The North Korea
Instability
Project

Assessing the Risk of Regime Change in North Korea

Paul B. Stares
December 2016

US·KOREA
INSTITUTE AT SAIS

Dr. Paul B. Stares is the General John W. Vessey senior fellow for conflict prevention and director of the Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Prior to joining CFR, Stares was the vice president and director of the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention at the United States Institute of Peace. He worked as an associate director and senior research scholar at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation from 2000 to 2002 and was a senior research fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs and then director of studies at the Japan Center for International Exchange from 1996 to 2000. From 1984 to 1996, he was a research associate and later a senior fellow in the foreign policy studies program at the Brookings Institution. He has also been a NATO fellow and a scholar in residence at the MacArthur Foundation's Moscow office.

Stares has participated in various high-level studies, including leading the expert working group on preventive diplomacy for the Genocide Prevention Task Force co-chaired by Madeleine Albright and William Cohen as well as the expert working group on the strategic environment for the Iraq Study Group co-chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. He is the author or editor of numerous books, articles and reports.

In addition to his work for the Council, Stares is an adjunct professor in Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a guest lecturer at the London School of Economics. He has a BA from North Staffordshire Polytechnic and received both his MA and PhD from Lancaster University.

The North Korea
Instability
Project

Assessing the Risk of Regime Change in North Korea

Paul B. Stares
December 2016

US·KOREA
INSTITUTE AT SAIS

Printed in the United States of America
www.uskoreainstitute.org

The **US-Korea Institute (USKI)** at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, works to increase information and understanding of Korea and Korean affairs. USKI's efforts combine innovative research with a repertoire of outreach activities and events that encourage the broadest possible debate and dialogue on the Korean peninsula among scholars, policymakers, students, NGO and business leaders, and the general public. USKI also sponsors the Korea Studies Program at SAIS, a growing policy studies program preparing the next generation of leaders in the field of Korean affairs. For more information, visit www.uskoreainstitute.org.

Table of Contents

Assessing the Risk of Regime Change in North Korea

I. Introduction[1]

North Korea watchers are going to be scrutinizing the country very closely in the coming months for any sign that the ruling Kim Jong Un regime is feeling the effects of new and tougher financial sanctions and trade restrictions. The hope is that this pressure will chasten the North Korean leadership and force it to curb its provocative behavior and return to the negotiating table to discuss meaningful limits on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The likelihood of this happening is hard to gauge. What does seem certain, however, is that if North Korea maintains its belligerent posture and continues to not only menace America's regional allies but also pose a direct threat to US national security, pressure will grow for even more punitive action, including measures designed to actively undermine the Kim regime.[2]

The prospect of regime change in North Korea has undeniable appeal. The general presumption is that the fall of the Kim family dynasty—the only rulers North Korea has ever known—would inevitably hasten its demise as an independent state and set in motion the reunification of the peninsula.[3] Besides ending once and for all the dangerous military standoff and threat of nuclear proliferation in the region, reunification would also finally relieve North Korea's long-suffering people of decades of oppression and deprivation.

However, accomplishing regime change through armed intervention is unlikely to attract many, if any, adherents. The United States is still grappling with the costly consequences of toppling regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya using military force for this option to gain serious policy traction, though under certain circumstances it cannot be ruled out. Rather, a strategy that employs a variety of "non-kinetic" measures short of armed intervention—economic, political, informational, cyber—to weaken or subvert the North Korean regime could gain support. Arguably, the adoption of such measures would not represent a real qualitative shift in policy but rather an intensification of current efforts. It is hard to deny, after all, that the existing sanctions policy has no bearing whatsoever on regime survival in North Korea. For example, public disaffection with the leadership could conceivably grow if many basic goods—which have become increasingly common in recent

1 Paul B. Stares is the General John W. Vessey Senior Fellow for Conflict Prevention and director of the Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations. This article is based on a paper presented to US-Korea Institute SAIS Workshop on "Instability, Insurgency, and WMD: The Case of North Korea," June 21-22, 2016.

2 Indeed, some have already called for such a policy change. See, for example, Richard Haass, "Time to End to the North Korean Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2014.

