



Finding America's Role in a **COLLAPSED** North Korean State

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IRAQI DICTATOR SADDAM HUSSEIN was an irritant to the United States and defied the international community over his weapons programs for a decade, causing some U.S. leaders to push for removing him and transforming Iraq into a democratic state. Unfortunately, few of those leaders thought seriously about how to accomplish the second half of their aim; thus, we are going on our fifth year in Iraq with no end in sight. One lesson we should learn from this mistake is that we must plan now for stability operations in countries where the risk of regime collapse is greatest.

North Korea has been a U.S. adversary responsible for the deaths of thousands of American service members over the past 55 years, and it is the only country in the world that holds a commissioned U.S. naval vessel hostage.¹ It also possesses stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, has an advanced ballistic missile program, and recently detonated a nuclear weapon. The nations within range of its medium-range missiles include 3 of the world's top 11 economies; combined, the 3 nations contain one-fourth of the world's population² and are responsible for nearly one-fifth of the world's trade volume.³ Today, North Korea faces the very real threats of internal collapse or forced regime change. Either event would create one of the greatest humanitarian crises of modern times overnight. Infectious diseases, severe economic burdens, and even weapons of mass destruction could spread across the borders North Korea shares with some of the world's greatest economic and military powers.

Background

After the Japanese surrender in 1945, Soviet troops occupied the Korean peninsula north of the 38th parallel while American troops occupied the area south of it. The Soviets installed dictator Kim Il-sung in the north and oversaw establishment of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK). In the south, the U.S. installed Princeton-educated Korean exile Rhee Syng-man, who established the Republic of Korea (ROK) and became its first president. After the Americans and the Soviets withdrew nearly all of their forces from Korea in 1950, Kim Il-sung's DPRK invaded the ROK and nearly unified the peninsula by force. An American-led UN intervention averted South Korea's extinction and almost reunified Korea under a democratic government, but China entered the war, producing a stalemate that continues to this day.

During the 55 years since the end of the Korean War, the United States has kept troops in South Korea to maintain the UN-brokered armistice that

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PHOTO: North Korean workers deepen the bed of a river and reinforce its embankments in the city of Chongjin, 23 April 2004. The anti-flooding operation was supported by the United Nations. (AFP, WFP, Gerald Bourke)

ended the conflict. Over 36,000 American Soldiers died during the Korean War.⁴ North Korea has killed more than 750 others since the signing of the armistice.⁵

In recent years, the North Korean regime has defied the United States and the international community with its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. The U.S. and North Korea nearly went to war over the latter's nuclear program before the countries signed the 1994 Agreed Framework, which was supposed to impose a freeze on the DPRK's nuclear ambitions.⁶ North Korean belligerence continued, however. Soon after it signed the Agreed Framework, the DPRK began a secret uranium enrichment program in violation of that agreement, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and a 1992 Inter-Korean Denuclearization Agreement.⁷ Under the leadership of Kim Il-sung's son, Kim Jong-il, who took over upon his father's death in 1994, the DPRK has continued to expand its missile program. In 1998 it fired a missile through Japanese airspace, and in 2006 it carried out additional tests over the Sea of Japan. Its ultimate act of defiance was an October 2006 nuclear test detonation.

Humanitarian Costs of Defiance

The DPRK's defiance of the international community and expansion of its military capabilities has come at a great human cost. Since the mid-1990s, North Koreans have lived through a series of famines that various scholars estimate have killed between 600,000 and 2.5 million people (mostly between 1994 and 1998).⁸ Many factors have caused the famines, but the main ones are the loss of Soviet subsidies, the allocation of funds to weapons instead of food imports, politically motivated discrimination in food distribution, poor centralized farming management, and massive flooding brought on by deforestation of many North Korean mountains. Numerous refugees have confirmed reports of cannibalism in the DPRK.⁹

North Korea watchers viewed the regime's 1997 decision to accept international food aid as a sign of desperation or even potential collapse. Because the regime had long prided itself on its *juche* ("self-reliance") philosophy, accepting international food aid meant abandoning its guiding principle. However, while the international community was spending money and resources to end the North



AP, WFP, Hillary Mackenzie

World Food Program emergency supplies are unloaded in the port city of Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province, North Korea, 20 August 1997. Outside aid was sent to North Korea where flooding, bad harvests, and years of agricultural mismanagement created food shortages.

