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Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse

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This briefing provides key points from RAND research on how to prepare for a collapse of the North Korean government followed by sudden South Korea-led unification. This study was launched out of concern that if these events occurred at current levels of preparation, the outcome would not be good. I believed that there were options for mitigating the collapse consequences and wanted to develop those options.

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This chart depicts the general leadership hierarchy in North Korea. Since his assumption of the top position on the death of his father in December 2011, Kim Jong-un has carried out a series of purges, the most notable of which has been the recent purge and execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek. Given that Kim Jong-un in two years has turned over the North Korean military leadership as many times as his father did in 17 years, there is now more concern that Kim Jong-un could become the target of an assassination or coup by senior military personnel. Many of these personnel already likely fear for their future and the future of their families, given North Korean brutality.
Because the Kim family has encouraged competition in the second tier of national leadership, we postulate that two or more factions would develop as the result of the elimination of Kim Jong-un*. Each faction would probably control some North Korean territory, though some territory might sink into anarchy.

*Some postulate that while the Kim Family Regime may fail, a new central leadership (likely military) would take control. We do not reject that possibility but treat it as beyond the scope of this study, the subject of which is government failure as opposed to just regime failure.
In a situation in which the central North Korean government were to break down, accelerating faction development, some of the government functions would likely be taken over by the factions in their territory. But food distribution could still largely cease in many areas. The failure of central control would also raise questions about the value of North Korean money, with many of the richer North Korean people hoarding food as a way of holding wealth. As a result, food would be difficult to find, creating a humanitarian disaster even more serious than is normally the case in North Korea.

In response to such a scenario, the South Korean government may decide to intervene in the North. But it will know that doing so will be very costly, and therefore to justify that cost, it would likely decide that its intervention should be geared to achieving Korean unification.

Meanwhile, at some point, China may or may not decide to intervene for its own purposes. Potential Chinese interventions are discussed below.
To understand the challenges posed by such a North Korean government collapse, it is important to note that Iraq and North Korea have similar population sizes. But the North Korean active duty military is about 3 times larger than the Iraqi military was in 2003, and the North Korean forces can be expected to be both more capable and more determined. Moreover, the North Korean reserves are reportedly more than 10 times the size of the Iraqi reserves in 2003. And North Korea really does have weapons of mass destruction (WMD).
Most of the focus on a possible North Korean collapse has been on the long-term consequences of the anticipated resulting path to Korean unification. These would be costly and could involve major economic and social challenges, as noted here.

But there would also likely be significant short-term consequences which must be addressed promptly to achieve a successful unification, as well as medium-term issues requiring serious attention.

Across these, the major concern is that many North Koreans, and especially the elite, view a South Korea-led unification as a personal disaster because they fear they would lose their favored social positions, their jobs, and their relative wealth, while being subjected to South Korean justice, which could be severe. Without some efforts to convince North Koreans that unification would be in their interests, South Korea, the United States, and China may well face conflict with the North Korean military in the event of a collapse.
So how can the United States and South Korea mitigate these negative consequences and increase the chances of a successful Korean unification? In the immediate aftermath of a collapse, humanitarian aid will likely be needed for many North Koreans to survive. This chart shows the population distribution that would require this aid.

The roads across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) would have difficulty carrying just the forces and their logistics needed to stabilize the north. The ability of these roads to also carry humanitarian aid would be severely limited. Therefore, it would be wise to plan to have South Korean and US Marines and Navy forces deliver aid to the roughly 40 percent of the civilian population [8.8 million] that lives in coastal counties. Initially, air forces would need to deliver aid to the 50% of the population in the center and northern parts of the country.

The average food consumption across North Korea is about 15,000 tons per day. Up to this much may need to be delivered daily to break the hoarding pattern. This would mean, for example, having airlift deliver 7,500 tons per day to the interior. This would require up to 135 C-17 sorties per day or some 500 C-130 sorties per day, a daunting requirement. Moreover, the airlift would be risky until the North Korean air defenses are neutralized.
North Korea has over 1 million military and security service personnel, far too many to integrate into a combined Korean military force. Many of them would need to be demobilized despite the likely lack of civilian jobs for them. Turning these personnel loose without jobs would almost certainly lead to major insurgency and criminal activity.

