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Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse

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North Korea is a failing state. Its government could collapse in the coming months or years, causing an immense humanitarian disaster and potentially other, even more serious consequences. This report assumes that the Republic of Korea (ROK) would decide to intervene in such a crisis with U.S. assistance and seek Korean unification. Neither the ROK nor the United States is adequately prepared for such an intervention. Inadequately prepared, the ROK and the United States could suffer many serious consequences, including a failed or aborted intervention, a destabilization of the region, and possibly broader warfare.

It is therefore incumbent on the ROK and the United States to prepare for a North Korean collapse. To explain the reasons for preparations and the areas needing preparations, this report examines the potential negative consequences of a North Korean collapse and the challenges that cause or contribute to them. It then turns to proposing the actions the ROK and the United States could take to ameliorate the various consequences of a North Korean government collapse and the preparations needed to empower these actions.

Background

There is a reasonable probability that North Korean totalitarianism will end in the foreseeable future, with the very strong likelihood that
this end will be accompanied by considerable violence and upheaval.¹

The immediate past U.S. commander in Korea, GEN Walter Sharp, summarized the North Korean situation this way:

Combined with the country’s disastrous centralized economy, dilapidated industrial sector, insufficient agricultural base, malnourished military and populace, and developing nuclear programs, the possibility of a sudden leadership change in the North could be destabilizing and unpredictable.²

Such a sudden change could occur if the current North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un, is assassinated,³ leaving no clear successor and the potential division of the senior North Korean leadership into factions that would likely wage civil war against each other. Such a government collapse would develop into a humanitarian disaster, one that would likely force ROK, U.S., and Chinese intervention to resolve the resulting threats both within the region and beyond.⁴

Unification as the Objective

The costs of intervening in a North Korean government collapse will be high for the ROK and its partners. If the ROK is to pay such costs, it will likely decide to make Korean unification the ultimate objective of the intervention. The presidents of both the United States and the ROK established peaceful unification as the objective for Korea in

⁴ For example, North Korean factions could use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against the ROK, Japan, and China or could proliferate WMD or WMD expertise to third parties (especially terrorist groups) that would be prone to use the weapons against the United States. North Korean possession of WMD could thus force U.S. military intervention in a North Korean government collapse.
their 2009 and 2013 summit meetings.\(^5\) A North Korean collapse may well provide the very best chances for unification. For a ROK and U.S. intervention to succeed in achieving unification, substantial preparations are required beforehand. While unification has been the alliance strategic guidance, the planning and preparation for unification appear to have been inadequate thus far.

**The Potential Consequences of Collapse and Subsequent Intervention**

The most immediate consequences of a North Korean government collapse will occur in North Korea. The division of the North into factions would likely precipitate civil war, as at least some of the factions will seek primacy and eventual control of all of North Korea, and none of the factions are likely to have the resources, such as food, needed for survival throughout the area that they control.\(^6\) Compared to today, the even more serious lack of food, medicine, and other supplies in North Korea would lead to a humanitarian disaster likely worse than the famine of the mid-1990s in North Korea, when several hundred


\(^6\) North Korea already suffers from starvation in relatively stable circumstances. In the unstable circumstances of a collapse, many will likely hoard food, and much more food than normal will be wasted.
thousand to potentially several million died of starvation.\footnote{According to one report, the North Korean government has acknowledged that 220,000 North Koreans died of starvation between 1995 and 1998, the height of the catastrophe. At the other end of the spectrum, Hwang Jong Yup, the highest-ranking defector from North Korea, has stated that North Korean agricultural officials estimated internally to the government itself that 2.5 million people perished between 1995 and 1997, including 500,000 in 1995, one million in 1996, and another one million in 1997. Andrew Natsios’s review of several independent studies concludes that there is significant evidence to support Hwang Jong Yup’s estimates. There have been plausible, fact-based estimates as high as 3.5 million deaths, although these estimates are regarded with skepticism by several scholars.} The breakdown of central authority would allow the North Korean military and security services to prey on the North Korean civilian population, stealing food and taking away the modest level of individual security that exists today. In turn, potentially millions of North Koreans would become refugees,\footnote{Na Jeong-ju, “3 million NK Refugees Expected in Crisis: BOK,” \textit{Korea Times}, January 26, 2007. The 3 million is the estimate for refugees trying to cross into the ROK; an even larger number of refugees trying to cross into China can be expected.} seeking to cross into China and the ROK in search of food and security. Such huge numbers of refugees would be destabilizing in both the ROK and China. China, in particular, has been quite clear that it does not want any such refugee flow. China also does not want U.S. forces operating near its territory.