Korean famine, Kim Jong-il was busy consolidating his power by implementing a *songun* ("military-first") policy, which effectively supplanted *juche*. Under *songun*, Kim gave much of the donated food aid—and additional funding as well—to the military before any North Korean civilians got it. Perversely, in the midst of one of the worst famines the world had seen in decades, North Korea began to expand its military.

Signs of Collapse

In a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, author Robert Kaplan imagines how the collapse of North Korea might look. In his view, it will not be a single event, but rather a process with seven identifiable phases:

- Depletion of resources.
- Failure to maintain infrastructure around the country due to resource depletion.

- Rise of independent fiefs informally controlled by local party apparatchiks or warlords, along with widespread corruption to circumvent a failing central government.

- Attempted suppression of these fiefs by the regime once it feels that they have become too powerful.

- Active resistance against the central government.
- Fracture of the regime.
- Formation of a new national leadership.¹⁰

Kaplan argues that North Korea reached phase four in the mid-1990s but was prevented from reaching phase five—insurrection—by the international food assistance, which effectively stopped the famine by 1998. However, in *Rogue Regime*, journalist Jasper Becker documents numerous phase-five acts of resistance against Kim Jong-il's regime, the most significant of which occurred in 1995 when senior officers of the North Korean VI Corps, based in Chongjin, North Korea's third-largest city, hatched a plan to capture key governmental facilities, gain support from the VII Corps further south in Hamhung, and march on Pyongyang.¹¹ The plot failed, but it clearly showed cracks in Kim's control.

The growing flood of refugees from North Korea is another sign of impending regime collapse. When governments cannot govern properly, their citizens search for better alternatives. This is happening in North Korea today, even though defecting from the country poses daunting challenges. Despite the rough ocean waters surrounding the country on two sides, a few North Koreans have successfully defected by boat.¹² An even smaller number, mostly soldiers, have defected across the heavily fortified demilitarized zone into South Korea.¹³ Most North Koreans who escape their homeland, however, do so by crossing the cold waters of the Yalu or Tumen rivers into China, even though Chinese and North Korean border guards heavily patrol both rivers. These geographical barriers and

the authorities' efforts notwithstanding, the flow of North Korean refugees into China continues.

North Koreans who succeed in crossing into China can attempt to survive there, but under the terms of an agreement between Beijing and Pyongyang, China returns any North Koreans it catches to the DPRK, where they face terms in prison camps or execution. When defectors began entering foreign embassy compounds and consulates in China and claiming refugee status, Chinese authorities increased the security around the diplomatic facilities. Defectors seeking a more accommodating place of refuge usually try to cross through China into Thailand, Vietnam, and Mongolia and thence into South Korea. In 2004, Vietnam permitted the ROK to airlift 468 North Korean refugees to Seoul.¹⁴

Since the end of the Korean War, 8,740 North Koreans have successfully defected to South Korea. Over 7,000 of those defections occurred during the last four years despite increased Chinese and North Korean efforts to crack down on the flow, and many expect this pace of defections to continue through 2007.¹⁵ The United States recently began accepting North Korean defectors for the first time under the new North Korean Human Rights Act.¹⁶



AP, Ng Han Guan

Soldiers carrying the North Korean flag and shovels march in the outskirts of Sinuiju along a fenced border shared with Dandong, China, 16 October 2006.

Because defectors hide from Chinese authorities, there is no way to know how many there are in China. Groups that aid defectors estimate the number at 100,000 to 300,000.¹⁷ If even the lowest estimate is accurate, approximately 1 out of every 230 North Koreans has defected to China. The continuing flow of defections suggests that the regime is already losing control at the periphery of the country.

