

# The Politics of Trusteeship and the Perils of Korean Reunification\*

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The concept of trusteeship has played a major role in Korea's colonial and post-colonial history. Two United States presidents, Woodrow Wilson in 1918 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1941, saw the policy as a stage for occupied peoples to pass through prior to their gaining complete sovereignty. In 1943 Roosevelt specifically deemed that Korea would require a lengthy trusteeship period upon Japan's defeat. This policy, however, was never officially introduced to the peninsula. This article focuses on post-liberation attempts by the United States and Soviet Union to enact a process that would have subjected a provisional unified Korean government to trusteeship as an important step toward forming a more permanent political body. This process, decided upon in Moscow at a conference of three foreign ministers held in December 1945, faced complications at Joint Commission meetings when the Soviet Union and United States failed to agree on the interpretation of the Moscow Decision. Specifically, the two sides differed over whether to allow consultation with groups of conservative Koreans who aggressively opposed the idea of their country being subjected to a trusteeship administration. Another important factor was the generally hostile relations that were developing between the Soviet Union and United States that impacted negatively any trust that remained from their wartime alliance. Their failure to complete their task represented the last reasonable chance for North-South reunification prior to the two Koreans forming separate states in 1948.

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