

South Korea renews information campaign on reunification

South Korean use of German reunification archives marks shift in public information policy.

News headlines featuring archives are just as likely to prompt a quick turn to the sports page as they are to sustain reader interest. Occasionally, when they intersect with geopolitics, whistleblowers and insurgents, they become grist for debate. The past month has seen a few choice morsels. In Moscow, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has spilled over into controversy about alleged anti-Russian propaganda lodged at the Library of Ukrainian Literature.¹ In China, where the context for trust in things digital is an atmosphere coloured by cyber, suspicion and surveillance, the government has sponsored a new online repository of ancient Tibetan medical texts.² In France, over 200,000 documents from the Vichy period have been made available for public consultation for the first time, renewing attention to the scale and scope of official collaboration with Nazi Germany.³ Elsewhere, a trove of ancient Iraqi Jewish historical materials, rescued from the Baghdad headquarters of Saddam Hussein's secret police in 2003, is the subject of continued debate between the US, Iraq and Israel over cultural property rights.⁴ Perhaps the most curious and intriguing item has been in South Korea, where the government has launched an online collection of documents relating to German reunification in 1990. The project is set against a backdrop of intensified public South Korean attention to reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Sovereign Data looks at the political uses of the South Korea-Germany reunification archive and its role in furthering South Korean political ambitions.

Governance: South Korean reunification policy

It is seventy years since the Allied expulsion of Japan from Korea and the country's division along the 38th parallel. The war that followed, precipitated by North Korea, failed to reunify the peninsula and the uneasy ceasefire since is between two Koreas with sharply differentiated sociopolitical systems. Both countries hope to restore Korea to a single nation guided by their respective ideologies. For its part, South Korea has maintained a Ministry of Unification since the late 1960s, spurred by its mission to realise 'a new unified Korea that ensures everyone's happiness'.⁵ South Korea's new president, Park Geun-hye, has sought to re-energise the reunification process. A Ministry of Unification white paper coinciding with her February 2013 inauguration stated the country's renewed 'effort to move unification preparations from the realm of words to that of action'.⁶ In March 2014, President Park outlined her vision for a unified Korea, citing the 'meticulous preparations' necessary for full reunification.⁷ She refused to make reunification contingent on regime collapse in the North but also offered it few political concessions. Sanctions against North Korea – the '5.24 measures' – remain in place, for instance. Pyongyang predictably rejected it as a 'betrayal of the Korean people'.⁸ Yet, Park articulated a non-violent roadmap that may entice more Koreans to pursue the reunification 'jackpot' through the three pillars of humanitarian assistance, co-prosperity and long-term integration.

In July 2014, Park established the bipartisan Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation, a public-private partnership chaired by the President herself.⁹ This must find innovative ways of delivering progress along the three themes directed in her speech, including by expanding 'national consensus' on reunification. This is an open admission that informational activities are central to the process of

Citation: "South Korea renews information campaign on reunification," *Sovereign Data* Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2016).

Keywords: ANALOGY, CULTURAL PROPERTY, GERMANY, NORTH KOREA, SOUTH KOREA, REUNIFICATION

--

Explanation of dates:

Drafted: 2016-01-07

Information cut-off: 2016-01-07

Published: 2016-01-10

Sovereign Data is a journal of data, politics, and risk in emerging markets.

Editor: Michael A. Innes

Author: Tim Stevens

ISSN: 2059-075X

For more information on the subject of this report, or to subscribe to our services, contact us at:

subscriptions@thesigers.com

"Thesigers" is a trading name of Thesiger & Company Limited.

Registered in England and Wales.

Registration number: 7234402.

VAT number: 135658985.

Office: 37 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3PP, England.

Phone (UK): +44 (0)134 430 6541

Email: enquiries@thesigers.com

Web: thesigers.com

© THESIGERS. All rights reserved.

German reunification has been closely studied by South Korean academics and analysts, the case described by one official in the South as 'a living textbook': 'When composing policies, we start by asking "How did Germany do it?"'.

reunification, without which democratic support for it cannot take place. The 2013 reunification white paper described many outreach activities in educational establishments and the private sector, and organised public campaigns explaining the need for reunification whilst attempting to allay citizens' concerns.¹⁰ This included a range of online information activities, social media engagement and internet television ('web-based unification stations'), most of which remain live, if not necessarily well frequented.

Infrastructure: a living textbook

The venue for President Park's 2014 speech on reunification was carefully selected. It had been seven decades since Korean partition but also a quarter-century since German reunification. Speaking in Dresden, formerly in East Germany, Park drew upon German narratives of national reunification in order to promote her own vision for the Korean peninsula. In classic diplomatic language, she noted the fraternity of two countries that rebuilt successfully after war and, ultimately, in terms that so alarmed Pyongyang, how German reunification would be played out again in the 'peaceful reunification' of greater Korea. The choice of an ex-East German city over a West German one was presumably to rebuff North Korean accusations of Park's intended 'absorption' of North Korea by South Korea, as East Germany had been by its stronger western neighbour.