Other signs of the regime's loss of control are mass defections by border guards, jailbreaks, a rise in trading to replace the dysfunctional rationing system, a proliferation of cell phones and DVDs that bring in information from abroad, and even a reported mass escape from one of North Korea's notorious concentration camps. Several journalists have reported on hunger, dissent, and isolated acts of resistance inside North Korea, a noteworthy fact given the extraordinary secretiveness of Kim's regime.¹⁸ Defectors still flow out of the country, and massive floods have wiped out many of North Korea's food crops.¹⁹ All these events are having an impact on regime stability. Without dramatic reforms, which appear unlikely, conditions will only worsen. How much longer will it be before the regime loses all control of the country?

A desperate fear of regime collapse may best explain why Kim Jong-il ordered ballistic missile and nuclear tests within months of each other in 2006. Arguably, the tests were less for international consumption and more about domestic politics.²⁰ With the regime showing signs of cracking, Kim may have felt compelled to shore up military support for it. The North Korean military has long wanted the prestige and security it believes nuclear weapons would bring. In addition, of course, nuclear weapons would give the DPRK a tactical advantage in any conflict with South Korea. Despite the huge size of its armed forces, North Korea has no conventional advantage over South

Korea now because its aging tanks and aircraft are nearly at the end of their service. By allowing the military to advance its ballistic missile and nuclear programs, Kim Jong-il has secured his generals' continuing loyalty and thus internal security. Additionally, as the nuclear and missile programs advance, the DPRK will gain the ability to deter any external threat of regime removal.

Missiles and nuclear weapons may help Kim Jong-il win the military's loyalty, but that does not mean he and his regime will win the people's admiration. Missiles and nuclear weapons do not feed families or develop economies. Only economic reform can change the plight of North Korea's people. Kim Jong-il tried reforms in 2002, but reversed himself when it became apparent that they were accelerating the decay of state control.

As long as starvation, economic decline, and defections continue, the regime's collapse is inevitable. Increasingly clear signs suggest that the collapse could begin at any time. Because regime collapse carries with it the terrifying risk of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons proliferation, it is imperative that the United States thoroughly prepare for such a possibility now.



AP: Ng Han Guan

A missile unit of the Korean People's Army in Kim Il Sung Square, Pyongyang, during a military parade to celebrate the Army's 75th anniversary, 25 April 2007.

The Northeast Asia Project

The fact that China is preparing for North Korea's collapse is one of the clearest indications of how real the threat is. After last year's North Korean ballistic missile and nuclear tests, the Chinese carefully avoided any punishments that could trigger the regime's fall.²¹ In recent years, the Chinese have deployed thousands more soldiers to fortify their border with North Korea.²² Although the conventional explanation for this is China's desire to keep refugees and defectors inside North Korea, Kaplan argues that China is deploying the soldiers to provide a quick-reaction force to occupy North Korea if the regime falls.

In fact, the Chinese have been busy laying the political, diplomatic, and historical foundations for an occupation and perhaps even an annexation of North Korea. Over the past few years, China has funded what it calls "the Northeast Asia Project."²³ The goal of this project, as with similar efforts to reclaim the histories of Tibet and East Turkestan in the west, is to turn the history of the ancient Korean Koguryeo kingdoms into *Chinese* history.²⁴ Thus, Beijing has registered Koguryeo historic sites with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) while formulating its own historical accounts of the kingdoms.²⁵ At the same time, it has tried to block North Korean attempts to register Koguryeo sites inside North Korea as Korean.²⁶ The Chinese have even claimed Mount Paekdu, on the Sino-Korean border, as a Chinese UNESCO site.²⁷ The significance of this is hard to overstate: Mount Paektu is the mythical birthplace of the Korean people, a site of enormous historical, spiritual, and political significance to Koreans. For example, North Korea's official mythology claims that Kim Jong-il was born on Paektu.

The ancient Koguryeo Kingdom once encompassed a large portion of northeast China as well as the entirety of North Korea. In tandem with its historical gambit, China has also been settling more Han Chinese in its northeastern territory, particularly in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, which has a large population of ethnic Koreans who still speak Korean. The attempt to "Han-ify" Yanbian has been so successful that Beijing recently suggested it might disband the autonomous zone. In actuality, then, as well as in history, China seems to be trying to supplant the North Koreans.