Rather than moving rapidly to such risky “civil reintegration,” it would be better to induct many of the military personnel into a “public service” system in which they would work on improving infrastructure like roads, while being housed, fed, and paid. Public service would be most effective if plans had been made on the needed work assignments and which North Korean forces to assign to each, along with preparation of a project monitoring force and stockpiling of the needed equipment, supplies, and means for compensating the North Koreans. Well maintained roads would eventually be needed to deliver humanitarian aid into the North Korean interior. This public service could also provide job training. The personnel could be released from public service when civilian jobs became available.
North Korea appears to have substantial quantities of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). South Korean and US military forces would need to secure and assess these weapons.

They would also need to secure the North Korean WMD experts and transition them into reasonable civilian jobs.

And they would need to work on preventing WMD proliferation, as the rogue states or terrorist groups that might try to acquire North Korean WMD might intend to use them against the United States or US interests.

Substantial planning and intelligence collection is required today to be effective in these efforts, including efforts to induce defectors from the North Korean WMD programs. Adequate US and South Korean forces must be allocated to this mission, resourced, and trained to perform it. And potential jobs in South Korea need to be identified for the WMD experts.
Many in South Korea hope that if the North Korean government collapses China will not intervene. But China has many interests that would lead it to intervene; it would be especially concerned about the prospective flood of North Korean refugees that could destabilize Northeast China. China is also militarily capable of prompt military intervention (something it has recently demonstrated*), and many US experts expect such Chinese action. In the event of collapse, Chinese intervention may well become the trigger for South Korean and US intervention.

While few Chinese personnel have been willing to discuss the concepts for a Chinese intervention, those who do talk either about creating a 50 to 100 km buffer zone in North Korea or about taking control of as much of North Korea as possible to maintain a buffer state. In either case, to prevent accidental Chinese conflict with the South Korean and US forces, it may be necessary to designate a separation line in the North which both sides agree not to cross. Such a line in Germany in 1945 led to over 4 decades of partitioning of the country; a similar risk would exist here. This is a miserable solution, but it is less miserable than a war between China on one side and the United States and South Korea on the other, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

China’s very visible demonstration of its military abilities to intervene suggests that it is time to begin more dialogue with China over responding to North Korean instability.

It is important to note that South Korea is facing major military force size problems due to demographic difficulties: Because of very low birthrates starting in the 1980s, the draft age cohort of young men will fall from over 400,000 per year in the 1990s to just over 200,000 in 2027, cutting the size of the South Korean military by about 40%.

By 2022, the South Korean Army may need to reduce from its current 22 division structure to 12 to 14 divisions. As the South Korean Army becomes smaller, the likelihood of South Korea and the United States successfully stabilizing North Korea declines. At some point in this decline, South Korea and the United States will be forced to seek third party assistance if they want to succeed, and China would be the country most able to provide that assistance. Thus there is a need to transition to viewing Chinese help as critical to Korean unification, something that has not been previously anticipated.
In conclusion, if the North Korean government were to suddenly collapse today, the consequences of that collapse could jeopardize regional security in Northeast Asia and undermine US interests. Preparation is needed now to convince the North Korean elites and others that South Korea-led unification in the aftermath of a North Korean collapse will be in their interests, as we do not want them to militarily oppose such a unification.

The United States and South Korea need to create comprehensive plans for a collapse and unification. They also need to resource those plans, for example storing the food needed for initial humanitarian assistance in South Korea and preparing the means for delivering that food. They also need to remove impediments to the North Koreans acceptance of unification, such as the view of many North Koreans that they will be imprisoned and treated badly because of crimes they have committed. Some crimes will require punishment, but the South Korean judicial system is inadequate to handle even 10 percent of potential guilty parties. South Korean laws for selective amnesty need to be put in place.

The plans and preparations for unification need to be communicated to North Koreans and visibly demonstrated. For example, the ability to deliver humanitarian aid should be exercised, filmed, and broadcast into North Korea. And these messages need to be repeated again and again until the North Koreans develop confidence that South Korea and the US are sincere and committed to making the lives of North Koreans better.
I will be happy to take your questions and welcome your comments and suggestions.