3 Mark Fitzpatrick, "North Korea: Is Regime Change the Answer?" *Survival*, June-July 2013.

years as a result of the North Korean economy's marketization—are suddenly more costly or scarce due to the intensifying sanctions campaign. Similarly, the impact of sanctions on the Kim regime's foreign earnings can directly affect its capacity to buy the continued loyalty of those it depends on to run the country.

In anticipation that policy toward North Korea will become a topic for growing debate in the United States, especially as the next administration begins to review US options, it is useful to ask some basic questions about the prospects for regime change and its putative benefits. How might it occur, and what seems to be the most likely scenario? Can external pressure and other actions promote such change? What are the potential consequences and results? Can we assume that the preferred outcomes will be realized?

These are difficult questions to answer, given the basic challenge of assessing the internal workings of North Korea, not to mention the inherent uncertainties of future contingencies. Nevertheless, some tentative judgments can be made especially with knowledge gained from comparable cases. While a comparative analysis may seem unpromising for North Korea, given that it represents an extreme outlier in the international system, autocratic states tend to share many characteristics, so understanding how they survive and come to an end can be useful.[4] The intent here is to offer a preliminary assessment of the prospects and potential consequences of regime change in North Korea with the hope it will stimulate more rigorous and thorough analysis.

Before proceeding, it is important to be clear about how "instability," "regime change" and "collapse" are defined here. Unfortunately, these terms are often used loosely or interchangeably when in fact they have distinct meanings. Instability refers here to a serious disruption of a state's normal functions or governing authority. It can manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as persistent popular disaffection and unrest over a state's leadership and institutions; suspension of routine legislative or executive functions; or violent and unconstitutional challenges to state leadership.[5] Instability, moreover, can arise as a consequence of a single event—for example, the sudden death of a state's leader without an agreed succession process being in place or from some other "shock," whether internal or external, that triggers significant political turbulence. It can also arise through events, such as protests, strikes or an environmental disaster, that progressively undermine state functions or the governing regime.

Regime change, meanwhile, refers here to the demise of the extant governing authority including its leadership and necessary support mechanisms, especially the associated political and security apparatus. It should not be confused with a *transformed regime* (i.e., where the governing authority has either replaced its leadership or adopted new policies while still retaining political control). Finally, it is important to emphasize that regime change is not the same as state collapse, in which

4 To the extent that other cases are invoked and discussed in relation to North Korea, they tend to support the narrative that regime change is likely to occur relatively quickly and painlessly as it did to the autocratic regimes of eastern Europe, particularly East Germany. This could indeed happen in North Korea, but it should not be assumed—not to mention that regimes in eastern Europe did not possess nuclear weapons.

5 This is a narrower definition than some. For example the CIA's Political Instability Task Force includes "revolutionary war, ethnic war, adverse regime change, genocide and politicide." See Jack Goldstone et al., "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (January 2010): 190–208.

the instruments of government control and regulation of daily life cease to function, resulting in potentially widespread disorder and anarchy. A governing regime can change with little or no effect on the continued functioning of the state—at least in the short term. Conversely, basic functions of the state can erode or be compromised in a significant way over time without the regime necessarily changing. Collapse, in the sense that the central governing authority is no longer able to exert its writ over much of the country, usually presages regime change, however.

II. What Are the Prospects for Regime Change in North Korea?

Although regime change can be triggered by a variety of factors, it typically comes about in one of three ways. The first is a largely "bottom-up" process, in which popular disaffection and unrest gather momentum and eventually lead to the forced overthrow or voluntary demise of the regime. The second is, in contrast, a "top-down" process whereby the leadership is assassinated, removed in a coup, departs willingly or dies without an accepted succession arrangement in place, leading to the wholesale removal of the larger political regime. The third pathway is through external pressure, which can take various forms, including the use of military force. Although these three pathways to regime change are conceptually distinct, they can also occur in an interacting and mutually reinforcing fashion. Public unrest can accelerate change at the top (and vice versa), while both processes can be influenced by external pressures.