The horrendous nature of these consequences would likely drive both a ROK-U.S. and a Chinese intervention into North Korea. The large size of the North Korean military would require that both interventions be led by military forces, seeking to reestablish security and provide humanitarian aid that is not immediately stolen from the people. The forces of both sides would have significant incentives to advance rapidly into the North, leading to a risk of accidental combat between them. In the zeal of the moment, the inevitable accidents could escalate into major combat between the ROK and U.S. forces and the Chinese forces, one of the worst possible outcomes. And even
if such conflict is avoided, the North Korean military forces would almost certainly oppose both interventions in some combination of regular combat, insurgency, and criminal behavior. This combat could lead to significant damage to the ROK, as North Korean artillery and missiles could be used against the ROK, and North Korean special forces could infiltrate the ROK and seek to wreck havoc. The North Korean military attacks could be made worse by the use of WMD. Even Japan and the United States would not be immune from North Korean attacks, let alone follow-on terrorist attacks.

If the worse consequences develop, the ROK-U.S. intervention in the North could fail. Alternatively, China could take political control of much of the North, likely in cooperation with one or more North Korean factions. A failure to achieve Korean unification in these circumstances could doom Korea to division for at least many more decades.

Preparing North Koreans for Unification

For six decades, North Korea has indoctrinated its people, describing the United States as the enemy of the North Korean people and the source of all the problems in North Korea. The ROK is described both as the lackey of the United States and as a determined enemy of the North Korean people. This North Korean diversionary effort is needed to deflect criticism from the regime for all its failings. If North Koreans sustain these feelings after a North Korean government collapse, it will be extremely difficult to perform the functions needed to achieve unification. Indeed, outright opposition can be expected from many in the North.

A ROK-U.S. information operations campaign is a key starting point for overcoming North Korean hatred and fear of the United States and the ROK across almost all the potential consequences. The ROK and the United States must change how North Koreans think about unification and their individual prospects after unification. Information is already leaking into North Korea that at least challenges North Korean indoctrination claiming that people in the ROK
live even worse lives than people in the North. But the North Korean people need to be given hope that the United States and the ROK are not enemies but are rather preparing policies that will make unification advantageous for the North Koreans. And these policies need to be communicated to the North Koreans. This will be particularly important with the North Korean elites who could oppose unification in very serious ways. Policies are needed for such issues as provision of humanitarian aid and jobs, selective amnesty, and property rights. These need to be transmitted to the North Korean people over time to adjust North Korean expectations. The ROK and the United States must be prepared to provide the North Koreans a favorable life after unification; otherwise, many North Koreans will become disaffected and likely rebel against the development of a stable and prosperous unified Korea that treats them poorly.

Responses to Humanitarian Disaster

A first step in improving the lives of North Koreans would be for the ROK and the United States to prepare to deliver humanitarian aid throughout North Korea promptly and in significant quantities. This aid needs to be delivered throughout the country to avert North Koreans from displacing from their homes in search of food and security and thereby posing a more serious humanitarian aid requirement. Prompt delivery of humanitarian aid will require ROK and U.S. military forces to take a major role in aid delivery because of the magnitude of deliveries required and the desire to avoid misappropriation of the aid by the North Korean military, security services, or criminal personnel. Intervening ROK and U.S. forces should “lead with aid” across the demilitarized zone and along the coasts of North Korea. Because about one-half of the North Korean populace lives in the interior of North Korea, rapid action should be taken to neutralize the North Korean

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9 When the East German government collapse developed into a West German–led unification, many of those in East Germany expected that such a unification would be good for them, which is not the case in North Korea.
air defense network so that aircraft can also be used for aid delivery (including encouraging North Korean military personnel to destroy the air defenses).10

Responses to Conflict and Military Forces in North Korea

After a North Korean government collapse, all conflict that occurs in North Korea poses risks of spilling over into the ROK and China and worsening the humanitarian disaster in the North. The ROK and U.S. forces should therefore seek prompt ceasefires for these conflicts and to avoid having to fight the North Korean forces.