Whatever its aims are, China clearly takes the risk of a North Korean collapse seriously and is making plans either to mitigate the ensuing calamity or seize an opportunity.

Considering the poverty, chaos, infrastructure decay, and humanitarian problems North Korea faces, one might ask why China would want to occupy it. First, China does not want refugees carrying a massive humanitarian crisis across its borders, particularly before or during the 2008 Olympics. Second, China wants to shape the region's political geography in its favor, and it is not in China's interest to have a free, united, prosperous, and pro-American Korea as a military or economic competitor combining cheap North Korean labor with South Korean technology. Third, China wants to develop its landlocked, economically backward northeast by gaining access to nearby North Korean seaports.²⁸ China could achieve all this by establishing a puppet state or by fully incorporating North Korea into China proper as a new Korean autonomous area. If China follows the same model it did in Tibet—first incorporating Tibet's history and then its territory—it is difficult to imagine a country that would be in a position to stop it. In short, the United States needs to take the threat of regime collapse in North Korea as seriously as China does.

A New Strategy

American military and political thinkers today are focused on creating policies to govern stability operations, but this invariably presumes the deployment of American Soldiers to advance U.S. interests. Direct stability operations are needed in Iraq and Afghanistan, but are they always necessary?

I propose the United States should adopt a new stability operations strategy, one based not on the deployment of American Soldiers but, rather, on setting conditions and providing logistical support for a third country to conduct stability operations that advance U.S. interests. For several reasons, the Korean peninsula is an excellent candidate for such a strategy.

The United States should begin creating the diplomatic conditions now to justify and support a South Korean-led occupation of North Korea. The best way to begin is by winning the information war inside North Korea. A widespread and persistent, although increasingly discredited, view holds that North Korea is belligerent because it really wants

normalization and engagement with the rest of the world. A more believable theory, strategic disengagement, suggests that Kim Jong-il really wants to isolate his people from the rest of the world because allowing them to engage with it would expose the fraudulence of his propaganda and destabilize his regime.²⁹ The U.S. must therefore challenge the Kim regime's control of information by increasing radio broadcasts into the country and helping move more radios across North Korea's borders.³⁰ Until recently, radios available inside North Korea were fixed to receive a single, government-controlled frequency. Today, more radios that people can tune to stations outside North Korea are being smuggled into the country.

By creating a radio audience now, the U.S. can begin building the legitimacy of the South Korean Government in the minds of North Koreans. Radio broadcasts could also combat the official North Korean media's ferocious anti-American propaganda. When the inevitable regime collapse happens, the North Korean people will use their radios to seek information. Through their already established radio audience, the U.S. and South Korea would be able to pass information about humanitarian relief operations to the citizens of North Korea.

We know that radio broadcasts from the outside world already influence the North Koreans. The best single example of this is prominent author and former North Korean labor camp survivor Kang Chol-hwan, who decided to defect after listening to South Korean and Japanese broadcasts on an illegal radio.³¹ If radio broadcasts are influential enough to encourage North Korean citizens to defect, they can be equally effective in setting conditions for an occupation of North Korea.

Congress has already authorized key parts of this strategy with unanimous passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act, which authorizes the president to fund private and nonprofit groups to "promote human rights, democracy, rule of law, and the development of a market economy in North Korea."³² The act also states that "the President is authorized to take such actions as may be necessary to increase the availability of information inside North Korea by increasing the availability of sources of information not controlled by the Government of North Korea, including such sources as radios capable of receiving broadcasts from outside of



North Korean leader Kim Jong-il acknowledging applause from soldiers as he inspects Korean People's Army Unit 1286.

North Korea."³³ Thus authorized, the U.S. recently provided funding to increase radio broadcasts in North Korea to up to 10 hours per day.³⁴

We can and should do more than this. For starters, Congress should fund 24-hour radio broadcasting to build the widest possible audience in North Korea.³⁵ We should also consider cultivating, organizing, and funding some of the dissident organizations and media that have already begun operating inside North Korea. Such groups publish anti-regime flyers and posters, interview residents and file news reports, smuggle religious literature, and even take clandestine video.³⁶ With more resources, they might be able to provide U.S. military planners with essential intelligence that could help them anticipate the population's post-collapse needs for food, drinking water, medical care, and other essential services.