When assessing the prospects for regime change in North Korea, it is useful to begin with some broad-brush observations about how autocratic regimes undergo political transformation. Although there is no generally accepted classification of autocratic regimes, scholars generally distinguish between personal- (patrimonial or royalist), military-, and party-led dictatorships. The Kim family dynasty falls squarely into the former type. Across all types of autocracies, the most prevalent way in which regime leaders were deposed was, until relatively recently, via a coup. During the 1960s and '70s, for example, almost 50 percent of all autocrats lost power via a military coup.[6] Since the end of the Cold War, however, the share of dictators being toppled by a coup has declined considerably, while at the same time the number of autocracies ending because of a popular revolt has increased.[7]

In the case of North Korea, the likelihood of a bottom-up popular revolt seems very low, certainly lower than the other two broad pathways to political change. Besides what appears to be an extraordinarily high level of social cohesion and resilience in the face of adversity, North Korea has nothing resembling civil society organizations and networks where popular protest can coalesce and propagate. In other countries, trade unions, churches, charities and universities have typically served this purpose in mobilizing dissent and driving popular uprisings, but the virtual absence of such institutions in North Korea limits the opportunities to generate a nationwide protest movement. Moreover, what local community structures that do exist, such as public security committees, are under close supervision by state security organs. All this, of course, severely limits the opportunities for external powers to nurture and support civil society organizations in North Korea as part of a larger strategy to promote political change.

---

6 See Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, "How Autocracies Fall," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 35.

7 Ibid.

The limited number of mobile phones in North Korea as well as its heavily restricted internet and social media platforms further reduces the potential for domestic political mobilization, certainly of the kind that proved so potent during the Arab Spring.[8] For the same reason, the opportunity for external actors to circumvent state censorship to increase popular understanding of the outside world and potentially foment unrest is extremely limited, though popular culture and other sources of information from South Korea and China are apparently making some inroads. Similarly, the underdeveloped state of personal transportation in North Korea limits societal mixing and with it the propagation and coalescing of ideas.

For these reasons, top-down change as a result of a leadership challenge to the Kim regime seems more plausible, though here again it is important to acknowledge the regime's extraordinary resilience, having successfully navigated two dynastic successions (from its founding father, Kim Il Sung, to his son, Kim Jong Il, in 1994, and then more recently to his son, Kim Jong Un, in 2011). Some of the risk factors associated with the onset of a coup (low infant mortality, poor economic growth, absence or low level of democracy) are present in North Korea, but many others (recent coup activity, popular uprisings and insurgencies in the region, limited regime durability, ongoing insurgency or civil resistance campaign) are manifestly not.[9] Evidence of growing factionalization within the regime, which has often been the precursor to real internal stress in prior cases of regime change, appears slim to nonexistent. Certainly, recent high-profile purges and the mysterious disappearance of senior officials might suggest growing tensions or strains within the North Korean regime, but such incidents are hardly new or conclusive that something fundamental could be brewing. They have occurred with some regularity since the founding of the Kim regime, notably in the 1950s and late 1960s by Kim Il Sung, and then again in the 1990s with the transition to Kim Jong Il. Indeed, rather than a sign of fragility, they usually reflect efforts to enforce discipline and consolidate power by putting a new cadre of loyal officers and officials into senior positions.
At the same time, there are no outward signs of rivalry among different organizational entities or factions within the Pyongyang elite. An assassination and coup attempt led by a group of military officers or cabal within the security services—another source of top-down regime change in other countries, particularly those in Africa—is certainly conceivable, but with the exception of one reported incident in the 1990s, there is no reason to believe that North Korea is especially vulnerable to this kind of instability.

That leaves the third pathway—externally induced instability and regime change. Given the general weakness of the North Korean economy, further sanctions and trade restrictions would appear to offer the best strategy for inducing political change. Reduced demand from China for North Korean raw materials, particularly coal and iron ore, combined with the depressed state of commodity prices worldwide is evidently already causing an economic downturn after several years of continuous growth.[10] The closure of the joint DPRK-ROK Kaesong industrial park that was estimated to have provided Pyongyang with the equivalent of around $100 million annually is another blow.
It is important to emphasize, however, that the vulnerability of the North Korean regime to further economic coercion ultimately depends on the willingness of China to let it happen. So far, all

8 Eric Talmadge, "North Korea announces blocs of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2016. The authorities, however, have reportedly set up a domestic version of Facebook.
9 Jay Ulfelder, "Assessing Coup Risk in 2012," Dart Throwing Chimp Blog, January 30, 2012.
10 "North Korea economy shrinks most in eight years," *BBC News*, July 22, 2016.

the evidence points to China wanting to put enough pressure on North Korea to curb its nuclear weapons program and other provocative behavior but not so much as to risk serious political instability that could endanger the country's very existence and bring with it all kinds of harmful spillover effects. From time to time, there has been speculation that China might engineer a military coup or other kind of leadership change in Pyongyang not only to install a regime more conducive to its interests, but also to forestall the kind of instability it fears most. However, Beijing's ability to orchestrate such change must be questioned, not least because it has never carried out such an operation. It is also unclear how much access it really has to instigate and plan a coup by senior military and political officials in Pyongyang, given that official contacts between the two countries have declined in recent years.

