PROJECTING PYONGYANG: THE FUTURE OF NORTH KOREA'S KIM JONG IL REGIME

Andrew Scobell

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FOREWORD

Forecasting is a challenging business, and this is especially true when North Korea is the subject. A little more than a decade ago, the conventional wisdom was that the end of North Korea was imminent. The country was beset by a severe famine, its economy appeared to have collapsed, and the collapse of the regime seemed destined to follow. In 2008, the conventional wisdom views North Korea as rebounding from the crisis of the last decade and the regime as being on a firm footing. Many experts now scoff at the possibility of the demise of the Kim regime.

Dr. Andrew Scobell's research cautions against wholeheartedly embracing conventional wisdom where North Korea is concerned. This monograph addresses the question of Pyongyang's future. Specifically, it explores the future of the regime of Kim Jong Il, constructs a number of scenarios, and then identifies the most plausible one.

I believe Dr. Scobell's monograph will be useful to analysts and planners as they contemplate and prepare for the future trajectory of North Korea.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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SUMMARY

This monograph considers the future trajectory of the Pyongyang regime and explores a range of future scenarios. It does not consider the future of North Korea as a geographic or territorial entity. Some analysts and observers discuss the future without clarifying whether they are discussing the country of North Korea or the Pyongyang regime. In this monograph, the focus is on the fate of the regime dominated by the Kim Dynasty, initially ruled by Kim Il Sung and then led by his son, Kim Jong Il, following the former's death in 1994. A fundamental assumption is that the regime will collapse. Thus, the key question is not whether the regime will collapse, but when and how it will collapse. The logic behind this assumption is based on this author's assessment that the Kim regime is a totalitarian one, and that such a regime has a limited life span. However, this collapse may be a long and drawn out process that could very well play out over a period of years or even over the course of a decade or more.

The purpose of this monograph is to set out an array of scenarios to assist planners and decisionmakers in thinking about and preparing for possible future contingencies concerning North Korea. This monograph does not dwell on war or conflict scenarios involving North Korea because military planners have already focused considerable effort and attention on these. It is entirely possible that the fate of the country as a political, territorial, and juridical entity is intimately bound up with the fate of the regime, but one should not assume this to be so. In other words, the collapse of the Kim regime may not lead to the collapse of North

Korea as a state. Moreover, one should not assume that even if the regime collapse is followed by state collapse that these events would inexorably lead to Korean unification.

How does one differentiate between a state and a regime? A *state* is a political entity that is recognized as having the sole legitimate authority over a geographic area. A state is responsible for the basic safety and welfare of the inhabitants of this area, including protection from both foreign and domestic threats. Different states have different structures and formats. The term *regime* refers to how a state's political power is organized. The most common distinction used in identifying a state's regime type is whether it is a democracy or a dictatorship. Of course, there are many variants of each. There are many types of authoritarian regimes—monarchies, military governments, one-party dictatorships, one-person dictatorships, and totalitarian systems, to name but a few. "Regime change" in this context refers to a transition from one type to another. This change may be violent or peaceful; it may be gradual or sudden. In any event, such change almost never occurs without some kind of upheaval or drama. A state can be considered "failed" when it loses authority over large areas of the territory it claims and loses control of its borders. Failed states are usually plagued by chronic internal warfare, violence, lawlessness, and economic collapse.

Forecasting the future of any country is challenging, but these problems are magnified when, as in the case of North Korea, the amount of information we possess about the country's domestic politics, the decisionmaking process, and statistics from economic to demographic information is typically not authoritative or verifiable. We actually know quite a lot about North

Korea, and the twin challenges confronting analysts are: (1) how to avoid drowning in the vast sea of open source information available, and (2) how to determine which data are reliable and useful and which data are not. Moreover, the information available is prone to a variety of interpretations. In short, experts can and invariably do tend to disagree about North Korea. One dispute among analysts concerns the basic nature of the political system in North Korea. No credible analyst would describe the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as anything but authoritarian with brutal and repressive features that are distasteful and deplorable.

But what credible analysts do differ on is the degree of dictatorship and rate of change in North Korea. Some analysts contend that the DPRK is a totalitarian regime in which a single dictator wields near absolute power and presides over a centralized coercive regime that seeks to control all aspects of human activity, including political, social, and economic. Others insist that while the preceding characterization may have been entirely appropriate to describe North Korea in the past, today a very different system exists.

A regime is said to collapse when it loses "political hegemony" and a country experiences the "disorganization of political power." A failing regime is one that is becoming increasingly disorganized; a failed regime is one that is extremely disorganized and in many respects has ceased to function even though significant institutions still exist; a collapsed regime is one in which political power has completely evaporated, as has its structure. A collapsed regime can leave a power vacuum or trigger a reorganization of state power leading to the establishment of a new regime type. The precise dividing line between

"failing," "failed," and "collapsed" seems difficult to discern. This is because the process of state decline is often gradual. Perhaps the best approach is to think of failure and collapse as *processes* rather than *outcomes*.

Another way to conceive of this difference of opinion over North Korea's regime type might be as an optimist/pessimist distinction; in other words, arguing whether the glass is half empty or half full. This debate ought not to be dismissed as simply academic and therefore irrelevant to real world policymakers and planners. This would be dangerous because the nature of the North Korean regime itself has significant implications for its future. This author contends that there is a real difference between whether the glass is half full (no longer totalitarian) or half empty (still fundamentally totalitarian). If the glass is half full, then fundamental economic and political change in the DPRK is possible in the near future; if the glass is half empty, then such thoroughgoing reform is not imminent. There seems to be one basic truth where totalitarian regimes are concerned: they *do not undertake systemic reform*.

But while such regimes are resilient and enduring, they also tend to be quite brittle, and burnout is inevitable. They certainly do not live forever. No totalitarian regime in history has survived longer than a few decades—until Pyongyang that is. North Korea is the world's longest lasting species of totalitarianism—5 decades so far and counting. In the first decade of the 21st century, Pyongyang is best described as a failing or eroding totalitarian regime where exhaustion, loosening of central control, and weakening of the monopoly of information are taking their toll.

When totalitarian regimes end, they seem either to collapse through defeat in war—the way Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy did—or evolve into post-

totalitarianism, as in the cases of the Soviet Union and China after the deaths of Stalin and Mao. Economic disaster, or indeed complete collapse of the economy, does not necessarily lead to political collapse. Numerous dictatorships have survived despite severe economic problems such as hyperinflation, widespread famine, and or mass unemployment. The deathwatch for the Pyongyang regime has lasted more than 15 years. Those who predicted or anticipated its imminent demise have had to eat their words or do a lot of explaining. Pyongyang is far from dead, and there is evidence that the regime may be regrouping.

Looking to the future, there seem to be three possible and analytically distinct trajectories: suspended animation, a soft landing, or a crash landing. Suspended animation refers to a future in which the status quo persists—the regime continues to survive without major policy changes. A case in point would be Albanian communism in its twilight years. A soft landing refers to a scenario in which Pyongyang adopts significant economic reforms and moderates its security policies. A case in point would be China's transition from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping. A crash landing sees a situation in which the regime collapses. A case in point would be the end game of Romanian communism.

Between "China's" Soft Landing and "Romania's" Crash Landing scenarios, one might also insert another scenario that possesses some aspects of each. This hybrid scenario would closely approximate the experience of Cuba. Like Pyongyang, Havana experienced tremendous economic difficulties in the final days of the Soviet Union and in the aftermath of its patron's collapse. Like North Korea, Cuba confronted an economic crisis of monumental

proportions as subsidies and credit from Soviet bloc countries evaporated. The Castro regime adopted ad hoc reforms in piecemeal fashion starting in the early 1990s. But Cuba and North Korea do seem to have much in common, including the fact that both regimes are in a holding pattern of sorts, ruled by dynasties wherein the current dictator's days are clearly numbered. In each case, there appear to be clear limits to the change possible in the immediate future. In early 2008, Fidel Castro, who had been plagued by medical problems, handed over the reigns of power formally to his younger brother and designated successor, Raul. Fidel, who turned 81 years old in August 2007, remains the dominant political figure in Cuba, although Raul is in charge of the day-to-day affairs of state. Once Fidel Castro and Kim Jong Il pass completely from the scenes of their respective countries, there is likely to be far greater scope for change.

