

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

## The Future of North Korea

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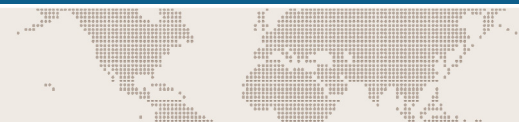
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It has been approximately three years since North Korean leader Kim Jong-un succeeded his father Kim Jong-il on December 2011. Although North Korea appears to be stabilizing at a gradual pace under the Kim Jong-un regime, unstable currents still remain as shown from frequent reshuffle of top-ranked military officers since the execution of Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission Jang Sung-taek in December 2013. Against this backdrop, the Ilmin International Relations Institute of Korea University conducted an expert survey about the “future of North Korea” in May-June 2014. A total of 135 North Korea and security experts including scholars and former government officials from seven countries/regions (South Korea, U.S., China, Japan, Russia, Europe, and others) participated in this survey. The survey results provide us with various strategic implications for the concerned parties surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

Regarding the durability of the Kim Jong-un regime, the most common response from both South Korean (40.8%) and non-Korean (37.2%) experts alike was 5-10 years, expecting a relatively early collapse of the regime, while 33.3% of all respondents replied that it would be sustained for 10-20 years. According to the survey results, however, domestic politics in North Korea for the immediate future (next 3-5 years) is expected to feature the consolidation of the Kim Jong-un regime (48.1%) rather than either an increase in domestic instability or collapse of the regime (35.5%).

A majority of experts responded that if the Kim Jong-un regime collapses, the downfall will likely be the result of a power struggle within the leadership (64.4%) rather than economic failure (27.4%) or a people's uprising (3%), expecting a struggle among the elite to culminate in the eventual collapse of the regime. Even Chinese experts predicted that a power struggle within the leadership (50%) is more likely than economic failure (33%) as the cause of the collapse of the regime, while all respondents, regardless of their nationality, were highly skeptical of a civil society emerging in North Korea.

In response to the question on North Korea's strategy regarding its nuclear weapons program, a total of 95.6% of all respondents were pessimistic about the possibility of North Korea conceding



its nuclear weapons, with 51.9% answering that North Korea will “continuously strengthen its nuclear capability” and 43.7% replying that North Korea will “open talks while maintaining its nuclear capability.” These results imply that almost all of the experts surveyed are skeptical about the prospect for the North Korean nuclear issue being solved through negotiations.

In order for Korean unification to be a ‘bonanza,’ however, the respondents replied that unification through an agreement between South and North Korea (60%) is more preferable than unification through the collapse of North Korea (31.1%). This implies that the challenges of Korean unification might be substantial if unification is achieved through the collapse of North Korea. While 68.1% of respondents replied that the “opposition of unification by North Korean government” will be the biggest obstacle towards Korean unification, 16.3% selected “insufficient preparation of Korean government” as the second most common response, indicating a concern that the unification process might face significant challenges and difficulties if Korea is not properly prepared. In particular, a larger percentage of Chinese experts (25%) chose “insufficient preparation by the Korean government” than Korean experts (20.4%) did, which implies that China is worried about a scenario that places significant burden on Beijing because Korea is not thoroughly prepared when unification occurs.

In response to the question about strategic directions for a unified Korea, respondents projected a unified Korea to be either an ally of the U.S. (60%), a non-aligned non-nuclear state (25.2%), a non-aligned nuclear state (4.4%), or an ally of China (3%) in that order. Experts from Korea, the U.S., Japan, Europe, and others all foresaw a unified Korea remaining an ally of the US to be the most likely outcome. On the other hand, Chinese (50%) and Russian (69%) experts believe that a unified Korea is likely to remain a non-aligned non-nuclear state, neither an ally to the US nor China and without nuclear capabilities. Nonetheless, in light of the survey result that 33% of Chinese respondents believe a unified Korea will probably remain an ally of the U.S., China appears to believe that the U.S.-Korea alliance will be maintained after Korean unification. Furthermore, it also illustrates the fact that even Chinese experts are skeptical of a unified Korea forging closer ties with China.

In response to the question regarding what type of policy the international society should strengthen vis-à-vis North Korea, a much larger number of respondents replied that both engagement and containment should be strengthened (71.9%), rather than just engagement (20.7%) or containment (5.9%). In addition, 36.6% of all respondents believed that “Chinese pressure on North Korea” is the most effective way to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, followed by opening U.S.-North Korea bilateral negotiation (24.4%), reopening Six-Party Talks (19.3%), strengthening sanctions on North Korea (11.1%), and economic support and lifting sanctions on North Korea (8.9%). In particular, 56% of U.S. experts, which is a much higher percentage than the overall average (36%), considered China’s pressure on North Korea the most effective, while U.S. experts were highly skeptical about the effect of U.S.-North Korea bilateral negotiations (4%). On the other hand, no expert from China saw Chinese pressure on North Korea as the best option (0%), and most Chinese respondents advocated the reopening of the Six-Party Talks (42%) and the opening of U.S.-North Korea bilateral negotiation (42%).

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On the issue of U.S.-China relations regarding North Korea, most of the experts anticipated strengthened cooperation between the two countries (37%) or a status-quo (48.1%), while few foresaw increasing tension or growing conflict. Response patterns regarding the U.S.-China bilateral relationship were similar among experts from South Korea, the U.S., and China. However, Japanese and Russian experts predicted that Washington and Beijing would maintain the status quo rather than strengthen cooperation. This can be interpreted as reflecting a subtle uneasiness among respondents from Japan and Russia towards the prospect of the U.S. and China furthering bilateral cooperation.

Against this backdrop, the expert survey results are alerting us to prepare some fine-tuned policy responses to the unexpected future of North Korea. First, the ROK government, together with its key strategic partners, should prepare for a potential contingency in North Korea. The majority of experts in this survey expressed concern regarding domestic instability in Pyongyang in the mid to long term, in particular the possibility of a power struggle within the leadership.

Second, South Korea must coordinate with the U.S. and focus its diplomacy on persuading China to actively participate in international sanctions on North Korea in the event of a fourth nuclear test. The expert survey highlighted the fact that ‘Chinese pressure on North Korea’ is pivotal to solving the North Korean nuclear problem.

Third, South Korea must continuously persuade China, through both official and non-official channels, to understand that Korean unification does not conflict with Chinese national interests. While many Korean and non-Korean experts considered China as the country most likely to oppose Korean unification (65%), Chinese experts demonstrated that they do not necessarily view unification negatively. Most of the experts believed that for Korean unification to be a ‘bonanza,’ unification must be achieved through an agreement between South and North Korea rather than due to the collapse of North Korea. This implies that Korean unification through the collapse of North Korea will involve considerable challenges and difficulties, and that the South Korean government should prepare accordingly.

Finally, Korea and other related countries must expand their efforts to increase a mutual understanding amongst themselves on North Korea policy and Korean unification. The expert survey took note of the significant divide in perception between the U.S. and China regarding unification on the Korean peninsula as well as policies toward North Korea. Both the U.S. and China should thus endeavor to bridge this glaring perception gap.

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