



## Considering DPRK Regime Collapse: Its Probability and Possible Geopolitical and Security Consequences

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**Both the EU and its member states are in a period of rethinking security strategy to adapt to contemporary challenges both in the European region and beyond, including Northeast Asia. In this Security Policy Brief, Mason Richey discusses what difficulties and risks a North Korean regime collapse would pose, the likelihood that it will occur sooner rather than later, and how Europe will be affected by such a scenario.**

Those who follow North Korea (DPRK) know that predicting the Pyongyang regime's collapse is a fool's game. Indeed many Pyongyangologists have acquired this knowledge by experience, having mistakenly forecasted regime failure as a consequence of any number of geopolitical or internal crises: the end of the Cold War, the first dynastic transition to Kim Jong Il's rule, the famine of the 1990s, tightening sanctions by the international community, the failed currency reform of 2009, or the second dynastic transition to Kim Jong Un.

But the actual collapse will occur one day, perhaps sooner than expected. And just because experts have reported false positives

previously does not mean that we should not periodically review evidence about DPRK political stability. The question of DPRK collapse is important because it would radiate security consequences regionally and globally, including for Europe. In this Security Brief I first discuss the likely scenarios for DPRK dissolution, and then evaluate the available information concerning the stability of Kim Jong Un's regime. Finally, I explain the geopolitical and security implications that a North Korean contingency would have, both globally/regionally and for Europe in particular.

### **THE NORTH KOREA ENDGAME: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS AND WHY COLLAPSE IS LIKELY**

To begin, let us remember why North Korean collapse (and Korean unification) is the likely scenario on the Korean peninsula: quite simply, the alternatives are even more difficult to envision. Option (a) is Chinese-style reform and opening up. In many ways this would be a desirable course of action, and numerous countries, including China, have counseled North Korea's leaders to undertake this process since the early 1990s. The Pyongyang regime has rejected this advice at every turn, precisely because it knows that the regime's peculiar institutions, and the leaders who

control them, would almost certainly lose their power in a reform scenario. Option (b) is forced unification following military victory of one side over the other. Due to the massive escalation risk (especially nuclear risk) associated with inter-Korean conflict, this option is a non-starter. Moreover, forced unification through conflict is also not the professed policy of either the current DPRK or the ROK. Option (c) is gradual and peaceful transition of one country's systems toward those of the other. Although the mechanisms and institutions for accomplishing this are radically different for each side, this is actually the official position of both the DPRK and the ROK. However, this is also a nonstarter, as each government would demand that the other adopt its system as the unification end state. This would inevitably relegate one side's elites to oblivion, and, as such, they would have no incentive to enter this unification path.

Thus we are left with option (d), collapse of one side and attempted absorption by the other. Given the North's feeble political legitimacy and generally precarious situation (especially its horrendously maldeveloped economic fundamentals), most scenarios envision an abrupt collapse of the DPRK and its rapid absorption and unification on the South's terms. There are other collapse possibilities of course—notably North Korean collapse and gradual absorption, as well as a one people/two states solution (something like Austria and Germany)—but they are generally considered unlikely.

But does this schema not forget at least one possibility: that inertia prevails and North Korea continues on its path of economic maldevelopment and political repression? Predicting DPRK regime collapse is a fool's game, and in fact we have not seen mass elite defections or popular uprisings that reliably signal regime change in authoritarian states. But in addition to the long-term trend of

decreasing regime control (i.e., tolerated marketization<sup>1</sup> due to the futility of the public distribution system, loosened agricultural collectivization, and loss of the government's monopolistic control of information due to ICT and foreign media penetration into the formerly hermetic country), there are new reasons to think that the current regime has entered a particularly fragile period.

### **SIGNS OF NORTH KOREAN REGIME FRAGILITY**

- The head of the vital Ministry of the People's Armed Forces has been changed five times during Kim Jong Un's initial forty months as supreme leader. The current MPAF vice-minister has been promoted and demoted six times over the same period. Most recently, in May 2015, MPAF minister Hyon Yong Chol (Lt. Gen.) was purged for insubordination and executed (reportedly by an anti-aircraft battery, in front of other military members, as a warning to other would-be rebels). The MPAF is a significant bellwether because it is both immediately subordinate to the National Defence Commission (chaired by Kim) and responsible for many foreign currency earning operations, which are critical to funding the chronically penurious North Korean military (as well as the state and its leaders more generally). One possibility is that the regime faces discipline problems at the general officer level, which would likely endanger both regime/state security and crucial financial lifelines. But from a core regime elite perspective, an even scarier implication of the MPAF chaos is that the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD)—which makes all senior-level civilian and military personnel appointments—might be factionalized or leaderless. In either case, that would imply weakness. The OGD is the most powerful institution in North Korea, and many DPRK analysts believe OGD weakness would be a prelude

to collapse.