Of the five scenarios described—"suspended animation" (Albania); "soft landing" (China); "crash landing" (Romania); "soft landing/crash landing hybrid" (the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]); "suspended animation/soft landing hybrid" (Cuba)—the closest to the reality of the North Korea's current situation is a Cuban mix of ad hoc reforms and regime holding pattern.

These scenarios could very well play out gradually over several years or even for as long as a decade or more. Why use this time frame? One reason is that Kim Jong Il could conceivably live for another 5, 10, or even 15 years. Although he has health problems, Kim also has the best medical care available in North Korea. Given this, and the fact that his father lived into his 80s, it is possible that he could have a comparable lifespan. Probably the weakest link in a totalitarian regime is at the apex. The longevity of the absolute dictator tends

to correlate closely with the lifespan of the regime. Totalitarian regimes are perhaps most vulnerable during a period of leadership transition. Indeed, only one regime has survived much beyond a change of top ruler: Pyongyang.

Preliminary conclusions include the following:

- Do not conflate the end of the Kim regime with the end of North Korea as a state.
- Regime type matters, and regime change does make a difference.
- Collapse is best viewed as a process not an outcome.
- The process of the collapse of the Pyongyang regime has already begun.
- When the crash landing comes, everyone will be surprised.
- A crash landing is likely to be messy.

Even if the collapse of the Pyongyang regime occurred without a major military conflagration, the situation faced by the armed forces of the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) would be extremely challenging—a significant number of the conditions coalition forces faced in Iraq in the period since the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime would likely be present in a post-Pyongyang regime North Korea. The situation would likely be nothing short of an enormous multidimensional catastrophe.

A crash landing is probably not imminent but in the mid to long run, it may be virtually inevitable. When collapse occurs, it will almost certainly catch everyone, including Pyongyang elites, off guard. In the end, all trajectories may ultimately lead to a crash. Soft landings and suspended animation could turn out to be mere way stations on the road to final impact.

Because the policy package that Pyongyang has adopted cannot be determined with absolute certainty, forecasting the regime's future requires constant and careful monitoring of key indications of regime change, collapse, or transformation. Five key indicators that bear watching closely are: trends in elite politics, the trajectory of economic reform, defense policy, ideology and information control, and foreign policy. While these are relatively straightforward to monitor, there are two other "wild card" indicators of change in the DPRK that are more difficult to monitor and assess: Pyongyang's process of leadership succession and Beijing's North Korea Policy.

PROJECTING PYONGYANG: THE FUTURE OF NORTH KOREA'S KIM JONG IL REGIME

The future of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)—more commonly known as North Korea—is of considerable importance to neighboring countries and the entire Asia-Pacific region. Where North Korea is headed and how it gets there matters enormously to the United States, its allies, and its friends. As a nuclear power with significant weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, ballistic missile capabilities, and massive conventional armed forces, the DPRK can either be a force for regional and global instability or stability depending on its policy choices and national security decisionmaking.

This monograph considers the future trajectory of the Pyongyang regime and explores a range of future scenarios. First, the purpose of this monograph is explained, and key terms are clarified. Second, several challenges to pontificating about North Korea's future are discussed. Third, a handful of future trajectories and scenarios are examined, refined, and the most likely one is identified. Fourth, implications of the analysis are outlined, and a series of key indicators of regime change are listed and discussed.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

This monograph does not consider the future of North Korea as a geographic or territorial entity. Some analysts and observers discuss the future without clarifying whether they are discussing the country of North Korea or the Pyongyang regime.[1] In this monograph, the focus is on the fate of the regime

dominated by the Kim Dynasty, initially ruled by Kim Il Sung and then led by his son, Kim Jong Il, following the former's death in 1994. A fundamental assumption of this monograph is that the regime will collapse. Thus, the key question is not whether the regime will collapse, but when and how it will collapse. The logic behind this assumption is based on this author's assessment that the Kim regime is a totalitarian one, and that such a regime has a limited life span (this logic is explained below). However, this collapse may be a long and drawn out process that could very well play out over a period of years or even over the course of a decade or more.

The purpose of this monograph is to set out an array of scenarios to assist planners and decisionmakers in thinking about and preparing for possible future contingencies concerning North Korea. This monograph does not dwell on war or conflict scenarios involving North Korea because military planners have already focused considerable effort and attention on these subjects. Readers may want to consult some very plausible war scenarios available in open source literature.[2] Moreover, North Korean military capabilities, strategy, operations, and tactics have already been examined in an earlier monograph.[3]

It is entirely possible that the fate of the country as a political, territorial, and juridical entity is intimately bound up with the fate of the regime, but one should not assume this to be so. In other words, the collapse of the Kim regime may not lead to the collapse of North Korea as a state. Moreover, one should not assume that, even if the regime collapse is followed by state collapse, these events would inexorably lead to Korean unification. To recap, while it is certainly quite possible that unification will follow from dual collapses, it

is important to recognize that this is not necessarily inevitable. There are many examples of a regime collapsing or being toppled but the state remaining intact. These include the end of communism in places like Poland and Romania that witnessed the collapse of the regime but the continuation of the country.[4] Of course, there are other instances when the collapse of the regime also meant the immediate or imminent collapse of the state. The collapse of communist regimes in East Germany in 1989 and the Soviet Union 2 years later both fall into this category.

THE FUTURE OF WHAT? STATE VERSUS REGIME, FAILURE VERSUS COLLAPSE

How does one differentiate between a state and a regime? A *state* is a political entity that is recognized as having the sole legitimate authority over a geographic area. A state is responsible for the basic safety and welfare of the inhabitants of this area, including protection from both foreign and domestic threats. In exchange for providing some level of protection to its people, the state collects revenue. A functioning state "monopolize[s] coercion and extraction compliance" within a recognized geographic area.[5]

Different states have different structures and formats. The term *regime* refers to how a state's political power is organized. The most common distinction used in identifying a state's regime type is whether it is a democracy or a dictatorship. Of course, there are many variants of each. The two main types of democratic regimes are presidential and parliamentary. There are also various types of authoritarian regimes—monarchies, military governments, one-party dictatorships, one-person dictatorships, and totalitarian systems, to name but a few. "Regime change" in

this context refers to a transition from one type to another. This change may be violent or peaceful; it may be gradual or sudden. In any event, such change almost never occurs without some kind of upheaval or drama.

What constitutes a failed state? According to Valerie Bunce, a state can be considered to have failed when it experiences "the collapse of [its] . . . coercive and spatial monopoly."[6] What are the indicators of state failure? According to Robert Rotberg, "Failed states cannot control their borders," and they "lose authority over large chunks of territory."[7] Failed states are usually plagued by chronic internal warfare, violence, lawlessness, and economic collapse. The bottom line is that a failed state is incapable of providing even a basic level of security to its citizens.[8]

How does one differentiate between failure and collapse? A regime is said to collapse when it loses "political hegemony" and a country experiences the "disorganization of political power."[9] A failing regime is one that is becoming increasingly disorganized; a failed regime is one that is extremely disorganized and in many respects has ceased to function even though significant institutions still exist; a collapsed regime is one in which political power has completely evaporated, as have its structures. A collapsed regime can leave a power vacuum or trigger a reorganization of state power leading to the establishment of a new regime type. "A collapsed state," according to Rotberg, "is an extreme form of a failed state. It has a total vacuum of authority. A collapsed state is a mere geographical expression, a black hole into which a failed polity has fallen."[10] In the 21st Century, failed states are unusual, and collapsed states are rare phenomena. To be sure, there are plenty of "weak states"—many of which

arguably could be classified as "failing." However, rather than collapse, these states "persist."[11]

Here is not the place to explore at length the reasons behind the resiliency of states, but it is relatively unusual for states to fail. Writing in 2002, Rotberg lists seven states that he contends are the "failed states of the first decade of the 21st century."[12] There are a good number of states that by objective measures are failing in a number of ways to provide for the basic needs of their citizens. Nevertheless, in 2008 states that can be classified as actual failures number only a handful. Moreover, it is highly unusual for a state to be considered collapsed. Most lists are of states where the risk of failure is "high." *Foreign Policy* magazine, for example, publishes an annual ranking of the world's weakest states.[13] It highlights 20 states that are considered most vulnerable to failure but does not pronounce any state on its list as having actually "failed." Rotberg, in his exposition on state failure, only classifies one state as collapsed: Somalia.[14] Significantly, Somalia is the only state in *Foreign Policy's* 2007 Failed State Index to score a perfect "10" in 5 of 12 categories: delegitimization, deterioration of public services, loss of security apparatus, factionalized elites, and external intervention.[15]

