

## **YES, REUNIFICATION BY ABSORPTION WOULD BE A CATASTROPHE FOR KOREA**

**JONGHO PARK**

[jong@hufs.ac.kr](mailto:jong@hufs.ac.kr)

Research professor at the Center for International Area Studies (CIAS), Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) in Seoul (Republic of Korea). He earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from Binghamton University (SUNY), United States. Park's research encompasses the issues of public choice, specifically federalism and party system. His work has appeared in several journals, including British Journal of Politics and International Relations

### **Abstract**

This article argues that reunification by absorption would make democratic institutional transfer in Korea politically unstable. Existing discussions often assume that if North Korea collapses, South Korea's democratic institutions can simply be extended to the North. I argue that this view overlooks a prior condition: brokerage institutions capable of mediating distributive conflicts across the former divide. In their absence, post-unification democracy would likely intensify distributive conflict and political outbidding. Yet the survival of such brokerage institutions depends on the timing of their implementation and on organizational capacity. Reunification by absorption is precisely a scenario in which both conditions are structurally absent.

### **Keywords**

Reunification by absorption, Korean unification, democratic institutional transfer, distributive conflict, political outbidding.

### **Resumo**

Este artigo defende que a reunificação por absorção tornaria a transferência de instituições democráticas na Coreia politicamente instável. Os debates atuais partem frequentemente do pressuposto de que, caso a Coreia do Norte entre em colapso, as instituições democráticas da Coreia do Sul poderão simplesmente ser alargadas ao Norte. Defendo que esta visão ignora uma condição prévia: a existência de instituições de mediação capazes de arbitrar conflitos distributivos de ambos os lados da antiga divisão. Na sua ausência, a democracia pós-reunificação provavelmente intensificaria os conflitos distributivos e a escalada política. No entanto, a sobrevivência dessas instituições de mediação depende do momento da sua implementação e da capacidade organizacional. A reunificação por absorção é precisamente um cenário em que ambas as condições estão estruturalmente ausentes.

### **Palavras-chave**

Reunificação por absorção, unificação coreana, transferência institucional democrática, conflito distributivo, disputa política.



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## **YES, REUNIFICATION BY ABSORPTION WOULD BE A CATASTROPHE FOR KOREA<sup>1</sup>**

**JONGHO PARK**

### **Introduction**

The literature on Korean unification has generally rested on two assumptions. The first is that unification remains a desirable national task in the long run. The second is that, should the North Korean regime collapse or rapidly weaken, South Korea's liberal institutions could simply be extended to the North Korea. South Korean reunification discourse has long framed division as a condition to be overcome through the restoration of national homogeneity. Foundational works have similarly treated division as a historical rupture in an otherwise shared national community.

The existing literature may be broadly grouped into four strands. The first consists of comparative and institutional-design studies that draw on historical cases such as Germany, Italy, and the United States in order to assess the feasibility and potential challenges of Korean unification. These works focus on issues such as income gaps, legitimacy, elite neutralization, administrative integration, and constitutional design (Brada, 2023; Vogel and Best, 2016; Shin and Jeong, 2020).

The second strand emphasizes transitional arrangements such as confederation, commonwealth, or gradual coexistence. Rather than viewing immediate absorption as desirable, this literature highlights the need for an interim framework that stabilizes the former divide over time (Kwon and Park, 2019; Lee and Lee, 2019)

The third strand examines the democratic adaptation of North Korean defectors. This body of research focuses on the micro-foundations of democratic incorporation and suggests that identity, belonging, and civic socialization shape the extent to which North Korean migrants adapt to democratic norms (Hur 2018).

A fourth strand addresses the problem of transition within North Korea itself. Its central concern is the durability of authoritarian rule and the prospects for political transformation inside the North.

These literatures provide important insights, but they share a common limitation. For instance, comparative studies of unification offer useful discussions of what institutions might be adopted, yet they say less about why such institutional designs fail to be stable

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once implemented (Brada 2023; Anderson 2016; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2015) Studies of confederation arrangements emphasize the importance of gradualism and coexistence, but they often leave unspecified the conflicts that such arrangements are expected to mediate (Kwon and Park, 2019; Lee and Lee, 2019)

The existing literature has asked far less why democracy itself may become unstable after unification, and still less how distributive conflicts might destabilize democracy in the absence of mechanisms capable of containing them. I argue that reunification by absorption should be understood not simply as a problem of regime replacement, but as a situation in which democratic institutional transfer is attempted in the absence of institutions capable of mediating distributive conflict.

