situation, this would place a huge burden on the US. Europe would be expected to help.

But Europe's interests are far from being exclusively economic. First, North Korea's WMD and missile exports to the Middle East have already begun to threaten European security interests directly. Second and more broadly, patterns of regional co-operation and conflict in North East Asia are likely to have implications for Europe's own external relations and for the
fabric of international relations as a whole. Given Europe's very limited military capabilities and its basic orientation as a Civilian Power, the EU depends critically on a "civilised" international environment and a healthy European-US alliance. If an important region of the world were to function in accordance with a different, more militarised logic, this would in itself be detrimental to European interests in East Asia. Thirdly, the co-existence of a cooperative and integrative security community system in Europe with a balance-of-power system in North East Asia appears problematic: as the USA and Russia are involved in both, corroding spill-over effects from NEA into the European theatre seem likely. For the transatlantic alliance, a focus on balance of power and strategic competition in North East Asia could lead to a shift in US attention and military assets (indeed, this shift is already becoming apparent), and US military withdrawal from Europe might thus be accelerated. In any case, strategic tensions in East Asia could be expected to complicate transatlantic relations (e.g., through American demands burden-sharing, through complicating European policies towards East Asia/China, or through NMD/TMD issues). Fourthly, strategic uncertainty and competition between key players in East Asia would probably also spill over into international economic relations. Tensions are likely to spill over into areas such as the international trading order, dual-use technology, international finance etc.

**European involvement**

Europe has participated in recent years in a number of ways in efforts to stabilise the situation on the Korean peninsula: European countries have provided about one third of the IMF financial support for South Korea during the Asian crisis, both in the IMF programme and the so-called "second line of defense" credits;

- The European Union and several European countries individually have participated financially in KEDO; the EU obtained one of the three directorships;

- The European Commission has provided substantial food and humanitarian aid to North Korea, explicitly also as a contribution to regional stability. The Commission has also opened diplomatic relations with the DPRK, and stands ready to provide economic and further humanitarian assistance;

- Several European countries have recently opened diplomatic relations with the DPRK; almost all member countries now entertain diplomatic ties. The visit by an EU troika to Pyongyang in May 2001, apparently carried out as a gesture in support (and
perhaps also at the behest) of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, showed Europe's determination to play a more active diplomatic role on the peninsula;

- Europe is a significant supplier of arms to South Korea, and recently has developed its involvement in bilateral and regional security dialogues with East Asia;

- Theoretically, several European countries still are committed to support South Korea militarily in the event of a renewed attack by the North under the UN armistice regime. France and the UK also remain in the UN Military Armistice Commission; Sweden and Switzerland remain on the Neutral Nationals Supervisory Commission, while the DPRK has forced Poland and the Czech Republic to withdraw.) North Korea and China also withdrew from the UN MAC in 1994). The UK and France also have permanent seats in the UNSC, which represents the supreme authority in supervising and enforcing the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and holds general responsibility for peace and international security. How relevant all this would be in any future conflict on the peninsula, or in a peace settlement, remains to be seen, of course - but the residual responsibility and involvement is still there.

**Europe's potential - and limitations**

Still, Europe's contribution to regional peace and stability so far has been rather modest. It took the EU a long time to make up its mind about participation in KEDO, and its financial contribution has been less than generous and slow in coming forth. European countries seem to have defined their interests in Korea in commercial, rather than in political and strategic terms, and - as their public disagreements about diplomatic recognition of North Korea showed - they have at times been more disposed to quarrel among themselves than pull their weight jointly.

It would be grossly misleading to suggest that Europe could play a strategic role in East Asia, comparable to that of the US. But the EU has not yet fully exploited its potential to contribute to the development of multilateralism in East Asia. It could do more, it seems to us, in two respects:

- Europe could share its own experiences with multilateralism in Europe more forcefully. To do so would require to be open about European failures, not only about its successes. Still, multilateralism in Europe, particularly in the context of the OSCE, may be of greater relevance to East Asia than is often admitted there. It therefore is...
encouraging to see that the OSCE recently has been more active in sharing its experience with East Asians, and that South Korea and Japan, in particular, have been interested in this exchange;

- Europe could do more to persuade the key outside powers, the US and China, of the merits of a multilateral approach to regional problems in East Asia. To gain influence with both Washington and Beijing on regional issues in East Asia would require, however, greater European political investment in its relations with East Asia, and in the co-ordination of European foreign policies towards the region.

Even if Europe lived up to those expectations, it would still in no way be a militarily relevant player. The European Union therefore could only have a subsidiary role in any "2+2+N" approach towards regional peace and stability. European policies also need to be closely tuned to, and co-ordinated with, those of its principal partners in the region: the US, South Korea, and Japan. European influence could be useful in providing additional resources to any material efforts, and in its ability to moderate, precisely because of its position as an outsider without much strategic power or specific strategic interests, tendencies among the key players in the region to pursue biased and risky policies. Europe could and should not define the rules for East Asia's new regional order. But it could help to have this order upheld once it is in place, and it could try to make sure that, whatever rules are adopted, they are compatible with those of an open, multilateral, and civilised international system.