**Between Myth and Reality**

**Examining the Practicalities of North Korean State Collapse**

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**Abstract**

This article critically examines the likelihood of a collapse in the North Korean regime by drawing insights from three comprehensive inputs. Through a diverse range of perspectives, it provides a thorough analysis of the vulnerabilities and resilience of the North Korean party-state. By exploring intricate dynamics within North Korea, including internal power shifts, factional infighting, and historical precedents, this article sheds light on the complexities of the regime’s political landscape. While acknowledging inherent uncertainties, it assesses the regime’s structural integrity and proven resiliency, challenging common assumptions of an imminent collapse. The article underscores the regime’s ability to withstand internal and external pressures and initiates a discussion on the role of external actors and their potential impact. By presenting contrasting viewpoints and addressing key factors, this article offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the likelihood of a state collapse in North Korea.

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The potential collapse of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea or DPRK) is a complex and poorly understood topic, yet it holds significant implications for North Korea policy. Despite the gravity of a collapse and its consequences, there is a dearth of research focusing on the specific details of a North Korean state collapse. While policy papers discuss the potential aftermath and offer brief descriptions of collapse scenarios, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the conditions, extent, and feasibility of a collapse. Furthermore, limited research exists on the vulnerability of the DPRK to trends and circumstances that historically lead to state collapse. This knowledge gap calls for an exploration into the enigmatic concept of North Korean state collapse, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of its intricacies and the factors contributing to its likelihood.

Given the alarming potential consequences of a state collapse in North Korea and its continued consideration in policy making, there is a pressing need for a focused examination of the characteristics and feasibility of such an event. This article begins by reviewing the historical context of collapse within North Korea policy and assessing the current ramifications of a North Korean collapse. It then explores the intricate structure of the North Korean party-state, comparing and contrasting common themes and contributing factors of state collapse with the
inherent characteristics and mitigating factors specific to North Korea. The analysis pursues three main objectives: identifying common trends of state collapse applicable to North Korea, evaluating the overall vulnerability of the North Korean party-state to collapse, and delineating the realistic circumstances under which a collapse could occur, considering North Korea’s unique circumstances and insights from the collapse of other states. The findings demonstrate that while the risks associated with a collapse in North Korea are significant, the research and examples from recent decades, coupled with the resilience of the North Korean party-state, suggest that a collapse is highly unlikely, albeit not entirely impossible. Among various scenarios, an attempted forcible change in leadership leading to unprecedented division and civil war emerges as the most plausible, albeit highly impractical. Therefore, while contingency planning for a potential catastrophic collapse should continue, future North Korea policy should not hinge on the notion that such a collapse is imminent, inevitable, or even probable, as it is far from certain.

State Collapse and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

The COVID-19 era has brought immense hardship and adversity to the DPRK. Since being the first country to completely seal its borders in January 2020, North Korea has witnessed a further deterioration of its already fragile domestic situation. Even Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un acknowledged these difficulties in speeches delivered in 2020 and 2021, a departure from the norm.\(^1\) Observers from the Washington–based think tank 38 North, among others, have noted the particularly challenging circumstances faced by North Korea during the pandemic, with food security reaching its worst level since the Arduous March of the 1990s.\(^2\) The visible signs of increased economic hardship and severe food insecurity have once again raised concerns about the potential collapse of the North Korean state.\(^3\)

This is not the first time that the concept of state collapse in North Korea has emerged. During the Arduous March of the 1990s, a period marked by severe economic and humanitarian crises resulting in widespread starvation, the fear of a

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collapse was palpable.\(^4\) In fact, the United States, while engaging in denuclearization negotiations, operated on the assumption that a collapse was imminent. Despite these concerns, a collapse did not materialize, but the belief in its likelihood influenced US policy toward North Korea.