This article shifts the focus from constitutional design to distributive conflict. The key institutional condition is the presence of brokerage institutions capable of mediating distributive conflict (Bormann et al., 2019; Strøm et al., 2017; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2015). Because the survival of such brokerage institutions depends on timing and organizational capacity, they must emerge before distributive conflict hardens into communal politics and must possess enough organizational reach to make participation in the new order credible.

Reunification by absorption is precisely a scenario in which both conditions are structurally absent. Institutional transfer may occur rapidly, but the organizational foundations required to mediate conflict cannot be built at the same speed. In this sense, reunification by absorption is not merely socially disruptive. It is structurally catastrophic because it attempts to transplant democratic institutions without the prior conditions necessary for their political stabilization.

This article proceeds as follows. In the second chapter, I explain why democracies in segmented societies are vulnerable to distributive conflict and political outbidding. In the third chapter, I turn to the conditions under which such instability may be mitigated, focusing on organizational capacity and timing as the two key conditions that mediate distributive conflict. In the fourth chapter, I argue that reunification by absorption structurally removes those very conditions. In the fifth chapter, I conclude this article with discussion and implications, referring to the German case.

## **The Classical Logic of Distributive Conflict**

### **Theoretical Logic**

A useful starting point for thinking about Korean reunification is the classic insight that democratic instability often emerges not from the absence of elections, but from the political consequences of distributive conflict in a divided society. In such settings, the transition to a new regime changes the very structure of political life (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Horowitz 1985; Gerring et al., 2018) Groups that had previously cooperated under a shared external constraint now face one another as rivals over scarce political resources. What had once been organized around a broad common purpose—Korean reunification—becomes a struggle over allocation. In that sense, regime change is a shift from one political game to another.



This logic is especially relevant to reunification by absorption. Prior to reunification, both Koreas may speak in the language of national unity, historical continuity, or eventual integration. Yet once reunification occurs under asymmetric conditions, those themes are likely to lose their integrative force. More immediate questions will move to the center of politics. Who bears the fiscal burden of integration? Who controls the security apparatus? Which actors are punished, excluded, or protected? How is representation redistributed across the former divide?

These are not secondary issues. Any political organization that attempts to accommodate divergent distributive preferences across the former divide—hereafter, a coalition—would struggle to manage these issues under conditions of scarce distributive resources (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972). The problem is that such issues constitute the substance of post-unification politics. Once such issues become salient, democratic competition may be organized less around abstract constitutional ideals than around distributive demands (Horowitz, 1985).

These demands are inherently difficult to reconcile. In a newly unified polity, the resources available for representation are finite. A settlement that satisfies one side will be read by another side as a direct loss. Under these conditions, broad national agendas are fragile. They may temporarily coexist with group-specific claims. General appeals to integration, growth, or democratic reconstruction cannot easily override conflicts rooted in everyday material interests and collective insecurity.

This creates a second problem. Coalitions formed under one political context tend to become oversized once that context disappears. (e.g., Riker, 1962). A broad alliance may be useful when groups face a common threat or when political legitimacy depends on maximal inclusion. After regime change, however, such coalitions become harder to sustain. Political actors now require a coalition large enough to win and govern. Once that threshold is lowered, the incentives to retain peripheral or costly partners decline (Dunning and Harrison, 2010; Selway, 2011)

This is one reason why post-transition democracies in divided societies so often struggle to remain inclusive. This dynamic also creates opportunities for political entrepreneurs. Even if a temporary compromise exists, actors outside the governing center would have incentives to magnify the importance of group-specific grievances (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Bormann et al., 2017)

In the Korean case, this dynamic could emerge on both sides of the former divide. In the South, political actors may mobilize against perceived concessions to the North. In the North, actors may frame any asymmetrical settlement as subordination. Once such outbidding begins, moderate positions become increasingly difficult to sustain.

The central risk of reunification by absorption is that it would politicize distributive conflict in a setting where electoral competition may reward communal appeals. In this sense, democratic instability is a structural possibility generated by the interaction of group-based claims.

Existing theories of ethnic conflict capture this dynamic well (e.g., Horowitz 1985; Bormann et al., 2017; Gerring et al., 2018). The Korean case is relevant because long-



term partition has produced distinct political communities across the former divide. (Kwon and Park, 2019).