The precise dividing line between "failing," "failed," and "collapsed" seems difficult to discern. This is because the process of state decline is often gradual. Jared Diamond, in his study of the success and failure of societies, defines collapse as "a drastic decrease in the human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over considerable areas for an extended time." Diamond proceeds to observe that: "The phenomenon of collapse is thus an extreme form of several milder types of decline, and

it becomes arbitrary to decide how drastic the decline of a society must be before it qualifies to be labeled as a collapse."[16] The same appears to be true of regimes and states (see the section regarding a dispute over the status of the Pyongyang regime). The rankings of *Foreign Policy* magazine's "Failed State Index" reflect "12 social, economic, political, and military indicators" of instability "in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and social deterioration."[17] At least several of the states in the *Foreign Policy* index seem very close to actual failure, if not to being considered failed already (most notable in this regard is Somalia). Perhaps the best approach is to think of failure and collapse as *processes* rather than *outcomes*.[18]

CHALLENGES

Forecasting the future of any country is challenging, but these problems are magnified when, in the case of North Korea, the amount of information we possess about the country's domestic politics, the decisionmaking process, and statistics from economic to demographic information is typically not authoritative or verifiable. We actually know quite a lot about North Korea, and the twin challenges confronting analysts are: (1) how to avoid drowning in the vast sea of open source information available, and (2) how to determine which data are reliable and useful and which data are not.[19]

Moreover, the information available is prone to a variety of interpretations. In short, experts can and invariably do tend to disagree about North Korea. This can be clearly seen in a number of fundamental assessments or assumptions about the DPRK. One of these concerns Pyongyang's strategic intentions. Has the regime decided to pursue a package of policies that

includes comprehensive economic reforms, scaling back its defense sector, and becoming a responsible member of the world community? Experts differ in part because the DPRK's words and deeds send out mixed signals, and there are insufficient data to make a conclusive determination.[20]

Another determination in dispute among analysts concerns the basic nature of the political system in North Korea. What term does one use to describe the Pyongyang regime? On the surface, the reader may be dismissive of the debate—after all, is there any doubt that the DPRK is a repressive dictatorship? Many would be quick to add the adjective "communist" with a single leader at the apex of the power pyramid. Indeed, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) lists North Korea's type of government as "Communist state one-man dictatorship" in its *World Fact Book*. No credible analyst would describe the DPRK as anything but authoritarian with brutal and repressive features that are distasteful and deplorable.

DEGREES OF DICTATORSHIP AND CRITERIA OF COLLAPSE

But what credible analysts do differ on is the degree of dictatorship and rate of change in North Korea. Some analysts contend that the DPRK is a totalitarian regime in which a single dictator wields near absolute power and presides over a centralized coercive regime that seeks to control all aspects of human activity, including political, social, and economic. Others insist that while the preceding characterization may have been entirely appropriate to describe North Korea in the past, today a very different system exists. Some analysts insist that Kim Jong Il is not the all-powerful leader his father

was. Indeed, many believe that Kim's political status is significantly weaker than his father's. As a result, there is limited pluralism among elites in the DPRK—some argue that Kim must play hardliners off against softliners, or conservatives versus reformers.[21] These differences are often assumed to manifest themselves along bureaucratic and institutional lines. Thus, for example, the military is believed to constitute one center of power, the party bureaucracy is considered another, and the economic bureaucracy considered yet another.[22]

Few observers dispute that North Korea's society and economy are changing, and its political system is also changing. What is in question are the scope and pace of these changes. Most agree that central controls have weakened considerably during the past decade or so. Many people in North Korea are less constrained by regime controls, less economic activity is controlled or regulated by the regime, and political indoctrination and propaganda do not have the same hold on people's minds. In short, George Orwell's satirical novel *1984* is, over time, becoming less and less an apt analogy for the DPRK.

One highly respected analyst, Andrei Lankov, contends that the Pyongyang regime has changed to such an extent that it can no longer be considered totalitarian.[23] But this author, assessing virtually identical events and trends to those of Lankov, interprets the scope of these changes differently, insisting that the political system known as the DPRK still most closely approximates totalitarianism, albeit a *failing* one, with significantly weakened central controls and eroding power.[24] One way to frame the debate is over whether totalitarianism has collapsed or not. If it has collapsed, the DPRK is probably best described as "post-totalitarian."[25]

Totalitarianism	Post-Totalitarianism
1. Absolute dictator and ruling party (monistic)	Dictator's power weakens (pluralism and dissent emerge)
2. Transformational ideology (totalist/utopian goals)	Instrumental ideology (economic development and One-party rule)
3. Terror all-pervasive	Terror no longer pervasive
4. Monopoly of coercive apparatus	Monopoly maintained
5. Centrally planned economy	Eroded
6. Monopoly of mass communication	Eroded

Figure 1. Totalitarianism and Post-Totalitarianism Compared.

Another way to conceive of this difference of opinion over North Korea's regime type might be as an optimist/pessimist distinction; in other words, arguing whether the glass is half empty or half full. This debate ought not to be dismissed as simply academic and therefore irrelevant to real world policymakers and planners. Moreover, the fact that it is unlikely to be resolved, and indeed may be impossible to resolve, should not lead readers to disregard it. This would be dangerous because the nature of the North Korean regime itself has significant implications for its future. This author contends that there is a real difference between whether the glass is half full (no longer totalitarian) or half empty (still fundamentally totalitarian). If the glass is half full, then fundamental economic and political change in the DPRK is possible in the near future; if the glass is half empty, then such thoroughgoing reform is not imminent. Moreover, I would go even further

and argue that such reform is impossible. There seems to be one basic truth where totalitarian regimes are concerned: they *do not undertake systemic reform*! If such a regime reforms, it would no longer be totalitarian. This argument may appear tautological to the reader. A brief discussion of historical cases may help clarify the point.

Germany under Hitler, the Soviet Union under Stalin, and China under Mao are generally considered to have been totalitarian regimes. In none of these cases did noteworthy political or economic reform occur. It was only *after* Stalin's and Mao's rule that reforms were possible in the Soviet Union and China, respectively (of course Nazi Germany did not survive Hitler). In both communist states, totalitarianism evolved into post-totalitarianism. Reforms could not occur in the Soviet Union until Stalin had departed, and it was only when Khrushchev came to power that such change was possible. Significantly, a necessary component of this was de-Stalinization. Similarly, in China, reforms could not take place until after Mao's passing, and an important element of the reform process was a reappraisal of Mao. It is noteworthy that reform did not occur under Mao's immediate successor, Hua Guofeng. Hua was formally depicted as the Chairman's anointed successor, and the younger leader's legitimacy was so intertwined with the figure of Mao and Maoism that no significant change whatsoever was possible. In fact, a key mantra for Hua was the "Two Whatevers," by which the younger leader insisted that all China's current and future policies must be guided by what Mao had said or done. Thus, the post-Mao reforms did not begin in China until Hua was ousted and Deng Xiaoping assumed power. It was Deng who was able to distance himself sufficiently from Mao that he could

sponsor an official reappraisal of Mao's rule as well as initiate a thoroughgoing program of reforms.

There are some useful parallels between Kim Jong Il and Hua Guofeng. Of course, there are also some important differences including the fact that the former's political legitimacy is significantly stronger than the latter's was, and Kim the Younger has proved a far more astute leader than Hua, with far greater staying power.[26] Nevertheless, the political legitimacy of Kim the Younger, like that of his Chinese counterpart 3 decades earlier, is inseparable from that of his predecessor. Just as it was impossible for Hua to break with Mao's legacy, so it is virtually impossible for Kim Jong Il to break with the legacy of his father. Under such circumstances, systemic reform is not a realistic option. What we have seen in North Korea to date in the way of transformation is probably the most we can expect in the way of regime-sponsored change—what this author has dubbed ad hoc "reform around the edges."[27] While some observers contend that the decision to pursue significant reform has been made in Pyongyang, the irrefutable evidence of this has yet to emerge. There is nothing yet manifest in North Korea comparable to what was witnessed in China in the late 1970s or Vietnam in the late 1980s. Of course, it is entirely possible that North Korea will pursue a quite different reform strategy from those of other communist countries and blaze its own distinct reform path. Rather, the point to be made here is that there are yet to emerge clear, unmistakable signs that the DPRK is moving along a reform trajectory.[28]