In 2011, with the death of Kim Jong-il and the succession of his young and untested son, Kim Jong-un, as the leader, concerns about instability and collapse resurfaced. Kim Jong-un had only three years to prepare for his ascension, unlike his father who had a much longer transition period. At that time, some experts considered a North Korean collapse a “reasonable probability.”\(^5\) In fact, during military exercises in the spring of 2013, US and ROK forces conducted scenarios to prepare for such an event, primarily focused on the security of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction, including its nuclear arsenal.\(^6\) The concern for North Korea’s domestic stability seemed secondary in these plans.\(^7\)

Beyond the nuclear aspect, there are substantial reasons to be deeply concerned about the possibility of state collapse in North Korea. Despite the end of the Arduous March, the country continues to grapple with severe scarcity. With a GDP of around USD 27 billion in 2021—approximately 60 times smaller than that of South Korea—North Korea faces economic stagnation and mismanagement, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kim regime’s stringent anti-COVID measures.\(^8\) According to UN data, North Korea has consistently failed to produce enough food domestically to feed its population since 1995, relying heavily on external assistance.\(^9\) The result is a population that is, overall, quite food insecure, with research by the World Food Programme finding high rates of malnutrition among the population.\(^10\) This has resulted in widespread food insecurity and high rates of malnutrition, with the average height of North Koreans significantly lower than their South Korean counterparts.

Considering North Korea’s dire human rights situation, extensive system of political prison camps, and the additional strain caused by anti-COVID-19 measures, a collapse in the country could trigger a colossal humanitarian crisis.

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\(^4\) Bruce W. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), 51.


\(^6\) Ingersoll, “US Army Planning.”


\(^9\) Rengifo-Keller, “Food Insecurity in North Korea.”

among the already vulnerable population, potentially leading to mass refugee flows and widespread starvation.

Moreover, North Korea boasts the world’s fourth-largest military, with approximately 1.3 million personnel.\textsuperscript{11} Despite its size, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) faces similar humanitarian and food security issues as the rest of the population, with reports suggesting that some conscripts must resort to stealing food from civilians to survive.\textsuperscript{12} In a state collapse scenario, the breakdown of command, control, and discipline within the KPA could pose significant security and humanitarian challenges for any force attempting to stabilize North Korea.

Even in the absence of a complete collapse of military discipline, the loss of effective and verifiable command and control (C2) in North Korea, especially concerning their nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, could pose a significant WMD threat to the entire region.

Therefore, there is substantial cause for concern regarding the possibility of a collapse in North Korea. However, the question of how a North Korean collapse might manifest remains unanswered.

**Challenges Posed by Unknown Variables and Information Scarcity**

North Korea, one of the most secretive states on the planet, has historically maintained its secretive nature. Consequently, analyzing North Korea presents challenges due to limited information availability and unpredictable variables. For instance, the country’s susceptibility to state failure can vary based on its humanitarian, social, and political dispositions, among other factors. Ascertaining North Korea’s internal stability at any given time proves notoriously difficult, lacking a reliable degree of certainty. Despite assuming a period of relative calm and reduced tensions with the US-ROK alliance for the purpose of this examination, North Korea’s actual disposition can deviate from this assumption at any moment. In fact, one could plausibly argue that, due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea’s current vulnerability to state failure exceeds normal levels, though the extent of this vulnerability remains undetermined.

Moreover, North Korea’s control of information hinders a thorough understanding of its ability to withstand collapse. While it is common knowledge that North Korea possesses an extensive state security apparatus and that Kim Jong-un


\textsuperscript{12} North Korea Military Power, 36; Hyun-min An, *et al*, *Prisoners in Military Uniform* (Seoul: The Database Center For North Korean Human Rights, 2022), 102.
is surrounded by personal bodyguards, specific details such as the total number of personnel dedicated to state security, the exact number of bodyguards protecting Kim Jong-un, or the presence of discontent among these personnel—all of which could be pivotal in a state collapse scenario—remain undisclosed. This lack of information also impacts other analytical aspects, including the attitudes of regime elites, the loyalty of the military leadership, and internal contingency plans in the event of attempted forcible power changes. Ultimately, despite focusing on a relatively “normal” version of North Korea, the existence of unknowable variables and information gaps necessitates acknowledging the presence of uncertainty in the findings of this analysis.