### Formal Intuition

The same argument may be clarified through a simple spatial and expected-utility framework. Consider three communities, A, B, and C, each with an ideal outcome that maximizes its own collective interest. The three actors may be understood as representing hardline and moderate positions across the former divide. The set of possible political outcomes can then be represented as a triangular strategy space whose vertices denote the realization of each group's preference. Intermediate points represent compromise outcomes.

**Figure 1.** Strategic Space of Three Communal Actors

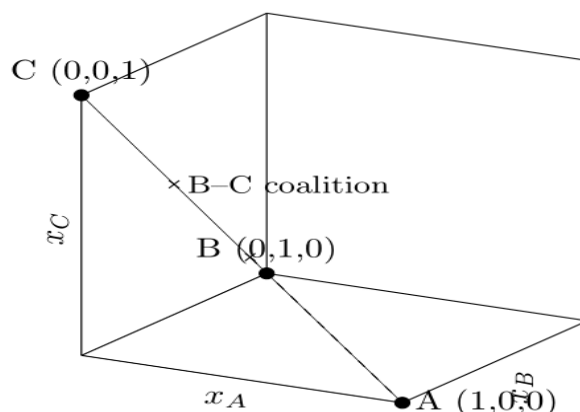


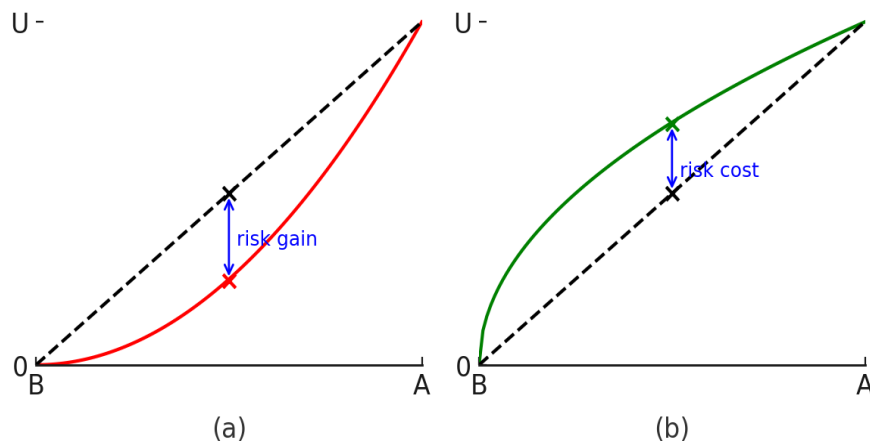
Figure 1 illustrates this strategic space. As in the original formulation, the point of the figure shows that compromise is intrinsically unstable when one group expects that democratic competition can move outcomes closer to its own ideal point. In the Korean setting, the intuition is easy to see. South Korean actors may prefer an intermediate arrangement in the abstract, but if they expect electoral competition to reward a harder line, they have little reason to remain at the center.

The same applies to North Korean actors who expect their survival or protection to depend on sharper communal mobilization. Under these conditions, the middle ground exists conceptually, but it lacks political security.

This instability becomes clearer considering the intensity of preferences. In divided settings, political actors do not merely rank outcomes differently. They also care about them with unusual intensity. This is crucial because strong preference intensity is tied to attitudes toward risk. If South or North Korean actor value distributive outcomes as matters of collective survival, then uncertain but potentially larger gains may be preferred to safer but moderate bargains. This logic may be summarized as follow;



**Figure 2.** Utility Functions reflecting Risk-Acceptant and Risk-Averse Preferences



$$\int u(x)p(x)dx > u(\int xp(x)dx)$$

In that case, actors become willing to gamble for more extreme outcomes.

Figure 2 captures this intuition through utility curves. When utility is convex, actors display risk-acceptant behavior and prefer “all-or-nothing” political strategies. When utility is concave, actors are more risk-averse and willing to accept secure compromise. The significance of the figure for this article is direct. Reunification by absorption is likely to generate the first configuration.

Questions of punishment, property, welfare or security are the daily issues that make collective preferences intense and non-compromising. Finally, electoral politics may encourage risky escalation rather than moderation.

Once these assumptions are combined, democratic instability follows from the logic of political competition itself. Suppose a candidate representing either of North or South Korea proposes a moderate position that includes some concessions to the other side. A rival from within the same divide may attack that position as insufficiently protective of the group’s core interests and move closer to the group’s ideal point.