Even as the United States fights an information war to shape a post-Kim Jong-il North Korea, the U.S. military must prepare urgently for the inevitable regime collapse. Military leaders who will be called upon to help stabilize North Korea do not have the option to forego planning for things they hope will not happen. However, there are few signs that United States Forces Korea has been planning or training for Kim's fall.

This is not due to a lack of vision. In 2006, U.S. military planners wanted to start preparing a

detailed operational plan (OPLAN) with the South Korean military to prepare jointly for the possibility of a North Korean collapse. However, the ROK Government was afraid such planning might offend North Korea, so the two nations reached a compromise: they would develop a contingency plan (CONPLAN) instead of a full-fledged OPLAN.³⁷ CONPLAN 5029-05, to be completed by the end of 2007, focuses on controlling the spread of weapons of mass destruction and handling refugees fleeing the country in the event of a collapse. CONPLAN 5029-05 might be the beginning of planning for the possibility of a North Korean collapse, but it is still woefully inadequate.

Stopping nuclear weapons dissemination and the exodus of refugees is extremely important, but as the U.S. military's experience in Iraq has taught us, providing for security, the rule of law, and government services immediately after a conflict is also essential. Who will stop the inevitable looting that will begin after a regime collapse? Who will prevent North Koreans from taking revenge against regime security forces and others who had oppressed them? The North Koreans rely on government food rations. If the regime collapses, who will provide food for the country's 23 million citizens? Several infectious diseases—scarlet fever, measles, typhoid, paratyphoid, and typhus—are reportedly spreading inside North Korea now. Who will enforce quarantines and treat the sick? Who will establish law and order in a country filled with small arms and explosives? Who will stand up a government that the citizens of North Korea will accept after a collapse? These are just a few questions that need answers. The virulent anti-American indoctrination of the North Korean people complicates matters enormously. This is why it might be better for South Korea to reestablish basic services and order in post-Kim Jong-il North Korea, not the United States.

The Republic of Korea, not the United States, is best prepared to occupy North Korea. South Korean soldiers can cross the DMZ with the advantages of having a shared language and culture, as representatives of a legitimate, prosperous Korean nation. American Soldiers should not enter North Korea except under the most limited of circumstances. Everything the United States does after a North Korean collapse should be in the context of building up the South Korean Government's legitimacy in

the eyes of North Koreans. Moving large U.S. troop formations into North Korea with the ROK military would create the perception that the South Koreans are American puppets, which is what DPRK propaganda has taught North Koreans since their birth. The United States must avoid taking any actions that could validate such a belief. Keeping U.S. forces out of North Korea would also strengthen the U.S. diplomatic case for preventing Chinese forces from moving into the country.

Putting a South Korean face on the occupation may come with some costs, but it is essential for building the ROK Government's legitimacy. The ROK military must prepare a detailed, city-by-city plan to provide the same essential services the North Korean regime (sometimes) provides today, beginning with security and food supplies. The ROK military has roughly 600,000 active-duty troops available and can activate hundreds of thousands of reserve soldiers and members of the Korean Service Corps. With a population nearly twice that of North Korea, South Korea has plenty of manpower to execute an occupation. Only its logistical infrastructure needs some improvement. The ROK military must stockpile rations, medicine, blankets, clothing, and other humanitarian relief supplies and be ready to deliver them instantly in the event of regime collapse.