Kim Jong Il has attempted to put his own imprimatur on policy. This is evident from the trumpeting of "military first politics" [*son'gun cheng chi*] and "strong, prosperous country" [*kangsong*

daeguk]. But while Kim the Younger has attempted to make a distinction between himself and his father, the differences seem to be more stylistic and tactical rather than fundamental and strategic. In short, there seems to be more continuity than change between the policies of the father and those of the son. At the same time that the Dear Leader tries to present himself as an innovator of sorts, he continues to underscore that he is faithfully adhering to the ideology of the Great Leader and scrupulously executing the wishes of the DPRK's eternal president. For example, Kim the Younger continues to stress adherence to *Juche,* which became enshrined in the DPRK's constitution revised in 1998 at the expense of Marxism-Leninism. And, of course, *Juche* is essentially synonymous with "Kimilsungism." Moreover, Kim the Younger repeatedly emphasizes that he is resolutely working to fulfill the wishes of Kim the Elder to achieve Korean unification and the denuclearization of the peninsula.[29]

A FAILING/ERODING TOTALITARIAN REGIME

In this author's opinion, the best way to understand the Pyongyang regime is as a *failing or eroding* totalitarian system. Such a system is very muscular and repressive, with a massive military machine and an expansive apparatus for coercion. An all-powerful dictator and ruling party attempt to exert absolute and total control over all a country's political, economic, and social activity.[30] The regime works constantly to monopolize the media, control all information, centrally direct the economy, and instill an all-pervasive climate of terror. At the same time, it attempts to inspire and motivate the people through an ideology that promises to transform society and bring about a brave new world. Although

North Korea falls short of realizing its ambitious aims, it does tend to be quite successful at brainwashing its citizens and making true believers of many of them. The preferred policy implementation mechanism is mobilizing the people, whether they are battalions of soldiers, multitudes of students, or a stadium full of synchronized gymnasts. Mass mobilization is a staple of full-blown totalitarianism.

But while such regimes are resilient and enduring, they also tend to be quite brittle, and burnout is inevitable. They certainly do not live forever. A totalitarian regime is a high maintenance one that requires constant activity and mobilization. When one or more pillars weaken, the entire structure is prone to collapse. No totalitarian regime in history has survived longer than a few decades—until Pyongyang that is. North Korea is the world's longest lasting species of totalitarianism—5 decades so far and counting. Furthermore, it is the only totalitarian regime to survive a leadership transition—the hereditary succession in July 1994 of Kim Jong Il to follow his father Kim Il Sung as dictator.[31]

The North has evolved over recent decades and in the past 20-odd years has weakened considerably. This is especially so since the demise of it primary patron, the Soviet Union, in 1991, and the onset of severe economic difficulties, most notably a terrible famine in the mid-1990s. Thus, in the first decade of the 21st century, Pyongyang is best described as a failing or eroding totalitarian regime where exhaustion, loosening of central control, and weakening of the monopoly of information are taking their toll.

FUTURE TRAJECTORIES AND SCENARIOS

When totalitarian regimes end, they seem either to collapse through defeat in war—the way Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy did, or evolve into post-totalitarianism, as in the cases of the Soviet Union and China after the deaths of Stalin and Mao. Economic disaster, or indeed complete collapse of the economy, does not necessarily lead to political collapse. Numerous dictatorships have survived despite severe economic problems such as hyperinflation, widespread famine, and/or mass unemployment. Stalin was not threatened by the famine following collectivization in the 1920s. Mao was not ousted following the famine triggered by the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. More recently, Robert Mugabe's harsh dictatorship in Zimbabwe continues to survive despite the economic devastation the regime has wrought on the people of that country.[32]

The deathwatch for the Pyongyang regime has lasted more than 15 years. Those who predicted or anticipated its imminent demise have had to eat their words or do a lot of explaining.[33] Pyongyang is far from dead, and there is evidence that the regime may be regrouping. The 2002 reform measures may best be seen in this light—as an effort by the regime to reassert control.[34] Other initiatives launched in the past 8 years or so, including those in the foreign policy arena: efforts to normalize relations with various countries, the inter-Korean rapprochement, and participation in the Six Party Talks, all attest to this. Moreover, there have been dramatic steps taken in the area of defense: the launches of multiple ballistic missiles in July 2006 and the detonation of a nuclear device 3 months later in October 2006. Moreover, demographic indicators are hopeful—the CIA estimates that since 2003 North

Korea has experienced a gradual rise in life expectancy and the country's population has been growing.[35]

Looking to the future, there seems to be three possible and analytically distinct trajectories: suspended animation, a soft landing, or a crash landing.[36] Suspended animation refers to a future in which the status quo persists—the regime continues to survive without major policy changes. A soft landing refers to a scenario in which Pyongyang adopts significant economic reforms and moderates its security policies. A crash landing sees a situation in which the regime collapses.[37]

These scenarios could very well play out gradually over several years or even for as long as a decade or more. Why use this time frame? One reason is that Kim Jong Il could conceivably live for another 5, 10, or even 15 years. Although he has health problems, Kim also has the best medical care available in North Korea. Given this, and the fact that his father lived into his 80s, it is possible that he could have a comparable lifespan. Probably the weakest link in a totalitarian regime is at the apex. The longevity of the absolute dictator tends to correlate closely with the lifespan of the regime. Totalitarian regimes are perhaps most vulnerable during a period of leadership transition.[38] Indeed, only one regime has survived much beyond a change of top ruler: Pyongyang.

One could certainly develop a larger number of scenarios, each with a higher degree of specificity. But for a first cut, three is the preferred number, each representing a different, analytically distinct general outcome: a persistence of the status quo, a largely peaceful and gradual end to the regime, or a tumultuous and sudden end to the regime.

Scenario/Trajectory	Example	Characteristics
1.Suspended Animation	Albania 1970s-late 1980s	*Status Quo* Regime in a holding pattern -No reform
2. Soft Landing	China Late 1970s->	*Gradual Reform* -Regime transformation -economic reforms -political liberalization
3. Crash Landing	Romania Late 1980s	*Collapse* -Overthrow/Revolution -No economic or political opening

Figure 2. How Totalitarianism Ends in North Korea: A First Cut.

SUSPENDED ANIMATION: North Korea as Albania?

In this scenario, the Pyongyang regime remains in a state of suspended animation, either unable or unwilling to change. Of the three scenarios, this one appears to describe most closely the current situation. Suspended animation is very likely to persist because it permits the North to avoid making the tough choices regarding reform.

This scenario is the least risky alternative for Pyongyang. Its elites know that the status quo works because that is what the regime has essentially been doing for more than 10 years. While Pyongyang has tolerated or permitted ad hoc reforms as well as selective diplomatic openings, they have been of a "system defending" variety rather than system transforming.[39]

The leadership is extremely rational and, given its fears, concerns, and priorities, firming up the status quo is the most logical policy option. Certainly

this approach has produced failed policies that have resulted in mass starvation and untold suffering for millions of ordinary North Koreans. But for Kim and his minions, this is an acceptable cost of maintaining the totalitarian dictatorship.

Like Albania under Enver Hoxha, North Korea under the Kim dynasty has been autarkic, largely closed off from the rest of the world with a command economy and a personality cult. The Stalinist command economies of each totalitarian regime kept the people of Albania and North Korea, respectively, in systems where individual initiative and collective efficiency were not rewarded. Moreover, both regimes promoted xenophobia and paranoia. The people of each country were brainwashed to believe that they were surrounded by enemies, and the only way they could survive was by constant vigilance and continuous struggle, constructing fortifications everywhere and training in military or paramilitary formations. It is instructive to note the way Albanian totalitarianism collapsed: gradually over an extended period of time during the latter years of Hoxha and afterwards. Hoxha's regime collapsed in what might be termed a "slow motion implosion." Moreover, the deleterious effects of the Hoxha regime are still being experienced as Albanians continue to suffer from extreme poverty, environmental degradation, and little or no infrastructure. One of Albania's most significant exports continues to be its people, most notably ruthless organized crime networks that now reach into Western Europe, the United States, and beyond.

However, unlike Albania, North Korea has displayed a penchant for highly pragmatic and inventive behavior, actively appealing for foreign aid as well as engaging in brinkmanship and extortion.

Both tactics have proved remarkably successful in obtaining currency, food, and fuel. Pyongyang elites have survived and even prospered on food and fuel from abroad—including from countries such as the United States and China, cash and investments from South Korea, and funds from criminal activities around the world. In the meantime, brinkmanship and skillful diplomacy have kept the United States at bay.[40]

SOFT LANDING: North Korea as China?