In either of Korea, this harder line may defeat the moderate alternative even when the latter is more broadly acceptable. The result is a pattern of outbidding. Moderates are vulnerable as hardline competitors exploit communal fears within majoritarian politics. This means that even actors who seek gradual accommodation may be punished by those who promise stronger protection for “their side.”

Democratic procedures can be destabilized when group-based distributive conflicts become politically salient. This is the political context in which reunification by absorption must be understood. The Korean problem is the extension of democratic institutions into an environment already primed for distributive conflict.



## Containing Distributive Conflicts

Distributive conflict becomes politically destabilizing when no institution exists to mediate it before it hardens into antagonistic politics. Classical pessimism, however, has important limits. If distributive conflict alone were enough to explain democratic failure, then all divided post-transition polities would unravel in the same way. However, some do not. Some of them manage to preserve a larger political framework long enough to contain those pressures.

Power-sharing institutions such as federalism or consociationalism may be attractive, but they do not implement themselves (Anderson, 2016; Christin and Hug, 2012; Brancati, 2006). The problem is not only which institutional arrangement would work, but who has the incentive to establish it before conflict becomes fully polarized (Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994; Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman, 2005). Any institutional reform requires political actors who expect to benefit from it and who possess the capacity to sideline both internal outbidders and external entrepreneurs.

An organized coalition of moderate actors across the former divide would be the relevant carrier of reform (Bormann et al., 2019; Strøm et al., 2017). Such a coalition matters because it connects northern and southern actors within a larger political framework and gives them incentives to remain inside the system even when they cannot secure all of their group-level demands. Democracy remains stable only when political loss does not become equivalent to collective exclusion (Simonsen, 2005).

Such a coalition does not emerge endogenously. It requires organizational depth, recognized leadership, routinized coordination, and legitimacy. They require organizational depth, recognized leadership, routinized coordination, and legitimacy to persuade actors that future gains inside the system is preferable to immediate exit. That is why democratic stabilization depends not merely on formal rules, but on the prior existence of organized coalition committed to a shared political goal.

The problem is as much temporal as it is institutional. The coalition must survive long enough to contain conflict before it becomes fully polarized. Once that threshold has been crossed, institutional reform is less likely to restore stability, whichever it takes form of federalism, consociationalism, or other power-sharing arrangements.

Thus, the functioning of power-sharing institutional reform requires two minimum conditions. The first condition is timing. Institutional reform led by the coalition needs to be implemented as early as possible, because reforms are most effective when they are introduced before political competition has been reorganized around communal demands. Once communal demands become the dominant political agenda, actors on both sides of the former divide have less reason to remain within the coalition.

The importance of early conflict-mediating reform can be demonstrated as follows. For any actor B, remaining within the coalition must be more beneficial than the expected compensation from leaving it. This can be stated as:

$$g \times \delta \geq (1 - g) \times C$$



$\delta$  denotes the actual share received by the minority within the institution, such as perceived access to cabinet positions, budgetary resources, or policy influence.  $C$  denotes the cost of acting outside the coalition, such as state enforcement capacity, punishment, or organizational costs. Finally,  $g$  denotes the weight voters place on “our group’s share,” that is, the relative importance of identity benefits compared to the conservative value of remaining in power.

In this case, the repeated expected utility of  $B$ , given a discount factor for future value ( $0 < \beta < 1$ ) is,

$$V_B = \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \beta^t [g \cdot \delta_t - (1-g) \cdot C_t]$$

Here,  $\delta_t$  is the share received within the coalition at time  $t$  and  $C_t$  is the cost of exiting the coalition.

If power-sharing reform occurs at time  $\tau$ , then for all  $t > \tau$ ,

$$\delta_t = \delta_0 + \Delta\delta, \quad C_t = C_0 + \Delta C$$

permanently change. The present value of the gain in utility generated by reform is therefore:

$$\begin{aligned} PV(\tau) &= \sum_{t=\tau}^{\infty} \beta^t [g \cdot \Delta\delta - (1-g) \cdot \Delta C] \\ &= (\beta^\tau / (1-\beta)) \times [g \cdot \Delta\delta - (1-g) \cdot \Delta C] \end{aligned}$$

If we accept the assumption that power-sharing institutional reform is generally advantageous to minority groups (mostly North Korea actors), then

$$\Delta := [g \cdot \Delta\delta - (1-g) \cdot \Delta C] > 0$$

$(\beta^\tau / (1-\beta))$  is the sum of a geometric series beginning at  $t=\tau$ , and since  $\beta < 1$ , this expression is maximized when  $\tau$  takes its minimum value.