- DPRK state media reported in mid-June 2015 that the country was facing the worst drought in a century. This is almost certainly an exaggeration, but the Korean peninsula is in fact facing a severe rainfall deficit, and the drought warning was likely both a pre-excuse for a poor harvest and a prelude to demanding international food assistance. UN and ROK estimates of the decline in the rice harvest range from 12%-20%, with barley and potato yields down even more. Such a poor harvest situation represents a major problem for the Pyongyang regime, as North Korea is in some ways still an agrarian society<sup>1</sup>; has poor soil conditions, fertilizer access, and irrigation (and is thus inefficient even with favorable weather); and aspires to be largely self-reliant in food production (although the reality does not match the rhetoric of Juche ideology). Historically, when the North encounters severe food security problems, the regime makes various types of (more or less coercive) diplomatic overtures to international benefactors to extract food aid in order to placate the military/elites and survive long enough for conditions to improve. The North's capacity to successfully execute this tactic is increasingly unreliable, however, as we see in the following three points.
- With no six-party talks and North Korea determined to never surrender its nuclear weapons, US de-nuclearization strategy for the peninsula has become co-terminous with regime change. No one seriously suggests fomenting revolution or war, but the US sees no hope in de-nuclearization through negotiations and its “strategic patience” policy is leading it to push the international community to continue tightening sanctions. The emphasis on coercion is not new, but previously its purpose was to force DPRK leaders to negotiate, whereas now the idea is to choke

the regime until it falls. That will probably happen eventually because North Korea only has two possible responses. The first is the current, failing strategy—“byungjin” (“dual path”)—of simultaneous nuclear weaponization and economic growth. The second approach is reliance on allied benefactors... But...

- The current regime in general, and Kim Jong Un in particular, appears to have increasingly poor relations with Russia and China. Kim committed a serious diplomatic faux pas when on short notice he inexplicably cancelled an agreed-upon trip to Moscow in May 2015 for the 70th anniversary of victory in WWII. Then in June he rebuffed a Chinese invitation to a similar celebration in Beijing scheduled for September 2015. This follows a two year period (since the 2013 DPRK nuclear test) of historically frigid relations between the North and China. Russia and China (to a greater extent) have functioned as the DPRK's traditional lifelines, so a breakdown in those relationships makes the regime more vulnerable to endogenous and exogenous shocks.
- Western officials working on North Korean issues privately say that Kim Jong Un is either disinterested in/distracted from or very bad at diplomacy (or possibly both). One notes that Kim has not left the DPRK since his assumption of power in 2011, not even to visit China. Although, on the one hand, his predecessors also sometimes isolated themselves from international interlocutors for long periods, it is also true, on the other hand, that fragile leaders do not engage in the luxury of diplomatic travel if they are afraid of a coup d'état. From a regime insider perspective, a more worrying problem than disinterest in/distraction from general diplomatic efforts may be that Kim does not seem to grasp how the North's distinctive, traditional coercive diplomacy works. Kim's father and grandfather

mastered the cycle of provocation ending in extracted concessions from the international community, and this has been crucial to regime survival. There is little to suggest that the unfortunate necessity for this strategem has changed, yet Kim does not seem to know how to follow the playbook.

- As tawdry as it appears, Kim's poor health and significant weight gain since assuming power are risk factors for regime stability. His unexpected death would leave a power vacuum, or he may at some point become sick enough that his ability to govern is hindered, or his failing health may invite challenges to his authority from other DPRK regime elites.
- Kim has carried out a major series of high-level purges. Since taking power, nearly seventy high-ranking military officers, party cadres, and government officials have been executed, most notably Kim's uncle and regime number two Jang Song Thaek. And this is in addition to an unknown number of their lower level associates who were also purged and possibly executed. On the one hand, one could argue that the power necessary to carry out an operation of this scale implies strength. On the other hand, one could argue that the official reasons for the purges—insubordination, counter-revolutionary factionalism, sedition/treason—indicate loyalty problems at the highest levels, and thus cracks in the regime. This is likely the case for the military, which has been hard-hit by the purges, and seems to have been downgraded relative to the State Security Department and the OGD. For a garrison state with a prominent *songun* ("military first") ideology, this is a serious risk.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the underlying power configuration, Kim is a leader who cannot lead. This is dangerous in North Korea because its institutions breed so-called "lines." "Lines" are patronage-driven factional lineages that support elite leaders.

When elite leaders are purged, their "lines" are either purged also or have to find a new elite patron for protection. Unsurprisingly, purges also produce resentment and desire for revenge by disadvantaged "lines." Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il knew how to handle this, but even they faced multiple assassination plots. Will the new supreme leader be as skilled?

None of these risk factors mean that the North Korean regime will fall apart tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, or even next decade. But it does explain why the DPRK has a 94.3 rating on the Fragile States Index (on par with pillars of stability such as Mauritania and Liberia), why a recent Ilmin Institute survey of 135 DPRK experts estimated median regime lifetime at 10-20 years, and why (off-the-record) government or government-connected officials in several countries with interests in closely watching DPRK regime developments currently tend to argue that it will fall sooner rather than later. As one high-ranking foreign policy official with an extensive North Korea portfolio recently put it in a closed-door meeting, all states with interests in Northeast Asia, and in particular the Korean peninsula, are being negligent if they are not crafting related policy with collapse in mind.