In this scenario, Pyongyang either adopts serious, partial, or thoroughgoing reform. How likely is it? Rather unlikely, in fact, because Kim seems fearful of the changes such reforms might set in motion. Indeed, Kim appears very reluctant to pursue systemic reforms precisely because he is terrified that they might prove so successful they would reform his regime, and that of his cronies, out of existence. This fear exists despite Beijing's ongoing efforts to demonstrate to Pyongyang that continued communist dictatorship can coexist with thoroughgoing economic change and opening.

If reform does come to the North, it is more likely to emerge in a serious way under Kim's successor in a post-totalitarian regime. However, the possibility of Pyongyang muddling through should not be ruled out. In spite of fears of thoroughgoing reform, change around the edges could conceivably surreptitiously morph into something more significant. Reform could be accomplished unintentionally and accidentally by *stealth*.[41]

How might reform by stealth occur? Some interpretations of the origins and evolution of the limited reforms to date in North Korea take a "bottom-up" approach. The reforms are not regime-initiated but

rather the result of ordinary people at the grassroots level making decisions and taking actions to survive.[42] Thus, for example, farmers produce crops on their own plots for their own consumption as well as to sell at private markets. Local officials tolerate these activities because they increase the food supply, improve the lives of local people, help the local economy, and have widespread popular support. Scholars have made similar interpretations about the origins and evolution of reforms in China and Vietnam.[43]

In both of these other Asian communist states reforms began in agriculture. But unlike China and Vietnam, which had large rural populations with large, labor intensive agricultural sectors, North Korea is highly urbanized, with a relatively small rural population and an "input intensive" agriculture sector. As a result, reform in agriculture is more difficult for Pyongyang. Indeed, the situation North Korea confronts in agriculture is quite similar to that of the former Soviet Union. Significantly, Moscow had tremendous difficulties reforming in this sector.[44] Moreover, industry is also a difficult sector to reform. Without momentum attained by quick success/gains achieved in an area like agriculture, moving forward on system-wide reforms even gradually is more challenging.

CRASH LANDING: North Korea as Romania?

In this scenario the Pyongyang regime collapses either with a whimper or a bang. The landing could be relatively quiet and trouble-free or noisy and chaotic. The former would be along the lines of those experienced by a number of communist east European regimes in 1989 and in the Soviet Union in 1991. The latter could be rather like Romania in 1989.

Moreover, Pyongyang could out of desperation "lash out" in dramatic fashion and launch either an all-out invasion of South Korea or a limited attack.[45] The former would be a desperate all or nothing effort to seize the entire peninsula quickly before U.S. military reinforcements were able to arrive in Korea. The latter would be a more calculated effort to force South Korea and the United States to negotiate so as to extract currency and resources from these governments. In either case, the impetus would be a sense in Pyongyang that the regime was in an extremely dire position that could only be saved by some kind of military operation either to reestablish the status quo or achieve unification. In either case, North Korean logic would be that, without some kind of proactive military strike, the regime would collapse.[46]

Collapse could be triggered by internal events, external events, or the regime could simply implode from exhaustion under its own weight. It is possible that exhaustion could result in the end of North Korea as a state, but more likely the high maintenance machinery of the totalitarian system would collapse. The regime would transform into a looser post-totalitarian system with weaker central controls. Internal events such as revolt or rebellion could trigger such a process. Indeed, this is precisely the way communist regimes ended in Berlin and Prague in 1989 and in Moscow in 1991. But these regimes were post-totalitarian.

Perhaps a better historical case for Pyongyang is the fate of the totalitarian regime of Nicolai Ceausescu in Bucharest. Both Romania under Ceausescu and North Korea under the Kims endured a massive cult of personality, and the reality or at least the real prospect of dynastic succession. As a result of the grandiose and ill-conceived public works projects of their

respective dictators, collectivization of agriculture, and harsh economic policies after decades of misrule, the vast majority of people in Romania and North Korea led grim existences in a semi-permanent state of exhaustion, malnourishment, and squalor. While people in Romania may not have suffered as severely from famine as their counterparts in North Korea, they did suffer as Bucharest diverted domestic energy resources and hard currency to pay off the country's substantial foreign debt. The results were power outages that left Romanians miserable and shivering in unheated and poorly lit dwellings. While one should be careful about suggesting "too deterministic a link between economic hardship and political failure," in the Romanian case protracted systemic economic disaster ultimately triggered popular unrest and prompted an intra-elite coup against the Ceausescu Regime.[47]

How Likely is Collapse?

How likely is a collapse as an outcome? This author does not believe there is a high probability of regime collapse in the immediate future. However, this does not mean that it might not occur. Moreover, just because governments do not want a collapse and have formulated policies designed to prevent this does not mean that it will not happen.

According to then President Roh Moo-hyun of the Republic of Korea, speaking in 2004,

> Up till now, people have been saying that North Korea would collapse but it hasn't. . . . It appears there's almost no possibility of North Korea collapsing. China is helping North Korea in several ways to help prevent its collapse. China is helping because should a situation arise in which something happens in North Korea and tens

> of thousands of people start crossing over the Yalu into China, it couldn't deal with the number. . . . Since South Korea, too, would face a number of difficulties, we do not want the North to break up.[48]

No one predicted the end of any of the communist regimes. Indeed, such outcomes seemed unthinkable even to observers in the mid- or late 1980s. Yet, in the aftermath, some commentators were quick to anticipate the collapse of communism in China and North Korea.

Seventeen years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and 14 years since the death of dictator Kim Il Sung, it has become fashionable to poke fun at those who continue to speak of North Korea collapse. It is worth remembering that these earlier regimes seemed to be extremely powerful and repressive, yet in the end turned out to have feet of clay. One leading analyst who has stressed the staying power of the Pyongyang regime and made light of those who anticipate collapse nevertheless appears to acknowledge that the regime cannot last forever. According to Scott Snyder, "In Washington, some people seem to wake up every morning and check whether the regime has collapsed overnight. But there is little of that sense in Seoul and even less in Pyongyang. I suppose, though, if people keep on predicting that the North is about to collapse, well, one of these days they'll be right."[49]

But thinking about collapse as a process instead of an outcome maybe more helpful. Speaking in 2004, Japanese scholar Masao Okogoni opined: "If we take the long view, the collapse of North Korea's system has already begun."[50]

NONE OF THE ABOVE: TOWARD A HYBRID SCENARIO

While the three scenarios outlined above are analytically distinct and helpful in thinking about the range of possible futures for the Pyongyang regime, none of them fully depict the future as it seems to be unfolding in the first decade of the 21st century. None of them seem to capture all the nuances of the North Korean case. Some finer distinctions might help. In particular, in contrast to Bucharest and Tirana, Pyongyang has exhibited greater pragmatism closer to other regimes such as Moscow or Havana. For example, between an "Albanian" Suspended Animation and a "Chinese" Soft Landing, one might insert another scenario that contains some elements of each. This hybrid scenario would closely approximate the experience of the Soviet Union: since Moscow experienced a soft landing of sorts via the Gorbachev reforms in the late 1980s but eventually crash landed when the Soviet Union dissolved at the end of 1991 as the full fallout from the so-called "August Coup" ultimately manifested itself.

Between "China's" Soft Landing and "Romania's" Crash Landing scenarios, one might also insert another scenario that possesses some aspects of each. This hybrid scenario would closely approximate the experience of Cuba. Like Pyongyang, Havana experienced tremendous economic difficulties in the final days of the Soviet Union and in the aftermath of its patron's collapse. Like North Korea, Cuba confronted an economic crisis of monumental proportions as subsidies and credit from Soviet bloc countries evaporated. The Castro regime adopted ad hoc reforms in piecemeal fashion starting in the early 1990s. But while the Pyongyang regime appeared more

reluctant to adopt reforms than Havana, it was quick to appeal for international aid. Certainly Cubans did not appear to be facing starvation the way hundreds of thousands of North Koreans did. But Cuba and North Korea do seem to have much in common, including the fact that both regimes are in a holding pattern of sorts, ruled by dynasties wherein the current dictator's days are clearly numbered. In each case, there appear to be clear limits to the change possible in the immediate future. In mid-2006 Fidel Castro, who had been plagued by medical problems, handed over the reigns of power temporarily to his younger brother and designated successor, Raul. Then, in February 2008, Fidel formally stepped down as head of state and his brother was "elected" by the rubberstamp National Assembly to replace him. But even in "retirement" and poor health the 81 year old Fidel remains the dominant political figure in Cuba, although Raul is in charge of the day-to-day affairs of state.[51] Once Fidel Castro and Kim Jong Il pass completely from the scenes of their respective countries, there is likely to be far greater scope for change.