Finally, there is the possibility of the Kim regime being removed by external military intervention. As indicated earlier, the likelihood of a premeditated campaign of this kind by the United States and the ROK seems very remote, given the anticipated costs and risks, which are growing as North Korea develops its nuclear and ballistic missile retaliatory capabilities. North Korea would have to pose an acutely grave threat for such an attack to be plausibly considered. More conceivable is that a North Korean provocation or a "surgical" US military strike designed to degrade its nuclear or missile program escalates in a way that leads to a full-scale resumption of hostilities. Such a scenario would almost certainly lead to a massive invasion of North Korea and ultimately the toppling of the Kim regime. Military intervention could also take place in response to a major humanitarian catastrophe or widespread civil unrest, but here again the nature of the threat would have to be very severe to overcome concerns about the risks of intervention.

III. What Are the Likely Consequences of Regime Change?

The process of regime change in North Korea could in theory unfold in a variety of ways (relatively peacefully or violently) over a compressed or prolonged time period (days and weeks versus months and even years) and with or without intervention by external powers. It could produce very different outcomes (further autocratic rule with North Korea remaining an independent state, or some kind of transitional authority that leads to reunification). Assessing the likelihood of any combination of the above is complicated by what can be considered special risk factors:

- The North Korean people have been largely isolated from the rest of world for nearly 70 years while also being inculcated to revere and defend the Kim family. Similar highly personalized autocratic regimes have existed in other countries, notably Albania and Romania, that subsequently experienced rapid political change, but North Korea is arguably sui generis. It is very unclear, therefore, how the North Korean people would react to the prospect of fundamental political change.
- North Korea is also part of a divided nation that remains in a very tense and heavily armed confrontation with its other half. Thus, there is a strong potential for military escalation and the resumption of open hostilities. Divided Germany during the Cold War offers the closest precedent, but the freedom of military action of East and West Germany was much more constrained than is the case for the two present-day Koreas. The risk of escalation, in other words, is higher.
- Last but not least, North Korea possesses nuclear weapons and other weapons of

> mass destruction, the fate of which would be of immediate concern during periods of acute instability and regime change. Other countries possessing nuclear weapons have experienced political turbulence and fundamental change without their diversion or use, which can provide some comfort. The Soviet Union experienced a coup in August 1991 that accelerated its political demise at the end of the year.[11] Apartheid South Africa also possessed a small nuclear stockpile during the 1980s when it came under increasing pressure to reform.[12] More recently, Pakistan has experienced significant political turmoil as a nuclear-armed state.[13] How much reassurance can be drawn from these cases is debatable, however. At no time in any of them was the state under the threat of external military intervention—the contingency for which they were developed to deter—which is conceivable in the North Korean case.

Although North Korea represents a special case for these reasons, it is still useful to review the overall experience of autocratic regimes that have undergone major political change. According to extensive comparative analysis by political scientists Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, "in the nearly 75 years since World War II, only about 45% of leadership changes [in autocratic regimes] led to regime change, and more than half of regime breakdowns were transitions from one autocracy to another. In other words, fewer than one-quarter of leadership changes resulted in democratization."[14] Regime change in personalist-type autocracies, moreover, tend to occur in a violent manner; indeed, that is the norm. Nearly all transitions from personalist rule to another autocracy were forced.[15] These results are more or less supported by similar comparative analysis by Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz. Their research indicates that only 20 percent of autocratic leader exits from 1950 to 2012 led to democracy "highlighting the resilience of autocratic rule."[16] Much seemingly depends on the way autocratic leaders are ousted: "When leaders fell through revolt . . . democracy followed in 45 percent of cases. Successful coups, in contrast, only led to democracy 10 percent of the time."[17]

