



# The real task for Xi and Obama: demand Korean reunification

**The California summit offers the US and China an opportunity to bring about peaceful regime change and push the two Koreas to unite.**



**Ross Terrill**

The Asia-Pacific region worries about the United States and China's relations – the two are to hold a summit in California on Friday – but do those countries worry about the fractured Asia-Pacific?

Our region should ask Xi Jinping to explain his “harmonious world” and Barack Obama to define his pivot's aims rather than chant, “It's not about China.” In particular, Washington and Beijing should be challenged over Korea.

After a bout of threats from Pyongyang, on May 24 Kim Jong-un demanded talks. Talks about what exactly? Pyongyang, lost without nukes, has no reason to bargain away its one morsel of strength, and no agreement could be verified.

Crisis management, which John Kerry and Bob Carr seem content with, may postpone the next tantrum, but so what?

Finding overlapping interests is the only way to turn the page. Washington and Beijing do not have such an overlap in denuclearising Pyongyang, as 20 years of fruitless effort prove. Future talks must have the single agenda of a process to unify South and North Korea – peaceful regime change by consent.

A bargain between the US and China could trigger the manoeuvre. Obama and Xi could announce their joint suggestion for Korean reunification in Seoul, and the same day they could fly to Pyongyang and announce it there.

They talk in both cities of the frustrations of Korea. They do not mention nuclear weapons or beg for disarmament.

Once before, the US and China struck a grand bargain, to the Asia-Pacific's great benefit. When Nixon met Mao in 1972, the Chinese leader said to him: “Taiwan is not an important issue; the international situation is an important issue.” With that sentence he compromised on Taiwan because of alarm at the Soviet Union. Broader issues were on the table. Nixon's trip to China became a triumph.

Xi and Obama could declare the Korean demilitarised zone – relic of a failed past before either man was born – not a central problem in itself; but that the major issue is security in north-east Asia.

For 1269 years there was one Korean state; for six decades there have been two. Beijing demands one China for itself. Koreans also want one Korea.

Benefits beckon for both China and the US: withdrawal of US troops from Korea would occur after 70 years; the danger would go away that Japan will go nuclear; and a burden would fall off China's shoulders as a constructive power in the Asia-Pacific.

Washington and its allies would achieve much too: the end of a headache for the war-weary American public; a boost for US-China relations; an end to the West's longest-running Stalinist enemy. For Japan



which would help finance post-reunification Korea with the UN and the World Bank, a Korea deal could end the downward spiral in relations with China.

During negotiations done entirely by the two Koreas, with China and the US in the wings as guarantors, Kim would be offered the vice-presidency of One Korea. He would find himself in a different context from today's Pyongyang, so would say and do fresh things. Principle and reality would be distinguished in the east Asian way (think "one China") to avoid panic in the north and anxiety in north-east China. Let a unified Korea lean where its national spirit flows. The nation would be likely to be friendly to China, but not Beijing's ally. Koreans in the south would probably continue the present close economic and cultural relationship with US society, even more keenly with no US troops on their soil. Civil with Japan, the new Korea would

also keep the door open to Russia as an insurance against China. There is zero reason for unified Korea to desire nuclear weapons.

Korea remains the one place in the world where China, Japan, Russia and US directly intersect strategically.

Otherwise, the war of 1950 to 1953 would not have occurred and North Korea would not be the nasty problem it is today. These same great powers could entice the

two Koreas toward reunification and everyone would gain.

Chinese foreign policy changes when China sees its interests change. That happened with the "yes" to Nixon in 1972. Kissinger didn't ask the Chinese for help. He and Nixon offered help for Beijing in the face of Moscow's threat. Change occurred again when Beijing abruptly recognised South Korea in 1992; the south's economic promise to China outweighed Pyongyang's fury with China at its step. It could happen once more when the US and China signal to their Korea ally that disarmament can be side-stepped for the higher goal of reunification – regime change with a light touch.

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