How and Why Nations Fail and Collapse

Discussions about the consequences and potential responses to North Korean collapse scenarios often overshadow an important topic: the level of vulnerability of North Korea to collapse and the circumstances under which it may or may not occur. While North Korea has not yet experienced collapse, there is substantial research available on the broader subject of state collapse.

The concepts of state failure and state collapse are complex and encompass various definitions and research examples. While the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they represent distinct, albeit interconnected, phenomena. According to research by Miguel de Corral and Rolf Schwarz, states can be categorized into five groups, with weak/fragile states and failed states representing the second weakest and weakest categories, respectively.13

Robert Rotberg defines a failed state as “a polity that is no longer able or willing to perform the fundamental tasks of a nation-state in the modern world,” despite maintaining international recognition.14 Failed states are typically characterized by internal conflicts, loss of territorial control, regimes that exploit their own citizens, flawed institutions, deteriorated infrastructure, and rampant corruption.15 While civil war and intense violence often accompany failed states, the presence of violence is not a prerequisite for state failure. Additionally, a state can fail in certain aspects while continuing to function in others. Examples of failed states

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include Sudan, Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko, Afghanistan under the Taliban, Sierra Leone under Siaka Stevens, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.\textsuperscript{16}

In contrast to failed states, collapsed states exhibit a breakdown of structure, legitimate authority (legitimate power), law, and political order, requiring their reconstitution in some form, be it old or new. According to William Zartman, state collapse is “a situation where structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new.”\textsuperscript{17} Zartman further emphasizes that state collapse involves the dis-integration of both governmental superstructure and social infrastructure, with civil society being unable to rebound, fill positions, restore faith, support the government, or rally around a successor.\textsuperscript{18} In the context of a failed state, Rotberg defines a collapsed state as “a rare and extreme version of a failed state” where there exists a vacuum of state authority, rather than simply weak state authority.\textsuperscript{19} Hence, state collapse and failure are not mutually exclusive but rather exist along a continuum. States do not collapse abruptly; instead, they first experience faltering and failure before reaching an extreme level of failure known as \textit{collapse}. Therefore, it is possible to find examples of states that have both failed and collapsed and transitioned between these categories.\textsuperscript{20} Using this definition, examples of collapsed states include Somalia, Bosnia, Lebanon, and Afghanistan in the 1980s, as well as Nigeria and Sierra Leone in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{21}

While not all failed states collapse, failed and failing states are more susceptible to collapse due to the underlying characteristics that contribute to their failure. It is crucial to note that states do not simply collapse unexpectedly; collapse is the result of a long series of extreme circumstances. These circumstances give rise to trends that, while not universally applicable, are commonly observed in states that fail and collapse. Therefore, when evaluating the likelihood of a country’s failure and, ultimately, collapse, it is important to identify indicators of state failure, assess the extent of their manifestation, and consider the potential for the situation to further deteriorate into complete collapse.

\textsuperscript{17} William I. Zartman, \textit{Collapsed States. The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority} (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), 1, 7–8.
\textsuperscript{18} Zartman, \textit{Collapsed States}, 1, 7–8.
\textsuperscript{19} Rotberg, “Failed States,” 10.
\textsuperscript{20} Rotberg, “Failed States,” 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Rotberg, “Failed States,” 9.
The North Korean Party-State

The North Korean party-state is a complex governmental structure that intricately integrates the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) into all aspects of state governance. While some elements of the DPRK governmental structure exist on paper in other countries, certain interpretations of common themes, such as a state constitution, a ruling party, and a representative assembly, manifest differently in North Korea. One notable example is the role of the KWP in the functioning of the North Korean state. Unlike Western liberal democracies, where the party and the state are separate entities, no such distinction exists in North Korea. According to Article 11 of the DPRK constitution, all activities in the DPRK are conducted under the leadership of the KWP.\(^\text{22}\) A broad interpretation of this clause suggests that, regardless of the formal structure of the DPRK government, the KWP serves as the supreme governing body within the country. The structure of the state and its organs are dependent on the will of the party. In contrast to other forms of government where parties operate within the framework of the state, the opposite is true in North Korea: the state operates within the confines of the party. This is even evident in the DPRK constitution itself, which, unlike in other nations where the constitution is the supreme law of the land, reflects the KWP’s will and derives its legitimacy from its association with the party. The design of the North Korean government revolves around the direct leadership of the KWP and relies solely on the party’s presence for its functioning. Essentially, in North Korea, the party is the state, and the state belongs to the party.