However, if the value of  $V_B^0$  at the initial point  $t < 0$  is sufficiently negative, then even

$V_B = V_B^0 + PV(0)$  may still remain negative.



An attempt at power-sharing reform will fail no matter how early it is undertaken. This provides a clue as to why many coalitions, despite having sufficient incentive to attempt the reform, nonetheless failed to institutionalize it in time.

Power-sharing institutions created by reform must be able to manage the communal demands within it until the institutionalization is completed. To do so, the coalition must be organized to manage that transition. Although the concept of organizational strength remains theoretically underdeveloped (Borz and Janda, 2018), Olson (1962) conceptualizes it as a group sustained by successful collective action.

Both northern and southern communities have incentives to free-ride by prioritizing their own communal agendas, but the extent to which the organization minimizes that possibility indicates its degree of strength. Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) view that communal demands as the factor that fatally undermines collective action and causes the organization to collapse within a short period.

The proof regarding organizational strength is determined by the interaction of the following three functions. For the organizational strength of the institution;  $O \in [0,1]$

1.  $k(O)$  denotes the cost of exiting the coalition, where  $k'(O) \geq 0$ .
2.  $s_{current}(O)$  denotes the actual share that  $B$  receives within the current coalition, where  $s'_{current}(O) \geq 0$ .
3.  $s_{alt}(O)$  denotes the incentive offered to  $B$  by an alternative coalition, where  $s'_{alt}(O) \leq 0$ .

The reason the derivative of  $s_{alt}(O)$  is negative is that, as  $O$  increases, the expected share that an alternative coalition can offer to  $B$  is assumed to decline.

In this case, the retention condition in terms of repeated present value is:

$$s_{current}(O) \geq s_{alt}(O) - x(O) \cdot (1 - \beta).$$

Define

$$G(O) = s_{current}(O) - s_{alt}(O) + x(O) \cdot (1 - \beta).$$

Then its derivative is:

$$G'(O) = s'_{current}(O) - s'_{alt}(O) + x'(O) \cdot (1 - \beta) \geq 0$$



As a result,  $G(O)$  increases as  $O$  increases. In other words, the stronger the organizational capacity of the coalition, the lower the incentive to exit under otherwise identical conditions. At the same time, this also acts as a factor that reduces the negativity of  $V_B^0$ .

### **Why Absorption Eliminates These Conditions**

The political consequences depend on whether institutional reforms can emerge early enough and whether they are backed by the organized coalition (Bormann et al., 2019; Strøm et al., 2017). Reunification by absorption, however, is precisely the process in which both conditions are structurally undermined. This is not simply because absorption produces asymmetry between North and South Korea. The danger lies in attempting to establish a democratic order without the conditions necessary for it to function.

First, absorption eliminates the condition of timing. The institutional reform must be undertaken before nationwide issues are displaced by communal demands (Horowitz, 1985; 1993). Once distributive conflict has already hardened, the reform no longer works as a preventive mechanism. The earlier the intervention, the greater its present value for actors deciding whether to remain within the system. The later it comes, the less capable it is of altering their incentives.

Reunification by absorption eliminates precisely this condition. It does so because it presupposes that political incorporation must occur rapidly, often under conditions of collapse or abrupt institutional vacuum. In such a setting, the extension of South Korean law would likely be treated as urgent and non-negotiable.

This ensures that the implementation of reform arrives too late. Institutions capable of translating conflict into manageable bargaining cannot be built at the same speed as the regime transition by itself. While such institutions require time to organize, absorption compresses that time. What disappears is, therefore, the temporal window in which mediation could still function preventively.

That delay directly lowers the expected value of remaining within the new order for every actor. In the language of the earlier model, the relevant issue is whether the perceived share of participation exceeds the expected value of acting outside the coalition. However, that condition becomes harder to satisfy when the benefits of participation remain uncertain while the costs of exposure are immediate. North Korean actors facing immediate uncertainty cannot be expected to value a future promise of inclusion as highly as a present guarantee.