Today, most of the North Korean military personnel will likely be hostile to unification. In aggregate, they pose far larger and more serious threats to the Korean unification process than was the case in German unification, including North Korean possession and potential use of WMD. Thus, ROK and U.S. forces moving into North Korea to secure the delivery of humanitarian aid will need to begin their work with the local North Korean military commanders, trying to co-opt the commanders and their units. With North Korean commanders facing the pressures of a North Korean collapse, it may be possible to avoid conflict and insurgency in some local areas, especially if more has been done to help the North Koreans perceive that unification offers them a reasonable future. But the ROK and U.S. forces need to prepare to do more, promptly disarming most North Korean forces and sending mobilized North Korean reservists back to their civilian jobs, while keeping some North Korean units lightly armed to assist in the demilitarization, weapon security, and countering insurgent actions. The disarmed former North Korean units should be transferred to public-service efforts to rebuild North Korean infrastructure and other critical capabilities, hopefully providing training for at least some North Koreans in future jobs that will support Korean economic growth and

10 The ROK and/or U.S. presidents may order airborne delivery of humanitarian aid before the military is satisfied with the safety of the environment. Thus, the military needs to make every effort to prepare the environment and to be able to respond to any threats that still develop.
stability. Officially retaining former North Korean military personnel in the combined Korean military for a year or more will allow imposition of military discipline, completion of debriefings, and imposition of biometrics that will both help deter criminal behavior and provide a means of countering that behavior when it develops.11

The elimination of North Korean WMD would be another objective for ROK and U.S. forces entering North Korea. The North Korean WMD could cause serious damage in North Korea and beyond and could be proliferated to third parties, including terrorist groups, many of which would delight in attacking the United States. Unfortunately, the North Korean WMD appear to be dispersed among a large number of facilities, at least some of which have not yet been identified or located, making it difficult to quickly eliminate the WMD threat. Because of the severity of the damage WMD could do, ROK and U.S. forces need to be prepared to secure and then eliminate this threat as promptly as possible. This would be a major reason for ROK-U.S. military intervention into a North Korean collapse and also a reason for ROK-U.S. cooperation with China in resolving this threat.

Responses to Security Services and Human Rights Disasters

The North Korean security services will be more difficult to deal with because many of their members will be guilty of criminal activities. In practice, however, the ROK judicial system will lack the capacity for criminal action against most of these personnel, and thus the ROK will need to decide how many criminal cases it can handle and prepare to grant selective amnesty for lesser offenses that the judicial and prison systems are unprepared to handle. Amnesty may be applied to those guilty of accepting bribes and other forms of corruption, giving pre-

11 The imposition of biometrics may not initially be very effective in deterring criminal behavior because few North Koreans will understand the capabilities of biometrics at first. Biometrics will be useful in catching criminals and, over time, will have a deterrent effect as criminals and others learn how other criminals were caught.
cedence to the criminal prosecution of those guilty of serious human rights abuses, such as torture, murder, and serious abuse.

The ROK and U.S. forces must also pay particular attention to the North Korean prisons, especially the political prisons. Potentially hundreds of thousands of North Koreans are incarcerated in these facilities. While some prisoners may be guilty of crimes and justly imprisoned, many are imprisoned because of political offenses. As ROK and U.S. forces advance into North Korea, the prison camp commanders and guards may try to execute many of the prisoners to prevent their eventual testimony against the prison staffs. ROK and U.S. forces will need to reach these prisons quickly to stop such executions and save many lives. At least some of the prisoners may prove useful to postunification governance of the North, having served in the North Korean government but then been imprisoned for “political unreliability.”

Responses to Ownership Issues

In North Korea, the state technically owns the vast majority of the property. Once unification occurs, decisions must be made on who should assume property ownership. As in the case of East Germany, there will be conflict between those currently occupying the property and the families that held ownership before the North Korean regime took control.