The KWP employs various mechanisms to maintain firm party control over state organs. For instance, a crucial requirement for becoming a government official in North Korea is to become a member of the KWP. In principle, KWP membership entails demonstrating sufficient loyalty and allegiance to the North Korean party-state. This criterion extends beyond an individual’s own actions and may also encompass the actions and history of their family members. In North Korea, the songbun system categorizes individuals into several groups primarily based on loyalty. The three main categories are the core class, the wavering class, and the hostile class.\(^\text{23}\) The core class comprises individuals considered sufficiently loyal to the Kim regime, either through their own conduct or the conduct of their family members. The wavering class consists of individuals whose loyalty is in question, while the hostile class comprises those seen as politically irredeemable.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{22}\) DPRK Constitution, Chap. 1, Art. 5. 
Members of the hostile class face significant challenges in securing meaningful employment or becoming party members due to their *songbun* classification. On the other hand, members of the core class and some individuals in the wavering class have greater opportunities to join the party and subsequently pursue government positions, with those possessing the highest *songbun* enjoying the chance to attain high-ranking positions. Through this relatively straightforward loyalty assessment, the North Korean party-state ensures that government officials possess a certain degree of loyalty to the party before assuming their roles within the state.

In addition to ensuring party loyalty among party-state officials, the KWP also employs various mechanisms to maintain control over the population. These mechanisms include a vast state security apparatus, strict control over information, resources, and weapons, human rights violations, and indoctrination. An essential component of indoctrination is the utilization of Mass Organizations. In North Korea, party-sponsored Mass Organizations exist at nearly every level of society, serving as a means to engage the general populace in political activities, foster “class consciousness,” and instill socialist ideology into the mission and responsibilities of the working people. However, mass organizations also serve additional purposes geared toward state control. While the populace becomes politically involved through these organizations, they also provide a means for the party to observe and surveil average North Koreans at the individual level. This arrangement allows the party to integrate itself into the everyday lives of North Koreans and assess party and state loyalty among the population using an embedded state mechanism.

Ultimately, the organization of the North Korean party-state results in a totalitarian apparatus that is extensive, tightly woven, highly robust, far-reaching, and unchallenged. The levers of power extend into the highest levels of leadership and the military, with political officers stationed at every level, and even into individual households, where *inminban* (people’s units) monitor and, if necessary, control the actions of households. While the North Korean government may encounter practical challenges, it is by no means politically weak. Most state functions are geared toward the preservation of the party-state, even at the expense of other essential state functions. The outcome is a North Korean state that exhibits weaknesses in certain areas, remarkable strength in others, and an undeniable extensive reach.

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Applying the Concept of Collapse to North Korea

When comparing the North Korean party-state to the definitions, examples, perceptions, and common trends of state failure and collapse, interesting observations can emerge. Some descriptions of a failed state would categorize North Korea as either a failed or failing state, a viewpoint shared by certain observers. However, other definitions portray North Korea as a weak state rather than a failed or failing one.

In the case of North Korea, it is crucial to consider the specific context when applying the general descriptors of failing, failed, and collapsed states. For instance, failed states are often characterized by high levels of corruption, deteriorating infrastructure, and flawed state institutions, among other indicators. While some of these traits can be observed in North Korea, not all of them apply easily. For instance, failed states are typically associated with limited or no control over their borders and parts of their recognized territory. In the case of North Korea, the government maintains effective and uncontested control over its entire recognized territory, including a clearly demarcated and monitored border with China and Russia. While defections and smuggling occur across this border, it would be inaccurate to suggest that North Korea lacks border control in the same way as truly failed and collapsed states. The strict border controls implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrate the central government’s ability to exercise control in this aspect, indicating a strengthening of their border management.