Park's proposals were consistent with her existing Korean Peninsula Trust Building Process but her speech was also a continuation of a bilateral South Korea-Germany process begun by her predecessor. In October 2010, the South Korean Ministry of Unification and the German Ministry of the Interior signed a Memorandum of Understanding pertaining to international cooperation on the issue of Korean reunification. This established a Germany advisory committee and various bilateral working practices, including increased sharing of 'historic and government documents' on German reunification and integration.¹¹ German reunification has been closely studied by South Korean academics and analysts, the case described by one official in the South as 'a living textbook': 'When composing policies, we start by asking "How did Germany do it?"'.¹²

In December 2015, South Korea announced that this educational process was being extended into the public domain, thereby furthering its intentions to improve public understanding of reunification issues. The Ministry of Unification has launched a 'German reunification archive' website, from which the public can download German documents, translated into Korean, on a wide range of relevant topics.¹³ Of the 2,152 documents in the archive, 926 have been provided by the German government, the remainder consisting of Korean expert reports. Not all documents have yet received copyright clearance from their original authors but a process is underway to resolve this issue.¹⁴ At the time of writing, 1,101 items were available to the public.¹⁵ German government documents from the 1980s and 1990s detail a wide range of political, economic, social and cultural aspects of potential and actual reunification. These include fields as diverse as health, policing, security, education, gender issues, infrastructure and, of course, foreign policy. It is not known whether any of these documents were declassified specifically for the Korean archive.

Stakeholders: the elephant in the room

The South Korean government has a clear interest in disseminating documents that describe the preparations for, and the results of, the successful reunification of another nation. South Korean public support for reunification has waxed and waned over the decades, against a background of armed provocations by a North Korea determined to become a nuclear power and shifts in domestic South Korean politics and demography.¹⁶ A public relations and fundraising campaign by President Lee Myung-bak (2008-13) failed to enthuse South Korea's burgeoning middle class, who were concerned not to shoulder the burden of supporting a ruined North Korea should the Kim regime in Pyongyang collapse.¹⁷ Park faces similar challenges in motivating citizens and policymakers to embrace reunification as a national project.

As Koreans who remember a united country die of old age, personal ties between North and South grow weaker each year.¹⁸

Reunification rhetoric therefore shifts towards its economic benefits, a much harder case to make, especially if costs rising to USD3 trillion or more are indicative. This is not helped by limited information on the economy of North Korea, a country that has not declared even its gross domestic product since 1965.¹⁹ In January 2014, South Korea launched its own portal on North Korea for South Korean consumption (presumably also accessibly by those in the North who can manage a connection). It is an endeavour the South is better placed than most countries to undertake.²⁰ These informational efforts to educate South Koreans about both reunification and its prospective unification partner will continue to be difficult in the face of concerns about the social and economic cost of reunification, regardless of the relative success of the German example. There are doubts that South Korea is even serious about reunification. Many analyses identify government information schemes as propaganda rather than education. The argument is that Park, rather than demonstrating a deep-seated commitment to national unification, is preparing South Koreans for the medium-term collapse of the Pyongyang regime, the costs of which will inevitably fall in large part on South Korea.²¹ The omission in recent policy of any mention of regime failure in the North only serves to enhance public impressions that the South Korean government is not being entirely honest with its citizens.

The project is a fascinating twist on a common practice, but critics might scoff that the project lacks both credibility and resonance, as Korea and Germany share few historical, pre-Cold War linkages.

Conclusion

The South Korea-Germany archives project raises at least two issues. The first is explanation by analogy: comparing a current event or development with a borrowed device or prop – frequently, in foreign policy circles, an historical event or development. Leaders do this to shed light where confusion and murk reign, to sell a political agenda, or both. The second issue is cultural property: historical examples lifted from text books are nebulous things, but physical artefacts (and their digital proxies) are quite another. The use of such materials for strategic gain is not without precedent, more often undertaken without the consent of entitled parties. The South Korea-Germany archives project is different, two friendly countries collaborating at presidential level to shape public perceptions, using cultural artefacts to fuel geopolitical comparison. It is a fascinating twist on a practice common among culturally cognate or geographically proximate groups, but critics might scoff that the project lacks both credibility and resonance, as Korea and Germany share few historical, pre-Cold War linkages.²²

The scheme represents renewed South Korean efforts to shape popular expectations. The novelty of the process is such that it may be some time before the project's results can be observed and assessed. Most commentators believe that reunification is possible, but differ over time-scales, the circumstances that will bring it about and, of course, over how difficult, and perhaps violent, any transition will be.²³ This new archive should be seen as one of many efforts to shape the Korean information environment ahead of a range of potential scenarios playing out over the next decade or so. It will be interesting to see what, if any, political discourse follows from it. Importantly, although the German experience may comprise a 'textbook', it is certainly no 'playbook' for the politics of the Korean peninsula – where current conditions, arguably, suggest a far more fraught situation than Germany found itself in at the end of the Cold War.