The combined Korean government needs to establish policies for how property rights will be conferred. In general, the most favorable outcome with personal property (e.g., homes) will be to convey ownership to the current residents, requiring them to remain in place for some number of years to obtain property rights; the ROK government should plan to compensate pre–North Korea landowners. The vesting period will keep many North Koreans in their homes to reduce the potential refugee flows. It will also avoid some of the abuses of people selling their property immediately to achieve a financial windfall.

Ownership issues arise as a result of ROK efforts to unify the peninsula in the aftermath of a North Korean collapse, not directly from the collapse itself.
but then suffering from the longer-term consequences of not owning property—consequences that would lead to significant dissatisfaction with and blame of the combined Korean government. Similar problems developed in East Germany after German unification.

With regard to North Korean businesses, most are in such serious deterioration that they have little value. The East German government suffered similar problems; it decided to have a national organization take ownership of these firms and to “sell” them to private ownership under specific rules that would promote the needed capital investments. Indeed, in some cases, the East German government had to pay private companies to take ownership of the firms. A similar approach for North Korea seems warranted.

**Responses to Chinese Intervention**

A North Korean collapse raises Chinese fears of both U.S. intervention into the area directly adjoining China’s border and a massive influx of North Korean refugees. China recognizes, for example, that the United States will want to reach the North Korean WMD sites north of Pyongyang promptly to prevent WMD use or proliferation, and this threat will potentially force China to seek to secure these facilities before the United States can reach them. And the best way to reduce an influx of desperate refugees is for China to establish a buffer zone inside North Korea and keep the refugees in camps within the buffer zone. China would also have other reasons for intervening in the North, including Chinese economic interests, such as in North Korean ports on the East Sea (Sea of Japan) and in North Korean mineral wealth.

The view of Chinese intervention changes significantly in future years. The ROK Army is planned to reduce from 22 active duty divisions today to roughly 12 by 2022 due to severe ROK demographic problems. With 12 active duty divisions, the ROK will have insufficient forces, even with significant U.S. participation, to fully handle the various challenges of North Korean collapse. China could help, but the ROK worries that Chinese intervention in the North might not be reversible and that, as a result, unification after a North Korean
collapse may only be partial, with China annexing some significant portion of the North.

This future should force the ROK and the United States to work more closely with China in preparing for a North Korean collapse and developing cooperative plans for this effort. This will be a major undertaking, especially since China has sought to avoid preparations for a North Korean collapse, because these would make China appear to be disloyal to its North Korean ally. But China appears to be increasingly ready to address this difficult issue. The ROK and the United States should take every opportunity to share perspectives with China and seek to develop at least common perspectives on how to handle a North Korean collapse.

Addressing the Prerequisites of Collapse Preparation

The ROK, especially, needs to make progress in two critical areas to accomplish the preparations discussed above. The first is convincing the ROK populace that the ROK should prepare for a North Korean collapse and subsequent unification. Many in the ROK oppose such preparation, fearing that it will sour relations with North Korea and increase the likelihood of a collapse, outcomes that they wish to avoid. In practice, however, most preparation for unification would reduce its costs, whether it occurs peacefully or as the result of a North Korean collapse. And with the failing character of North Korea, a North Korean government collapse appears to be more an issue of when it occurs and not whether it occurs. Thus, preparations would most likely accelerate rather than cause a collapse, and by accelerating collapse would hasten the time when the North Korean people would be freed from their abusive government. These trade-offs need to be more actively discussed in the ROK to help encourage the people to support preparation for a collapse.

The other critical issue is preparing the ROK Army to sustain more combat power as its size declines in the coming years. As noted above, the ROK Army is planned to decline from 22 active duty divisions to about 12 over the next ten years. The reduction does not need to be
that severe if the current 21-month conscription period is retained, as opposed to reducing the period to 18 months, as ROK President Park Geun-Hye promised in her 2012 election campaign. But critical to sustaining and even enhancing ROK Army capabilities will be better use of the ROK reserves, whose effectiveness is constrained today by the limitation of only three days of training per year for the reservists.13 Selected reservists could be organized into reserve battalions or regiments serving in active duty divisions or into key specialty forces and could be provided financial incentives for agreeing to enough training time each year to keep the force effective. Some third-country forces could also be brought into plans for unification.

13 All ROK reserve divisions have an active duty cadre, which would be more qualified.