By examining these nuances, it becomes evident that while North Korea may exhibit weaknesses as a state, it does not align entirely with the characteristics of a failed or collapsed state. The specific circumstances surrounding the North Korean party-state warrant a careful analysis that goes beyond general definitions and takes into account the country’s unique dynamics and control mechanisms.

A significant trend observed in failed and collapsed states is the presence of a viable alternative to the nominal leadership. Whether it manifests as a rival political faction, a tribal or religious minority, a military junta, or a rebel group, a viable alternative typically emerges when the state loses control over territory or people. In some cases, this alternative may even possess enough strength to forcefully challenge the nominal leadership, as seen in military coups. However, for such

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29 This definition of recognized territory ignores the de-facto territorial dispute with South Korea and utilizes the Northern Half of Korea verbiage found in the DPRK Socialist Constitution.
a scenario to unfold, a viable alternative must first exist. Currently, in North Korea, there are no evident viable alternatives. There are no rebel groups, genuine rival political parties or factions, or tribal divisions within the country. Almost all forms of power—political, cultural, societal, economic, and military—are consolidated within the KWP. Therefore, there is no clear mechanism by which power could be wrested away from the KWP, and it remains uncertain whether an alternative could emerge in the event of a sudden power vacuum.

However, this does not imply that the appearance of a viable alternative is impossible. Similar to other failed and collapsed states, the North Korean military theoretically presents a potential source of a viable alternative. Nonetheless, the KPA also has a defined role within the framework of the KWP. The KPA is an integral part of the party and, despite its significance as a powerful organ, it ultimately operates under the party’s authority.30 This dynamic persisted even during the era of songun politics under Kim Jong-il, where the KPA and national defense held prominence in North Korean state policy.31 Despite the perceived political influence the KPA might have gained during this era, in reality, it possesses limited political capital within the party-state. This is particularly evident in the post-songun era, given Kim Jong-un’s subsequent purges of military ranks.32 While the KPA remains a potential option as a viable alternative in North Korea, its status as a party-aligned entity with limited political capital diminishes the likelihood of its successful transition to a capable alternative, although it cannot be ruled out entirely.

When considering the possibility of North Korean state failure, it is important to consider external pressures. For decades, North Korea has faced international sanctions and the smuggling of USBs containing foreign media, among other pressures, which clearly aim to undermine the party’s control over the state. Despite the government’s efforts to isolate the country due to COVID-19, North Korea continues to experience international sanctions, information smuggling campaigns, and other external pressures. Theoretically, if applied effectively, these external pressures could weaken and ultimately cause strong aspects of the party-state to fail. However, while there is evidence suggesting that some pressures have influenced North Korean behavior, there is no clear evidence regarding the impact of external pressures on the stability of the regime or its key organs. Furthermore, even if there were some effects on the regime, they did not lead to state collapse. It is evident that the North Korean party-state, by design, is highly resistant to external pressures.

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It is plausible that external sources of pressure, such as China, the US-ROK alliance, or the United Nations, could exert more pressure than the state can withstand. For instance, China could decide to cut off oil and electricity supplies to North Korea, severely compromising a fundamental function of the state. However, such heavy-handed tactics are unlikely and fall beyond the scope of this examination. These tactics have the potential to cripple any country, not exclusively North Korea. Furthermore, considering North Korea’s historical resilience to external pressures and the narrative of victimhood propagated by the state, employing more forceful measures may weaken the state initially but ultimately result in a “rally around the flag” effect, reinforcing the state’s victim narrative and enhancing social cohesion, thereby reducing the likelihood of state failure. In conclusion, while a sufficient amount of external pressure could push the North Korean party-state towards failure, it would not reflect the state’s inherent vulnerability to collapse, but rather the extreme measures that could destabilize any state. Given the low probability of such measures being implemented and the current ineffectiveness of existing external pressures in generating internal instability, it can be inferred that, within reasonable bounds, external pressures are currently unlikely to result in the collapse of the North Korean state.