Which of the above five scenarios is unfolding in North Korea today? The closest seems to be the Cuban scenario. Of course, in Havana, as in Pyongyang, the end has yet to come. So one does not know for sure how the story will conclude. Therefore, there are limits to what lessons one can take away from Castro's Cuba. Nevertheless, it seems likely that a dynastic succession will occur in Cuba, and the passing of Fidel will be a momentous event marking the end of an era. Raul Castro is poised to succeed his brother. Since Castro is likely to die within a matter of years (i.e., before Kim Jong Il), analysts will probably have more to learn from Havana as they explore the future trajectory of the Pyongyang regime.

Scenario/Trajectory	Example	Characteristics
1. Suspended Animation	Albania 1970s-late 1980s	Status Quo -Regime in a holding pattern -No reform
2. Suspended Animation/ Soft Landing Hybrid	Cuba 1990s->	Status Quo Plus -Some notable reforms but regime remains essentially in a holding pattern
3. Soft Landing	China Late 1970s->	Gradual Reform -Regime transformation -economic reforms -political liberalization
4. Soft Landing/Crash Landing Hybrid	USSR 1980s-1991	Reform and Regime Unraveling -Gradual reform and liberalization eventually getting out of control and leading to regime collapse
5. Crash Landing	Romania Late 1980s	Collapse -Overthrow/Revolution -No economic or political opening

Figure 3. How Totalitarianism Ends in North Korea: A Second Cut.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What can one conclude from the foregoing analysis?

1. Do not conflate the end of the Kim regime with the end of North Korea as a state. The latter can follow from the former, but this cannot be assumed. Another regime may assume control in a reorganization of state power. One can conceive, for example, of a military dictatorship succeeding the totalitarian dictatorship.

2. Regime type matters. Totalitarianism tolerates no

major reform. Thoroughgoing reform in North Korea will almost certainly not occur until totalitarianism collapses and/or transforms into post-totalitarianism. Even a military junta is more likely than the current Kim regime to implement systemic economic reforms.

3. Regime change makes a difference. This does not mean that this author advocates the violent overthrow of the Pyongyang regime. What this does mean is that significant and dramatic change of the kind that many people hope for is highly unlikely without the end of totalitarianism in North Korea.

4. Collapse is best viewed as a process, not an outcome. Rather than expecting collapse to be an end-state occurring on a particular date in the future, it may be more useful to think of collapse as a process that may have already begun.

5. The process of collapse of the Pyongyang Regime has begun. Declines and collapses are difficult processes to measure. Reliable data are often difficult to come by in countries at risk or in the throes of decline or collapse. Despite such difficulties in research and analysis, experts do agree that the Pyongyang regime appears to have suffered a sustained period of collapse. What experts do not agree on is whether the regime has begun to resuscitate itself sufficiently to reverse its collapse. It is certainly possible that this has happened, but more likely, Pyongyang totalitarianism has simply obtained a temporary stay of execution. That is, the regime has skillfully managed to stave off collapse, but this has only prolonged the inevitable.

6. When the crash landing comes everyone will be surprised. The final act of Pyongyang's collapse will be a crash landing. As noted above, because the process of collapse is often gradual and incremental, it is difficult to predict or even anticipate the final act

with any degree of accuracy. It is very likely that this event will catch governments unawares. It is worth recalling that the Bush administration was blindsided by the turn of events in Iraq following the ouster of the Saddam Hussein regime. Arguably Washington should have been far better prepared to tackle the daunting challenges of stabilizing a post-Saddam Iraq. The point is not to apportion blame for any failures in Iraq policy; rather, the point is to suggest that if the United States and its coalition partners encountered such difficulties in a situation where regime collapse could have been anticipated and planned for—in fact, it was triggered by U.S. military-led coalition action—then the challenges in dealing with a sudden unforeseen collapse would likely be far more demanding.

7. A Crash Landing is Likely to be Messy. If the regime collapses, this could mean not just extreme disorganization of power but a civil war or a collapse situation with significant pockets of organized armed resistance. In the latter situation, while elements of the coercive apparatus would surrender or disband and flee, others might vigorously resist. Some hardcore elements might engage in insurgency operations for months or even years. One should recall that individual soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army continued to hold out in the jungles of Southeast Asia for decades after Tokyo's defeat in World War II. If this were to occur on a collective scale in North Korea after the collapse of the Pyongyang regime, the result would be significant problems for stability operations.

Even if the collapse of the Pyongyang regime occurred without a major military conflagration, the situation faced by the armed forces of the United States and the Republic of Korea would be extremely challenging—a

significant number of the conditions coalition forces faced in Iraq in the period since the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime would likely be present in a post-Pyongyang regime North Korea—including severely decayed infrastructure and an entrenched culture of corruption.[52] The situation would likely be nothing short of an enormous multidimensional catastrophe. The governments of the United States and the Republic of Korea would be confronted with massive humanitarian, economic, and environmental disasters, not to mention the challenge of accounting for the regime's significant arsenal of WMD and missiles. A vast network of sites and underground facilities would need to be painstakingly searched. This task could very likely take years to complete.[53]

A crash landing is probably not imminent, but in the mid- to long-run it may be virtually inevitable. When collapse occurs, it will almost certainly catch everyone, including Pyongyang elites, off guard. In the end, all trajectories may ultimately lead to a crash. Soft landings and suspended animation could turn out to be mere way stations on the road to final impact.

Whether one is considering the collapse of the Pyongyang regime, of the North Korea state, or the collapse of both, what is important is to monitor trends and conditions over time. It is especially important to watch key indicators.

KEY INDICATORS OF REGIME CHANGE

The policy package that Pyongyang has adopted cannot be determined with absolute certainty. The regime continues to send out mixed signals in terms of rhetoric and actions. Because of this, obtaining any responsible forecast of North Korea's future requires constant and careful monitoring of key indications of

regime change, collapse, or transformation.

The first five indicators—one might dub these indicators "A Full House"—are focused on change and/or continuity in policy and are largely straightforward in terms of trends and impact. The last two indicators—one might dub these "Wild Cards"—are more complicated and more difficult to discern in terms of significance and influence. These "wild cards" are the leadership succession process in Pyongyang and China's North Korea Policy. These "Full House" of indicators are trends in elite politics, the trajectory of economic reform, defense policy, ideology and information control, and foreign policy.

A Full House.

Of the five indicators of the future of the regime, one of the most important is elite dynamics. But the others are also key indicators to monitor.

A. *Elites*. Defining and categorizing elites, as well as identifying conflicts and schisms, are all helpful in understanding leadership trends and regime dynamics. There are various definitions of what constitutes a member of the elite. As a practical matter, one concrete measure is an individual who is permitted to travel abroad. If a person is allowed to leave the country, this suggests the regime has a significant degree of trust in the individual, and that individual is privileged (of course, precautions are still likely to be made in the form of keeping members of the individual's immediate family in the DPRK to deter any thoughts of defection or flight). The makeup of the Pyongyang elite is also of importance. What proportion are soldiers? What proportion are party bureaucrats? What proportion are economic specialists?

Intra-elite strife has been identified as a chronic and indeed fatal problem for communist regimes.[54] It is true that serious splits within the communist elite were a significant factor contributing to regime collapse in Bucharest in 1989 and in Moscow in 1991. Moreover, the Beijing crisis of 1989 was fueled by splits within the leadership that both encouraged demonstrators and hampered regime response to the protests in Tiananmen Square. Are there any signs of debate or conflict among elites? Can one discern any evidence from the media?[55] Is there evidence of dissent or purges? Are there rumors or reports of purges, executions, assassinations, rebellions, mutinies, or coups?[56]

Another indication of disaffection, dissent, and elite tensions is the matter of defections. In recent years, there have been growing numbers of defections from the DPRK. In fact, thousands have defected during the past decade or so. Most of these individuals have been relatively low-level functionaries or ordinary citizens who have mainly been resettled in South Korea. The most prominent defector was of course, Hwang Jong Yop, who defected in 1997.[57] Not included in this classification are the tens of thousands of North Korean refugees and illegal migrants who have crossed into China in search of food and a better livelihood. Many of these go back and forth across the border, bringing food, supplies, and money with them.[58]

A checklist of questions:

1. Who is allowed to travel abroad and where are they going?

2. What is the composition of the elite? Soldiers? Economic specialists?

3. Are there signs of intra-elite strife?

4. Who is defecting? What are the levels, institutions of defectors, and reason for their action?

B. *The Fate of Reform*. The future of economic reform is also a key indicator of regime change in Pyongyang. If North Korea embraces systemic reform, then this is clear evidence of regime change in Pyongyang—the end of totalitarianism. Short of an unequivocal declaration by Kim Jong Il or an authoritative propaganda organ and follow-through actions across the board, this may be difficult to determine with a high degree of certainty.

