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# Could North Korea Be the Next Ukraine?

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[Saunders, Paul J.](http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/authors/saunders-paul) May 22, 2017

North Korea is some seven thousand kilometers from Ukraine and may seem like a completely different world. Ukraine is in the middle of Europe, its urban dwellers are increasingly connected to global information networks and cultural trends, and the size of its economy places the country in the top quarter in global rankings, though failed efforts at reform leave per capita figures among the lower half.

Despite a geographically central location in East Asia, North Korea’s citizens are largely cut off from their own region, let alone international society, with a government that a United Nations report has accused of deliberately starving its own citizens to maintain political control. [<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/108/66/PDF/G1410866.pdf?OpenElement>] Nevertheless, there are important reasons to consider Ukraine’s recent experience in assessing the North Korea challenge.

### **Ukraine’s Collapse into Disarray**

The fundamental similarity between North Korea and Ukraine is that each shares a border with a powerful American rival. In Ukraine, this has produced a 25-year contest for political and economic influence, including over Ukraine’s membership in the NATO alliance. Indeed, NATO’s 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration declared that “we agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO,” referring to Ukraine and Georgia. [<http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm>]

Although the George W. Bush administration virtually imposed this statement on NATO despite reluctance in Germany and elsewhere, the Obama administration demonstrated considerably less interest in implementing it. Ukraine under former President Viktor Yanukovych did not seek NATO membership, and Russian officials continued to see Ukraine’s alignment with the West as a medium-to-long-term security threat.

Moscow saw lesser but significant costs to its interests in the European Union’s pursuit of an Association Agreement with Ukraine that Russian officials feared could provide a back door to Russia for European imports, evading Russia’s customs duties and regulations, and might threaten Moscow’s then-dominant economic position. In 2014, this competition led to Russia’s seizure and annexation of Crimea as well as its support for armed rebel groups in eastern Ukraine.

A central question in thinking about the competition over Ukraine and its results is why Moscow used force in 2014 rather than 1992 (following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Ukraine first asserted its independence) or 2004 (when Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, and Western political pressure, brought a pro-Western government to power following flawed elections and large-scale protests). After all, the Kremlin’s view that Russia’s vital interests are at stake in Ukraine has been consistent throughout the post–Cold War era.

While there are probably many answers to this question, three stand out. The first is that in 1992, Russia’s leaders expected the West to welcome Moscow among its members and thought that Ukraine would remain *de facto*dependent on Russia notwithstanding its *de jure* independence. The second is Russia’s military capability, which grew substantially between 2004 and 2014, especially following major structural reforms in the wake of Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia and parallel procurement of modern weapons systems to replace Soviet-era equipment. These are both important reasons, but are more useful in explaining why Russia did not act in 1992 or 2004 rather than why it did act later.

The third answer—that something happened in 2014 to catalyze a Kremlin decision to use force—is more helpful in this respect. The most obvious catalyst would be the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, since it heightened Western-Russian competition over Ukraine and, when former President Yanukovych abandoned it, drove protesters into the streets. But this does not seem to be enough either; Russia’s seizure of Crimea and involvement in eastern Ukraine did not prevent Kiev from signing the agreement in June 2014 and did not appear intended to do so. Rather than the agreement *per se*, it seems to have been the disorder in Ukraine resulting from anti-Yanukovych protests on Kiev’s now-famous Maidan that made the difference. Moscow acted after Ukraine’s government collapsed into disarray that simultaneously posed new dangers, such as renewed pursuit of NATO membership in Kiev, and new opportunities, including a sudden implosion of the Ukrainian state that severely undermined its ability to resist.

### **Will China Annex North Korea?**

Like Moscow’s perspective toward Ukraine, China appears to see a unified Korea on its border that is allied with the United States as a threat to its vital interests. Indeed, China intervened in the Korean War in the 1950s—when it was far weaker relative to the United States—for precisely this reason. This raises a critical question: what might bring China to use force in Korea again?

There are some important differences between Ukraine and North Korea that require consideration. The most obvious is that North Korea has a nuclear capability and may soon develop a usable nuclear missile. Ukraine surrendered its Soviet legacy nuclear weapons in 1994 in exchange for nonbinding political guarantees of its security and territorial integrity. Pyongyang’s nuclear capability is a powerful deterrent, of course, and one that deters not only the United States, Japan, South Korea, and their allies but also China. Nuclear weapons assert national independence in a way that nothing else can.

This connects to a second difference: despite a history of Chinese imperial domination, few if any analysts fear that China might annex parts of North Korea or seek to incorporate its territory into a greater China. North Korea is perhaps more like western Ukraine—an intensely reluctant component of the Russian empire—than eastern Ukraine, which has strong historical, cultural, social, economic, and political ties to Russia and is used to looking toward Moscow rather than Kiev (or, Warsaw, for that matter). The combination of North Korean nationalism with the country’s nuclear deterrent would make any effort at Chinese territorial expansion very risky regardless of Washington’s reaction.

### **Obstacles to Unification**

A third and no less important difference is that the United States and its Asian allies are not currently competing with China for influence in North Korea or encouraging Pyongyang to align its foreign policy with theirs. In fact, China today would probably welcome increased trade between America and North Korea, within certain limits, as a contribution to stability there. Thus, tension between Washington and Beijing over North Korea’s future is still theoretical and contingent on dramatic internal political change, whether deliberate or not. It is also contingent on decisions in the United States and elsewhere regarding whether to compete with China over North Korea should circumstances arise that could allow its reunification with South Korea or reorientation toward the United States.

Some are tempted to see North Korea as a possible East Germany to be peacefully reabsorbed and reoriented. However, there are two critical differences between Germany’s past reunification and Korea’s future. First, unlike North Korea—or Ukraine—East Germany did not share a border with a rival major power. Second, Russia was weak and itself Western-oriented at the time of German unification. Absent these favorable conditions, China is quite unlikely to react to Korea’s unification as benignly as Moscow did to Germany’s. (And, of course, Russia soon came to resent the terms of German unification, an attitude that has contributed to its assertive conduct.)

**This analysis suggests two conclusions.** One is well-known to observers of East Asian security affairs; North Korea’s collapse could be the catalyst that unlocks intense competition, now frozen, over its fate. This competition could have potentially devastating consequences, up to and including war between the United States and China, risking a nuclear conflict. This is in addition to the dangers posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons during a regime survival crisis.

The other conclusion is that our decisions matter. Even when framed to ourselves and others as efforts to integrate a country like Ukraine or North Korea into the international community, geopolitical competition with a nuclear-armed major power should be a deliberate policy, not a reflexive one.

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