**The North Korean Version of “Collapse”**

North Korea can be characterized as a weak state with a strong central government that maintains a monopoly on political power and the use of force within the country. In some instances throughout its history, it has shown signs of transitioning into and out of the failed state category, such as during the retreat to the Yalu River in the Korean War, the Arduous March, and possibly during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown. However, even in these circumstances, the North Korean party-state did not fail in critical categories that are essential for retaining state power. These categories ensured that the North Korean state, despite shortcomings in certain areas, maintained legitimacy, control over loyalty, power, violence, and C2 of the armed forces and WMDs. The party-state’s resilience and strength have arguably prevented North Korea from descending into a full-fledged failed or collapsed state, even during challenging times.

When assessing the possibility of a collapse of the North Korean state, it becomes crucial to consider the factors that could impose significant stress and disruption on the party-state, compromising its demonstrated resilience. Given the robust nature of the party-state, any stressors capable of inducing a collapse would need to exert tremendous and targeted strain on the structure of the party-state itself.

At the outset, certain options can be ruled out. The stability of the party-state was not compromised despite the severe strain endured during the Arduous March,
which involved famine, mass deaths, and mass defections. Therefore, this event can be dismissed as a catalyst for collapse.\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, the likelihood of a people’s revolt is extremely low. The party-state’s effective means of crushing any uprising, coupled with political indoctrination, a vast security apparatus, and information control, make initiating and succeeding in a revolt highly challenging, if not impossible.\textsuperscript{34} Economic hardship, despite being a persistent issue in North Korea for decades, has not posed a significant threat to the party-state’s power, thus ruling out its potential to cause a collapse.

However, there remains one distinct possibility that sets itself apart from the rest. Many scenarios depicting a collapse of North Korea commonly feature one central trend: a sudden and unexpected change in the supreme leadership of the DPRK. Given that the DPRK government revolves around a unitary and totalitarian leadership structure, the abrupt removal of this leadership unit could lead to the emergence of various factions competing for power. This internal conflict could pose a substantial threat to the structural integrity of the party-state.

However, for this scenario to unfold, the infighting among the core leadership must reach an exceptionally intense and violent level, surpassing the ideological disagreements witnessed in the years following Kim Jong-un’s ascension to power. During that period, numerous high-ranking party-state officials were purged, banished, or executed, yet the party-state continued to function relatively normally. If conflict among the top leadership is to jeopardize the party-state, it would have to be on an unprecedented scale, encompassing a broad scope and exhibiting extreme violence unlike anything seen in North Korean history.

Two main possibilities exist for a sudden change in North Korea’s supreme leadership: the sudden death of the supreme leader or the ousting of the supreme leader. While either scenario could potentially lead to factional infighting, the ousting of the supreme leader presents a greater likelihood of instigating the instability required to compromise the party-state. Although Kim Jong-un currently lacks a clearly designated successor, there is some evidence to suggest that his sister, Kim Yo-jong, has been groomed to assume his position in the event of his incapacitation.\textsuperscript{35} While such a swift transfer of power is unprecedented in North Korean history, Kim Yo-jong, having been present during her brother’s rise to


Between Myth and Reality

power, is likely familiar with the potentially brutal methods required to maintain her leadership. In a sudden death scenario, where a viable alternative may not have had sufficient time to emerge, any opposition to Kim Yo-jong would likely be scattered, if it exists at all. Although not impossible, factional infighting following a sudden death is unlikely to generate the level of stress necessary to compromise the party-state.

An ousting scenario presents a distinct set of circumstances. In the event of an ousting, whether through the arrest or assassination of the supreme leader, a viable alternative will have emerged. The size and scope of this alternative are challenging to predict, but it must possess sufficient strength to evade or gain support from the state security apparatus, overcome or receive assistance from the Supreme Guard Command (Kim Jong-un’s personal guards), and gain unauthorized and hostile access to the supreme leader. Any faction accomplishing these feats becomes a de facto viable alternative to the nominal state leadership, although the situation grows increasingly complex from that point forward.

Nevertheless, a successful ousting of the supreme leadership does not automatically result in the collapse of the party-state. In fact, a robust, cunning, supported, and powerful viable alternative that successfully removes the North Korean supreme leader is likely capable of maintaining nominal control over the rest of the party-state in their absence. They can utilize the same levers of power, whether institutional or improvised, that the previous regime employed. While the successful ousting of the supreme leader is a recurring theme in North Korean collapse scenarios, it does not guarantee the collapse of the state.