A checklist of questions:

1. Is Pyongyang proclaiming the full embrace of economic reform (and following through on its words with actions)?

2. Is the key dynamic in reform "bottom up" or "top down"?

3. How widespread and comprehensive are the reforms?

4. Is the Korean People's Army (KPA) an actor in any reform efforts, and, if so, what is the nature of its involvement?

5. What are the trends in Foreign Direct Investment? Is investment permitted outside of specific zones?

6. What countries are investing?

7. What are the trends in foreign trade? What are the countries with which North Korea is trading? What are goods are being exported and imported?

8. What are the trends in agriculture and industry? How is each sector performing?

C. *Trends in Korean People's Army*. The KPA is the central pillar of the Pyongyang regime. Any significant adjustment in North Korea's military forces or its defense policy is a key indication of change. Conversely, little or no change is an important indicator of continuity. An increase or decrease in the number of personnel in uniform and/or a change in the order of battle may

have significance beyond a transformation in the way the KPA might wage war. Trends in Pyongyang's WMD or ballistic missile programs also bear close attention for the same reason. Also important, although extremely difficult to evaluate, are the level of military morale and degree of troop loyalty to the regime.

A checklist of questions:

1. Is the KPA downsizing or increasing its personnel and are its capabilities being enhanced or degraded?

2. Is the KPA being reconfigured, restructured, or repositioned?

3. What is happening to the KPA's training/exercise schedule/routine?

4. What are the trends in WMD/ballistic missile programs?

5. What is the condition of military morale and regime loyalty?

D. *Trends in Ideology and Mass Communication*. A totalist ideology and monopoly of mass communication are core attributes of a totalitarian regime. A weakening in the hold of the former and a breakdown of the latter would signal that the Kim regime was nearing its end of days. Regarding ideology, one must monitor what message or messages Pyongyang's propaganda apparatus is spouting and check for consistency or inconsistency. Do *Juche*, "military first politics," or "prosperous and powerful country" continue to be the messages delivered by the machinery of mass communication? Does the regime continue to enjoy essentially a monopoly of mass communication or is the monopoly being eroded in significant ways? Are North Koreans able to receive foreign radio and/or television broadcasts? What is the pattern of cell phone usage in North Korea? Is there an expansion of the intranet and/or an opening up to the internet?

A checklist of questions:

1. What are the message(s) of propaganda?

2. Are ideological pronouncements on message, diffuse, and/or inconsistent?

3. Is there still essentially a regime monopoly in mass communication, or is it being eroded?

E. *Trends in Foreign Relations/Diplomacy.* The condition of Pyongyang's foreign relations and diplomacy is another important indicator of regime change. Measures of this include whether the DPRK continues to participate in the Six Party Talks and other multilateral fora. Moreover, is the regime living up to its commitments to disable and dismantle nuclear facilities? What are the conditions of Pyongyang's bilateral relations with Seoul and the capitals of other major powers? What cities is Kim Jong Il visiting, and which leaders are visiting Pyongyang? Kim promised to visit Seoul at an appropriate time but this has yet to happen. Both of the inter-Korean summits have taken place in Pyongyang with Kim Jong Il playing host: in June 2000 with then South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and in October 2007 with his successor, Roh Moo Hyun.

A checklist of questions:

1. What are Pyongyang's level of participation in and the status of Six Party Talks?

2. Has North Korea lived up to its commitments vis-à-vis the disablement of its nuclear program?

3. What is the status of Pyongyang's relationship with Seoul?

4. Has Kim Jong Il visited South Korea?

5. What is the status of its bilateral relationships with China, Russia, Japan, etc.?

6. What is the status of its bilateral relationship with the United States?

"Wild Card" Indicators.

The final two indicators to be discussed are leadership succession and China's North Korea policy. These two indicators are more difficult to monitor and/or anticipate than the above mentioned five.

F. *Leadership Succession*. Decisions must be made and preparations need to occur if Kim Jong Il is serious about arranging a smooth leadership succession. There could very easily be a succession struggle in North Korea. It is during a period of leadership transition that totalitarian regimes are most vulnerable to collapse. There is every reason to believe the greatest challenge that the Pyongyang regime will face in the foreseeable future will be transition to the post-Kim Jong Il era. All other things being equal, the longer Kim Jong Il lives, the better. If he lives an additional decade or so, he should prove better able to pave the way for a smooth succession.

If there is no indication that a specific individual or set of individuals is being groomed for succession, it may indicate one of two things. The first is that these preparations are being undertaken in such secrecy that they are impossible to detect. This is unlikely, however, because over time there are likely to be indicators of this that should be detectable.

A checklist of questions:

1. What is the health and longevity of Kim Jong Il and immediate family members?

2. Is one or more offspring seen accompanying their father on inspection tours?

3. Are offspring or other individuals being introduced to foreigners?

The second possible reason why no indicators of preparations for succession may be evident is because

Kim Jong Il may have not been making any such preparations. While this is unlikely, it is possible. What this would likely mean is that Kim feels too insecure to do so either because he feels that his authority is fragile, or he anticipates significant elite opposition or dissent over his preferred succession arrangement. In any event, the succession issue constitutes a "wild card" indicator of regime change in Pyongyang.[59]

G. *China's Nordpolitik*. Another "wild card" indicator of the regime's future is China's policy toward North Korea.

Beijing is extremely sensitive to developments on the Korean peninsula. China watches developments and trends in North Korea very closely, so change or continuity in Beijing's policy toward Pyongyang is a key indicator of possible change. Since the inception of the communist regime in Beijing in 1949, the leaders of the People's Republic of China thought of their country's relationship to (north) Korea as one of "lips and teeth." What this means to China's elites is that if Korean "lips" are stripped away, then China's "teeth" will be unprotected—exposed and open to the elements.[60] China is particularly concerned about the impact of negative trends in North Korea on domestic stability in China. Perhaps Beijing's greatest concern is North Korean refugees. Heightened concern by China's leaders would likely trigger round-ups, internment in detention camps, and mass repatriation to North Korea.

No action by China should be ruled out where North Korea is concerned. Under certain circumstances, Beijing might stop propping up Pyongyang and allow North Korea to fail. This is possible if China believes a unified Korea under Seoul's auspices would be more favorably disposed toward Beijing than it has been in

recent years *and* produce a more stable and predictable environment on the peninsula.[61] We should not be surprised by the spectrum of policies and actions that China is capable of adopting vis-à-vis North Korea, although some are far more likely than others. In any event, we should expect that Beijing will do whatever it deems is necessary to protect its national security interests, including the employment of military force beyond its borders. China would prefer not to have to resort to military action. Indeed, China has sought to use other levers of national power since 2003. These nonmilitary efforts include diplomatic—organizing and hosting the Six Party Talks—and economic—Chinese entrepreneurs have made considerable investments in North Korea.[62]

A checklist of questions:

1. What are the trends in Chinese trade with and investment in North Korea?

2. Which Chinese leaders and what kinds of delegations are traveling to North Korea?

3. Which North Korean leaders and delegations are traveling to China and where are they visiting?

4. What kinds of military-to-military interactions are there between the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the KPA?

5. What kinds of military activities, deployments, and maneuvers are occurring in Northeast China?

6. What kind of border security measures is China employing?

7. How is China dealing with North Korean refugees in China?

ENDNOTES

1. For example, in Nicholas Eberstadt's book titled *The End of North Korea*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1999, it is not completely clear whether the author is discussing the end of the regime of Kim Jong Il or the country of North Korea. It appears that the author believes that the end of the former will be synonymous with the end of the latter.

