

South Korea's Reunification Think Tanks: The Development of a Marketplace for Ideas

Ralph M. Wrobel*

Summary

In contrast to Germany South Korea has for years been continuously preparing for national reunification. As a result, alongside the Ministry of Unification a number of think tanks, research institutes, and other organizations have also been established in South Korea. After years of the dominance in the country of state-run, security-orientated think tanks in the wake of German reunification, a new structure of reunification think tanks has recently evolved. Nowadays, besides the 22 Korean think tanks themselves, seven foreign think tanks are also active in this field of research. Therefore, the market of ideas concerning reunification research can be described as a broad but open oligopoly. Additional restrictions on the competition of ideas are generated by the two different overlapping subsystems of society: science and politics. South Korean reunification think tanks compete with each other on two fronts: the market of ideas and the market of financial resources. Because the South Korean government is the main financial donor to reunification research in South Korea, several think tanks have only limited independence. However, a growing pluralistic structure within reunification-oriented think tanks gives us reason to expect increasingly pluralistic research results as well.

Manuscript received on 2013-05-30, accepted on 2013-10-01

Keywords: Korean reunification, think tanks, market of ideas, science studies

Introduction

While Germany was surprised by the opportunity for reunification presented in 1989–1990, South Korea has been preparing continuously for national reunification. Especially since German reunification, research into opportunities and strategies for reunification, as well as into the problems and costs of it, has intensified. Therefore, further to the Ministry of Unification many think tanks have also been established in South Korea. A priori — and especially looking at the German case — this strategy of preparation for reunification seems to be a useful approach to take. In a democracy, however, think tanks belong to two different overlapping subsystems of

* This research project was supported by travel grants from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Germany, and the National Research Foundation, South Korea. The author wishes to thank the Korea Institute for National Unification for hosting him and Dr. Bernhard Seliger, Representative of the Hanns Seidel Foundation, Seoul Office, for his generous organizational and research support.