These general observations suggest we should not assume that a change in the leadership of North Korea will take place peacefully or that it will axiomatically lead to a democratic outcome and, for that matter, a reunified Korea. In the event of serious political instability, whether precipitated by popular unrest or a leadership challenge at the top, the likelihood of a violent counterreaction by forces loyal to the regime appears to be high. The exception, of course, would be if the North Korean army and other security services decided to abandon their support for the regime. A violent suppression of a popular uprising or challenge by a rebellious faction in North Korea could in turn lead to requests for external assistance, especially if it was felt their actions had been encouraged or were likely to be met with approval. This has happened on several occasions—such as during uprisings in Tibet (1959), Hungary (1956), southern Iraq (1991), Libya (2011) and Syria (2011)—but only in the case of Libya were these requests met with external intervention. Bloody repression

11 Celestine Bohlen, "Gorbachev Lost Nuclear Control, Russians Report," *New York Times,* August 23, 1992.
12 Bill Keller, "South Africa Says It Built 6 Atom Bombs," *New York Times,* March 25, 1993.
13 Feroz Hassan Khan, "Pakistan: Political Transitions and Nuclear Management," Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, February 27, 2012, available at http://www.npolicy.org/article.php?aid=1156&rid=6.
14 Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (June 2014): 313.
15 Ibid, 326.
16 Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 6.
17 Ibid.

by the ruling regime followed in all others.

A violent crackdown, especially if accompanied by mass atrocities, would also increase pressure on external powers—especially South Korea—to intervene. Much would clearly depend on the accuracy and timeliness of reports emanating from North Korea as well as on whether the regime was able to impose order soon thereafter. Prolonged unrest would increase the chances of refugee outflows, though any estimation of this risk should bear in mind the relative lack of personal transportation and the heavily guarded state of North Korea's borders. Depending again on the source of instability, there may also be military defections and conceivably even military provocations to incite intervention of behalf of anti-regime elements.

If outside powers do intervene, it should not be assumed that the entire population would acquiesce peacefully to "foreign" rule, however temporary it is declared to be. This is likely to be true for South Korea and especially true for other powers, even longtime ally China. As one Russian analyst of North Korea has argued:

> It is naïve to expect that North Korea's entire population would welcome the "liberation from tyranny" that unification offers; such an expectation is simply not based on sober analysis of what North Korea's social strata would gain or lose from the arrival of South Korean governance. The elite and middle class—possibly about 1 million people or roughly 5 percent of the population, including members of the party, security apparatus, military and a considerable portion of their brainwashed supporters and families—would have no exit strategy and no place in a South-dominated Korea. Moreover, they could reasonably expect repercussions for their role in the previous regime. If even a portion of this group (including trained personnel) resorted to armed resistance, the results could be disastrous. This is not just speculation: the regime has spent decades preparing for guerrilla war, and it likely has a network of well-equipped bases concealed throughout its territory for use by dedicated fighters.[18]

Recent US experience in Afghanistan and Iraq certainly supports this argument.

IV. Concluding Observations

This preliminary risk assessment of the prospects and potential consequences of regime change in North Korea should make us question our assumptions and expectations about when and how such events might unfold and what might ensue. More specifically, as the saying goes, "we should be careful what we wish for." Instability and regime change could, for a variety of reasons, be accompanied by considerable violence and even civil war. It could also set in motion a host of other dangerous contingencies, including a wider conflict involving outside powers. The hoped-for process of change in North Korea—essentially a rapid and relatively peaceful collapse of the current regime followed by a reasonably smooth transition to reunification—should not be assumed. The German precedent is in many respects a misleading example of what is reasonable to expect.[19] All this means is that what may appear to be relatively risk-free options for promoting regime

18 See Georgy Toloraya, "Preparing for Korean Unification?" *38 North*, June 9, 2016.

19 We should not overlook how many participants in German reunification indicated afterward how much of a "close run thing" it had been.

change in North Korea should be scrutinized with the utmost care. If the recent US experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have taught us anything, it is to be extremely circumspect when presuming what the "day after" in North Korea will bring.

US·KOREA
INSTITUTE AT SAIS

US-Korea Institute at SAIS
Johns Hopkins University
1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, 6th Fl
Washington, DC 20036
www.uskoreainstitute.org