Japan may be able to assist South Korea in this humanitarian crisis. It too should be involved in post-collapse planning, but its role must be even more carefully limited than that of the United States. With its great resources and ideal location near Korea, Japan could support the occupation and reconstruction of North Korea with funding, airlift capacity, and additional stockpiles of humanitarian aid. Koreans, however, have long been hostile toward Japan because of its occupation of the Korean peninsula before and during World War II. For this reason, Japanese nationals—and above all, Japanese military personnel—should stay out of North Korea during the initial reconstruction phase. Japan can reduce historical animosities toward Korea and make an important goodwill gesture to the Korean people by spearheading a major humanitarian relief operation in which Koreans deliver the aid. Japan's ensuing influence in a unified Korea could help offset any Chinese effort to achieve hegemony over the peninsula.

The U.S., for its part, could also provide some of the logistical assistance needed to ensure a quick, effective response to the Kim regime's fall. The U.S. military has a logistical network in South Korea to conduct the reception, staging, and onward movement of troops and equipment into South Korea in anticipation of any potential conflict. It should adapt this network to transport humanitarian aid to designated ROK military logistical locations near the DMZ.

The United States could also reduce the cost and pain of North Korean reconstruction by preparing Koreans to rebuild their own nation. The U.S. should begin training the north's future doctors, teachers, journalists, and political and business leaders now. North Korean defectors accepted into the United States can be taught essential nation-building skills. The United States allowed the first such defectors asylum in 2006, but the numbers so far have been small.³⁸ Accepting and training more North Korean defectors will help create an educated class of citizens that will be critical in shaping the former North Korea's future.

In the final analysis, however, South Korea must bear most of the burden of reconstruction. A failure to prepare for this monumental task risks losing the Korean dream of reunification to Chinese hegemony. If South Korea cannot occupy the DPRK immediately and effectively, China will.

Paving the way for South Korea's successful occupation and reconstruction of North Korea requires urgent planning and action now. The United States can begin by—

- Escalating the information war.
- Developing a detailed city-by-city OPLAN.
- Persuading South Korea (with Japanese and U.S. logistical support), to take a leading role in a post-collapse North Korea.

South Korea's readiness to occupy and stabilize North Korea will determine whether the Korean people will ever achieve their dream of a unified, democratic Korean peninsula. If not, the world may see the creation of yet another Chinese autonomous area. **MR**



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A South Korean Navy SEAL team conducts joint military operations in urban terrain training with U.S. Special Forces at Rodriguez Range Complex, South Korea, 24 March 2007, during exercise Reception, Staging, Onward movement, and Integration/Foal Eagle 2007.

NOTES

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4. Frank Reister, "Battle Casualties and Medical Statistics: U.S. Army Experience in the Korean War" (Washington DC: U.S. Army Surgeon General, 1973). According to this report, there were 33,652 U.S. deaths from hostile fire and 3,262 deaths by non-hostile means (a total of 36,914) in theatre during the Korean War.
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13. "Three North Koreans Flee to South," *Chosun Ilbo*, 17 June 2005, <english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200506/200506170030.html>.
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16. Hyun-jin Seo, "NK Defectors in China Remain a Concern," *Korea Herald*, 30 July 2004. The reader can view the entire North Korean Human Rights Act of the U.S. House of Representatives website, <www.internationalrelations.house.gov/nkhra.htm>, accessed 5 February 2007.
17. Onishi.
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30. Joshua Stanton, <www.internationalrelations.house.gov/archives/109/30142.pdf>, accessed 26 January 2007. Stanton is a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer and an active member of the North Korean Freedom Coalition and Liberty in North Korea human rights groups. Among other Korea-related issues, he has testified before the House International Relations Committee about the need to increase radio broadcasts into North Korea.
31. Chol-hwan Kang, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Kang was a former prisoner in a North Korean labor camp. He ultimately defected through China to South Korea and has gone on to write a book and articles about his life in the North. Kang's emotional accounts of his ordeals touched President George W. Bush, and the president met with him in the White House in 2005. "Bush Meets North Korean Defector behind Aquariums of Pyongyang," *Chosun Ilbo*, 14 June 2005, <english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200506/200506140011.html>. See also *CNN Talk Asia*, <edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/11/20/talkasia.kang.script/index.html>, accessed 25 January 2007. In this interview, Kang describes his time as a prisoner and how he ultimately decided to escape North Korea after learning of the outside world by listening to broadcasts on an illegal radio.
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