

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

The U.S., China, and Preparing for North Korea's Demise

By Andrew Bennett and Cory S. Julie
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Much of the recent commentary on North Korea focuses on two dimensions. The first is the personal story line, depicting North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and his heir apparent Kim Jong Eun as irrational dictators intent on playing brinksmanship with the West. The second is the international context within which the "hermit kingdom" operates, including the policies of the U.S., South Korea, China, and the other members of the ASEAN Regional Forum. These analyses often overlook a key third perspective: politics in Pyongyang have their own strategic logic, driven by an entrenched military elite perpetually seeking to justify its power and privileges. These elites intentionally provoke occasional crises in order to paint outsiders as enemies and thereby legitimize their stranglehold on North Korea's national resources. As recently as the 1980s, North Korea could make a credible claim that its living standards were on par with the South's. Those days are gone, and the impoverished North's only means of legitimizing its kleptocratic government is to trumpet its nuclear weapons program and periodically reinforce fear of foreign adversaries.

It is telling that Pyongyang's sinking of the South Korean *Cheonan* warship last March and its shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November were not accompanied by any general mobilization of North Korean forces. North Korea hopes to provoke its neighbors into validating its propaganda while stopping short of any actual combat. As long as the U.S. and South Korea have generated no viable alternatives to either starting a costly war or looking the other way, this remains an easy game for the North to play.

Meanwhile, on the international level, many analyses of China's interests regarding the North are misguided. China entered the Korean War in the 1950s because U.S. troops were nearing China's borders and the fall of a communist regime next door would constitute a blow to the ideological legitimacy of Beijing's communist government. Today, the equation is reversed. North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons undermines China's security by creating incentives for

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others in the region to seek their own nuclear arsenals. Moreover, Pyongyang's domestic failures call into question the efficacy of single-party governments like China's, and stand in stark contrast to Beijing's ability to achieve long-term economic growth. The Wikileaks reports of Chinese leaders' impatience with North Korea on these fronts should be interpreted carefully as these disclosures have been reported by South Korean diplomats. It is entirely plausible, though, that Chinese leaders view their interests as quite different from those of North Korea's elites. What really restrains China from cutting North Korea loose is its fear of a mass outpouring of North Korean refugees in the event of Pyongyang's collapse, as well as a potential re-encroachment of American forces on Chinese borders. South Korea is also hesitant to actually move toward its long-stated goal of unification because of the uncertainties the collapse of North Korea's regime would entail and the certainty, from Germany's example, that unification would impose high fiscal and social costs.

Yet dramatic change may well come to the Korean peninsula even if South Korea and its neighbors prefer the uneasy status quo to the uncertainties and costs of unification. The demise of one-party regimes in the former Warsaw Pact states, and more recently Tunisia, reminds us that long entrenched governments can disintegrate with remarkable and unexpected speed. With its ailing economy and rickety transition to a figurehead third generation leader, North Korea is a candidate for collapse. We will know this process is imminent, and gain insight into its dynamics, when we see an increase in defectors from North Korea's ruling circle.

Although outsiders cannot and should not press overtly for regime change, as this may serve to only embolden the Pyongyang elite, we can better prepare for this eventuality. To do so, the Obama Administration needs to build on its recent success in encouraging China to restrain North Korea during South Korea's December naval exercises, and coordinate with South Korea, China, Japan, and the rest of the ASEAN states.

During Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington last week, the U.S. and China appeared to make little serious headway on North Korea, issuing relatively vague policy statements merely encouraging renewed North-South dialogue and calling on the North to stem its nuclear pursuits. Discussions must move to a more strategic level – building off the recent momentum created by Seoul's agreement to hold high-level military talks with Pyongyang last Thursday – and focus on mitigating China's fears of mass refugee influxes from the North through joint security efforts. Washington might also seek Beijing's acceptance of possible peacekeeping roles for U.S. and ASEAN forces to facilitate an orderly regime change in North Korea if and when the time arises, develop a mutual understanding on how to identify that time,

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and pledge that the U.S. will not deploy troops above the DMZ on a long-term basis. The structure of future aid regimes should also figure into this dialogue. The Bush administration facilitated German unification by reassuring the Soviet Union that it would not forward base U.S. forces in former Warsaw Pact states, and it is time to consider such an approach in Korea.

We should also make clear that early defectors from the North Korean elite will be welcomed and well-treated, and that late converts may be left to their own devices or handed over to international or Korean courts. Repugnant though it may be to provide amnesty to any North Korean officials clever enough to jump ship early, they need to know that an orderly process of unification is a realistic and superior alternative to continued provocations or the risk of uncontrolled state collapse.

Pyongyang has defied previous expectations of collapse, and we can't predict when and how any such collapse might materialize. Yet the interests of the U.S., South Korea, China, and Japan coincide on this issue more than many realize. We should coordinate our efforts so that if such a collapse does happen, it will increase regional stability, as was the case with Germany's reunification, rather than lead to the kind of miscalculations that brought about the Korean War.

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