The second problem is the coalition's organizational capacity. Even a reform introduced early, it may fail if the coalition is insufficiently organized to lead the process until its complete implementation. The argument is that strong organizations raise the cost of exit, increase the benefits of remaining within the coalition, and reduce the attractiveness of alternative alignments. As organizational capacity rises, actors are less likely to defect under otherwise identical distributive pressures.

Absorption removes this condition at its source. The coalition would have to connect actors across the former divide. However, such an organized coalition cannot arise



spontaneously. It cannot be improvised by constitutional declaration alone, nor can it be assumed to exist simply because one side already has functioning institutions. South Korea possesses a democratic state, but that does not mean it possesses a political actor capable of mediating conflict across the former North–South divide.

Instead, the sudden extension of South Korea’s democratic rules intensifies the risk that distributive conflict will be interpreted in communal terms. This distinction is essential. In ordinary discussions of unification, South Korea’s institutional strength is often treated as an advantage that would smooth the transition. The stronger the preexisting South Korean state, the easier it becomes to extend democratic rules downward from the top.

South Korean actors may mobilize against perceived privileges granted to northern communities. On the other hand, North Korean actors may interpret unequal incorporation as evidence that the new order is a structure of domination.

Such conflict is politically difficult to avoid. This does not necessarily mean that conflict will always take the form of open violence or regime breakdown. The claim is narrower but still severe. It is that the issues most likely to define early post-unification politics—property rights, taxation, security, representation, punishment, and administrative authority—are all distributive in character, and that absorption deprives the new regime of the institutions that might otherwise contain them.

Reunification by absorption should be understood as politically catastrophic. It converts that divide into a new distributive struggle inside a formally democratic order. The result is the institutionalization of conflict without the prior means to manage it. In that precise sense, absorption is catastrophic by design.

### **Why Germany Is Not a Benchmark for Korea**

This article argues that reunification by absorption would produce a highly unstable path to democratic integration in Korea. The main problem is political. Democratic institutions cannot stabilize themselves where distributive conflict is immediate and institutions of mediation are absent. This is because post-unification Korea would not be the simple restoration of a unified nation-state. Under these conditions, the earliest politics of unification would be distributive.

In this situation, welfare, punishment, representation, taxation, employment, and security would shape the regime from the start. Elections and party competition would not moderate these conflicts. Instead, they would be vehicles for mobilizing actors on both sides of the former divide. The extension of South Korea’s existing institutions would still be unable to accommodate each community’s interests at once. Given the salience of institutional rules for distributive resources, the likely result would be political outbidding and the communalization of distributive claims.

German unification should not be treated as a benchmark for Korea (Shin and Jeong, 2020; Vogel and Best, 2016). This analogy obscures the mechanism at the center of this article. Emphasizing Germany’s success shifts attention toward institutional superiority, administrative integration, and fiscal burden, but these are not the core issues. The key



question is whether democratic institutions remain governable when distributive conflict becomes salient. I am highly skeptical of the possibility.

An uncritical comparison to Germany hinders productive discussion. It privileges outcomes over mechanisms. While it highlights successful institutional extension, it sidelines the question of who would mediate distributive conflict between North and South Korea. South Korea clearly possesses established democratic institutions and may be the actor that would extend them to the North. However, those institutions are less likely to mediate the distributive conflicts that absorption would immediately politicize.

Moreover, Germany itself was not a case of coalition-free success. East Germany experienced roundtable politics and held elections during the transition. Although West German parties and administrative institutions quickly entered the East, they also provided the organizational capacity necessary to sustain coalition-building (Vogel and Best, 2016), including the incorporation of political moderates on both sides. East German society likewise contained churches, civic groups, and emerging associations (Shin and Jeong, 2020). Its unification remained governable in part because brokerage functions were already present.

Germany was therefore an exceptional case. It cannot serve as a model for Korea. Its relative stability rested on conditions prior to institutional transfer itself. The scenario of reunification by absorption lacks the conditions that Germany enjoyed. It would compress the timing of incorporation, weaken prior mediation, and expose vulnerable actors before the organized coalition has time to emerge. Given this difference, the German case reinforces the importance of prior political organization.

The broader implication is conceptual as well as empirical. Korean unification should not be approached only through the language of national restoration. It should also be analyzed as a problem of democratic stability under severe distributive conflict. A unified Korea cannot be presumed politically homogeneous because it remains nationally continuous. It should instead be examined as a conflictual order in which group-based claims may acquire a quasi-ethnic character.

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