However, there is a caveat to this theory. It is important to consider scenarios in which attempts to oust the supreme leader are unsuccessful. As mentioned earlier, internal violence and civil war are common trends in failing and collapsing nations. A successful attempt by a robust and capable viable alternative could lead to a relatively smooth transition of power away from the Kim family, resembling some military coups in the developing world. On the other hand, a failed attempt by the same viable alternative could result in the suppression of the alternative faction, or it could ignite a significant conflict between the faction and those loyal to the still-powerful and living supreme leader. This situation could serve as a catalyst for a civil war, extending beyond the highest echelons of North Korean state power and descending into a widespread and violent conflict. In an extreme scenario, such a civil war could compromise the very foundation of the party-state and, if the key competencies of the party-state collectively fail, lead to the collapse of the state.

This scenario, however, remains highly improbable and lacks substantial historical precedent in North Korea. Nonetheless, if the North Korean party-state
were to collapse, it would require an unprecedented and highly unlikely sequence of events. A sudden and significant shift in power at the highest levels of leadership, accompanied by internal conflict and division that escalates to the point of civil war, would exert immense pressure on the functioning capacity of the party-state. This strain would surpass any challenges the government has encountered thus far in its history and could potentially lead to its collapse, albeit with extremely low probability.

Conclusion

State collapse is theoretically possible in North Korea, as it is in any other nation. However, North Korea’s susceptibility to collapse may be higher compared to other countries, given its relatively low score on de Corral and Schwarz’s Degree of Statehood scale, which categorizes it as a fragile/weak state. Nevertheless, the design, structure, and proven resilience of the North Korean party-state make state collapse highly unlikely. Over the decades, North Korea has demonstrated its ability to withstand various forms of strain and pressure, both internal and external, that could have crippled a less resilient state. Despite economic hardships, humanitarian disasters, international isolation, and factional infighting, the North Korean party-state has remained intact. Its key strengths, despite its many weaknesses, have allowed it to endure in the face of such challenges. Therefore, any scenario leading to a North Korean state collapse would have to involve unprecedented events that pose a direct threat to the structural integrity of the party-state, surpassing anything witnessed in North Korean history thus far.

If a North Korean state collapse were to occur, it would not likely be triggered by a humanitarian disaster or economic underperformance. Public dissatisfaction with the regime or international pressure, isolation, and sanctions would also not be the direct causes. The party-state is expected to be strong enough to withstand these pressures and overcome them.

A collapse of the North Korean state would be the culmination of a highly unlikely and increasingly extreme series of events. It would likely stem from a sudden and unforeseen power shift or attempted power shift at the highest levels of leadership. However, the unique characteristics of the North Korean party-state add complexity to the situation. A viable alternative that possesses the power and support necessary to successfully challenge and remove the supreme leader would also be capable of maintaining control over the party-state. In other words, the more successful the coup, the less likely a collapse becomes.

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To trigger a collapse, the leadership shift would need to result in extreme divisions, violence, and factional infighting among the North Korean elites, reaching the level of a large-scale civil war that engulfs the party-state. Among the possibilities, a launched but unsuccessful attempt to force a leadership change in North Korea, with multiple powerful and armed factions vying for supremacy, appears to be the most plausible scenario for creating the conditions that lead to the failure and collapse of the North Korean party-state.

However, even this most likely collapse scenario remains highly improbable due to the inherent strengths of the North Korean party-state. While North Korea certainly has weaknesses and shares certain characteristics with failed and collapsed states, considering it doomed or highly likely to collapse would be a misunderstanding and a significant underestimation of the strengths and structural integrity of the North Korean party-state. Although planning for such a scenario should continue, North Korean policy should not hinge on the expectation of an imminent collapse unless there are verifiable indications that question the structural integrity of the party-state and its various apparatuses. In the unique case of North Korea, if a collapse were to occur, it would likely be the result of a civil war rather than the cause of it. States do not simply collapse, and North Korea is no exception.

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