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

Sovereign Data is published monthly and distributed direct to subscribers via email as a PDF attachment. Subscribers to the Reporting Service benefit from daily, weekly and monthly reporting and analysis.

Thesigers defines “sovereign” and “data” broadly, in order to more fully understand the risks and opportunities associated with knowledge in all its tributary forms – “information”, “data”, “evidence”, “intelligence”, and so on.

Thesigers’ view of sovereign data is that it contains essential elements of substance and form, of context and meaning – original, often perishable artefacts about people, places, events, issues and things.

Monthly Journal

Thesigers’ monthly journal, *Sovereign Data*, provides short, digestible analysis of the state of the information environment. Each monthly issue focuses on a single, current topic selected by Thesigers staff, given additional context and assessed for relevance and impact.

Reporting Service

Thesigers’ reporting service tracks current developments in sovereign data. Intended for clients who need more frequent, detailed updates, the service features summary reports and briefings based on locally-sourced news, data analytics, risk indexes and regular assessment.

Research and Development

Thesigers’ conducts ongoing research and development through a sense-making program of workshops, system design and technology innovation. Workshops investigate problems covered in our reporting and analysis. Our systems and technology work creates working solutions to them.

For more information on the subject of this report, or to subscribe to our services, contact us directly at:

Email: subscriptions@thesigers.com

Phone (UK): +44 (0)134 430 6541

Notes

1. ‘Putin warns against moves to close Ukrainian library in Moscow’, RIA Novosti, 25 December 2015, via BBC Monitoring.
2. ‘China sets up database for Tibetan medical books’, Xinhua, 7 December 2015.
3. ‘France opens access to archives drawn from Nazi-collaboration Vichy era’, *The Guardian*, 28 December 2015.
4. ‘Who should keep Iraqi Jewry’s archives, saved from Saddam, now on tour in US?’, *Times of Israel*, 6 January 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/who-should-keep-iraqi-jewrys-archives-saved-from-saddam-now-on-tour-in-us/>. [Accessed 7 January 2016.]
5. <http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/main.do> [Accessed 6 January 2016.]
6. ROK Ministry of Unification, *White Paper on Korean Unification*, February 2013.
7. ‘Full text of Park’s speech on N. Korea’, *The Korea Herald*, 28 March 2014.
8. ‘North Korea lashes out at Park’s unification declaration’, *The Hankyoreh*, 14 April 2014.
9. Ministry of Unification, ‘New Year plans on foundation building for unification by Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation’, press release, 30 December 2014. [Accessed 5 January 2016.]
10. ROK Ministry of Unification, *White Paper*, pp. 45-64.
11. ‘South Korea: Looking to Germany for lessons on reunification’, *The New York Times*, 1 October 2010.
12. ‘New way of looking at “unification cost”’, *The Korea Times*, 10 October 2010.
13. Gov’t builds archive of German reunification info’, *Korea.net*, 15 December 2015, <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Policies/view?articleId=131346> [Accessed 7 January 2016.]
14. ‘Gov’t launches online archive on German unification’, Yonhap, 7 December 2015.
15. The archive is online at <http://germanunification.unikorea.go.kr/index.jsp>. [Accessed 7 January 2016.]
16. Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 157-162.
17. ‘A little reunification OK for young S. Koreans, but not too much’, Reuters, 22 December 2011.
18. ‘North Korean families reunited with relatives from South after six decades’, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2015.
19. ‘Korean unification costs clouded by dearth of data on North’, *Bloomberg Business*, 20 November 2014.
20. <http://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/main/portalMain.do>. [Accessed 7 January 2016.]
21. ‘Why is South Korea plugging unification?’, BBC News, 28 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25911981>. [Accessed 7 January 2016.]
22. See, for comparative purposes, Douglas Cox, “Inalienable” archives: Korean royal archives as French property under international law’, *International Journal of Cultural Property* 18, no. 4: 409-423.
23. ‘Costly and complicated – why many Koreans can’t face reunification’, *The Guardian*, 9 October 2015.

South Korea renews information campaign on reunification

THESIGER & COMPANY LIMITED

Projects office: 5 Kew Road, Richmond, TW9 2PR

Registered Office: 27 Old Gloucester Street, London, WC1N 3AX

Registered in England and Wales (No. 07234402). VAT No: GB 135658985

Web: thesigers.com Email: enquiries@thesigers.com