### SECURITY CONSEQUENCES OF REGIME COLLAPSE

Indeed, DPRK collapse and peninsular unification would have a transformative effect on the Northeast Asian regional order, beginning with its alliance architecture. These geopolitical transformations would change the context in which polities, including those in Europe, approach relations to China and Russia (inter alia). And obviously there are risks involved. Notably China would be largely disadvantaged by the transformation, as it would suddenly have borders contiguous to territory that would be part of the US-Korea-Japan constellation. It would thus likely adopt a different posture, given a realigned region in

which it were deprived of its buffer state. A distinct possibility is that China—defying both ROK and US desires—would work hard to undermine the North’s absorption. This would inherently destabilize a region in which the five major players (US, China, Korea, Japan, Russia) are all EU strategic partners and among its top eight trade partners.

If a putative Chinese strategy of undermining Korean unification were to fail, China could be expected to use leverage in other places to maintain its interests. For example, it would compensate by exerting more pressure on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and disputed maritime territories such as the Senkaku/Diayou islands. These potential actions would affect global commons—e.g., sea lines of communication, or overflight rights—whose secure access is vital for Europe’s economy. At the very least such possibilities should, for example, lead to re-examining how Europe prioritizes and handles its strategic partnerships in the region.

Yet another scenario is that the current US-ROK-Japan security alliance would not persist without the presence of North Korea. After all, the US-ROK alliance is primarily for DPRK deterrence, which would be unnecessary after unification. Notably a unified Korea could theoretically gravitate more to China on security cooperation (reflecting the weight of their economic relationship). This specific scenario is unlikely, but at the least a more independent, “balancer-role” Korea could emerge. The dynamics of formal alliance dissolution would be unpredictable, but history shows that a Korea-Japan relationship without the US to enforce cooperation is fraught with conflict.

Despite the human rights gains that one would hope and expect to see emerge from a defunct Kim regime, there are also security risks entailed in DPRK collapse. Most worrisome is WMD (especially nuclear) proliferation. A

chaotic regime collapse would likely result in degraded control of NBCR weapons, which could then be the object of proliferation by disaffected or opportunistic members of the military, state security, or worker’s party. Scientists may also be a proliferation risk if a collapse situation renders their skills unmarketable domestically and they seek to sell their know-how internationally. Such possibilities are not only a general threat to global nonproliferation efforts, but also a specific threat to Europe’s security. One of the likely buyers of such goods and services would be violent extremist groups in Europe’s neighborhood, such as Daesh and Al Qaeda, both of which have followers within Europe. Let us not forget, after all, North Korea has already made inroads to the region: indeed it was covertly helping Syria build a nuclear reactor that Israel bombed in 2008. Other weapons clients have included Libya, Yemen, and Hezbollah, each of which has connections with DPRK military officers.

Added to this overarching problem are many smaller security issues emanating from the possibility of North Korean regime collapse: small arms and light weapons could be shipped out of a failed DPRK to extremist groups from SE Asia to the MENA. In this eventuality, these groups’ improved materiel would hurt Europe’s ability to manage crises in its neighborhood. Increases in cyber-crime and cyber-terrorism would be probable. North Korea’s Bureau 121 has a contingent of 6,000 cyber-warriors who, for example, crippled Sony Pictures in 2014 and carried out the 2013 DarkSeoul attack that caused 700mnUSD in damage to South Korea’s economy (especially banks and media companies). Like the country’s nuclear scientists, they will be dramatically underemployed following a regime collapse, and thus incentivized to sell their black-hat abilities to unscrupulous entities interested in attacking European companies and governments. Notably, these Bureau 121 cyber-warriors are frequently stationed

internationally (in order to have easy, invisible access to servers), which means it will be difficult to identify and track them in the case of DPRK collapse.

Trans-boundary health security would need to be improved in order to prevent pandemic breakout of infectious diseases with human reservoirs in the DPRK. A prominent example is xdr/mdr tuberculosis. About 3,500 annual cases are currently quarantined in North Korea, but in a chaotic situation they could cross borders, become disease vectors, and propagate to other regions, including Europe. Finally, there will be numerous humanitarian challenges falling under the rubric of human security (refugee crises, food shortages, gulag inmates facing execution by repressors seeking to destroy forensic evidence of crimes against humanity, etc.). Precisely the idea of filling such “security gaps” is one of the dominant themes of the EU’s security strategy.

This is obviously not a comprehensive list of geopolitical and security challenges that might arise from a hypothetical DPRK collapse; nor is there room in this space to provide solutions. But these issues are possible events that European policy-makers should consider when reflecting on the evolution in Northeast Asia. Europe espouses a commitment to thinking strategically, and leading policy-makers will be drafting a new EU security strategy in the

months to come. Although from a security standpoint Europe has a lot to deal with right now, and thus it may seem that North Korean collapse and peninsular unification are sufficiently distant scenarios that they do not deserve much attention, policy-makers should remember the following: strategy is about long-term thinking, thinking beyond the horizon and around the corner, establishing a solid context for reacting to unforeseen and unforeseeable events, if not shaping them yourself. Not doing so invites punishment by the inevitable changes of history itself.

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