2. See, for example, Lonnie Henley, "Korean Cataclysm: A War Scenario," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1997, pp. C1, C4. For a fictional but realistic depiction of a North Korean invasion of South Korea, see Larry Bond, *Red Phoenix*, New York: Warner Books, 1990. While this novel was written prior to the end of the Cold War, with some notable exceptions, this scenario holds up well more than 15 years later.

3. Andrew Scobell and John M. Sanford, *North Korea's Military Threat*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, April 2007.

4. Other examples from history include the victory of Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army over the Royalists in the 17th Century English Civil War. King Charles I was beheaded and the monarchial system was abolished (albeit temporarily), but England as a state survived regime change. Similarly, the French Revolution a century later saw the end of the monarchy but a continuation of France as a republican regime.

5. Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 12.

6. *Ibid*.

7. Robert I. Rotberg, "The New Nature of Nation-State Failure," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Summer 2002, p. 86.

8. Rotberg, "The New Nature of Nation-State Failure," p. 87. Economic collapse is stressed by Robert Dorff, "Responding to the Failed State: The Need for Strategy," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1999, p. 64.

9. Bunce, *Subversive Institutions*, pp. 11-12.

10. Rotberg, "The New Nature of Nation-State Failure," p. 90.

11. Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, "Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and Juridical in Statehood," *World Politics*, October 1982, pp. 1-24.

12. Rotberg, p. 90. The seven he identifies are Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan.

13. "The Failed State Index 2007," *Foreign Policy*, no. 161, July/ August 2007, pp. 54-63.

14. Rotberg, "The New Nature of Nation-State Failure," p. 90.

15. "The Failed State Index 2007," p. 57.

16. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Chose to Fail or Succeed*, New York: Viking, 2005, p. 3.

17. "The Failed State Index 2007," p. 56.

18. For an excellent example of the process approach, see Robert Collins, "Pattern of Collapse in North Korea," unpublished manuscript (n.d.). For published discussion of this paper, see Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, New York: Thomas Dunne, 2004, pp. 553-555.

19. Of course, these challenges of information overload and separating the wheat from the chaff bedevil information age researchers pursuing virtually any topic. Andrew Scobell, "Notional North Korea," *Parameters*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1, Spring 2007, p. 117.

20. See, for example, Andrew Scobell, *North Korea's Strategic Intentions*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2005.

21. On the former conception, see Selig Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000; on the latter conception, see Robert L Carlin and Joel S. Wit, *North Korean Reform: Politics, Economics, and Security*, Adelphi Paper No. 382, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006.

22. Daniel A. Pinkston, "Domestic Politics and Stakeholders in the North Korean Missile Development Program," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 107, Summer 2003, pp. 51-65.

23. Lankov actually uses the term "Stalinist," but for the purposes of this discussion, the term "Stalinist" is virtually interchangeable with "Totalitarianism." See Andrei Lankov, "The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism," *Asia Policy*, Vol. 1, 2006, pp. 95-121.

24. Andrew Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea: The Leader and the System*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2006.

25. For discussion of the concept with reference to North Korea, see Andrew Scobell, "Making Sense of North Korea: Pyongyang and Comparative Communism," *Asian Security*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2005, pp. 245-266. For discussion of the term more broadly, see Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000.

26. Due at least in part to the hereditary nature of the succession in North Korea combined with 2 decades of grooming.

27. Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea,* pp. 37-38.

28. Scobell*, North Korea's Strategic Intentions.*

29. For example, on the denuclearization of the peninsula, see Tong Kim, "You Say Okjeryok, I Say Deterrent: No Wonder We Don't Agree," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2005. Kim Jong Il claims that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was his father's "fervent wish." See also Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea,* pp. 27-28.

30. For a more detailed discussion of totalitarianism as a concept and its application to the DPRK, see Scobell, "Making Sense of North Korea"; Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea*. For a comprehensive depiction of totalitarianism in Kim Il Song's day, see Helen Louise Hunter, *Kim Il Sung's North Korea*, New York, Praeger, 1999.

31. On North Korea's records, see Scobell, "Making Sense of North Korea," p. 247.

32. See, for example, the discussion in Marcus Noland, *Korea After Kim Jong Il*, Washington, DC: International Institute for Economics, 2004, pp. 21-28.

33. Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Persistence of North Korea," *Policy Review*, October/November 2004, pp. 23-48.

34. Haggard and Noland conclude that part of the purpose of the reforms was to reassert central control. See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 16.

35. "North Korea's Population, Life Expectancy Inch Up," *Choson Ilbo*, Seoul, June 11, 2007; and "Korea, North" in the *World Factbook* available at *www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/kn.html*.

36. Similar scenarios have been sketched out by other researchers. See, for example, Jonathan D. Pollack and Chung Min Lee, *Preparing for Korean Unification: Scenarios and Implications*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999.

37. Earlier formulations of these scenarios appear as Andrew Scobell, "North Korea: Totalitarian Future; Rollercaster Ride," *The World Today*, Vol. 63, No. 5, May 2007, pp. 7-8; Andrew Scobell, "North Korea Endgame or Mid-Game?: Some Scenarios and their Implications for U.S.-China Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16, No. 51, May 2007, pp. 315-323.

38. Scobell, "Making Sense of North Korea," pp. 37-38.

39. Haggard and Noland argue that the reforms of 2002 held elements of both regime defending and regime transforming. See Haggard and Noland, *Famine in North Korea,* p. 16. The term "system defending" is Adrian Buzo's and is cited in Pollack and Lee, *Preparing for Korean Unification*, p. 34.

40. For an insider account of the negotiations between North Korea and the United States during the Clinton administration, see Robert Gallucci, Daniel Poneman, and Joel Wit, *Going Critical*, Washington, DC: Brookings, 2004.

41. Readers should note my use of this term is different to that of Selig Harrison's. See *Korean Endgame,* p. 26.

42. Lankov, "The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism," pp. 111, 118. Haggard and Noland contend that the "marketization" they describe "can be traced in part to the coping strategies" of various grass roots party, state, military, plus enterprises and families. Haggard and Noland, *Famine in North Korea,* pp. 15-16.

43. Kate Xiao Zhang, *How the Farmers Changed China: Power of the People*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996; and Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Changed National Policy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

44. See, for example, Stephen K. Wegren, "Dilemmas of Agricultural Reform in the Soviet Union," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 1992, pp. 3-36; Stephen K. Wegren, *Agriculture and the State in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.

45. The term is Victor Cha's. See Victor D. Cha and David S. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 18-24.

46. Of course, it is possible that Pyongyang could initiate such offensive military action from a position of more confidence, but this is rather unlikely in this writer's judgment. This is because North Korea appears to recognize under current conditions the KPA will almost certainly be defeated on the battlefield, and the Republic of Korea-U.S. response will be a massive counterattack,

with the goal of ousting the regime. The almost qualifier is there because a North Korean victory is possible in this writer's view in the event of a "perfect storm" scenario in which virtually everything goes right for Pyongyang's forces and almost everything goes wrong for U.S. and ROK military forces.

47. Marcus Noland, "Why North Korea Will Muddle Through," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 4, July/August 1997, pp. 115-117.

48. Roh is quoted in "Roh dismisses Likelihood of N.K. Collapse," *Choson Ilbo*, Seoul, December 4-6, 2004.

49. Cited in Barbara Demick, "Talk Swirling of North Korean Regime Collapse," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2004.

50. Linda Sieg, "Sudden Shock to N. Korean Regime Could Spell Chaos," *Reuters*, December 21, 2004.

51. For some analyses of the succession situation in Cuba, see "Cuba: Fading Away," *The Economist*, August 5, 2006, pp. 34-35 and James C. McKinley, "At Cuba Helm, Castro Brother Stays the Course," New York Times, February 25, 2008, pp. A1, A10.

52. This point has been made by Lieutenant Colonel Nate Freier of the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute in research-in-progress briefings, "After Iraq: Preliminary Thoughts on Strategic State Collapse," attended by the author in early 2006.

53. For some insight into this problem in a former communist country, see Joby Warrick, "Albania's Chemical Cache Raises Fears About Others: Long Forgotten Arms Had Little or No Security," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2005.

54. According to Valerie Bunce, because of the institutional structure of socialist regimes, "intraelite conflict" was chronic, often acute. Such conflict could and invariably did send shock waves through the entire system. Although Bunce does not explicitly say so, the clear implication of her analysis is that elite instability was a fatal flaw in communist regimes. Bunce, *Subversive Institutions*, pp. 26-27.

55. For an example of a study that diligently reads between the lines of DPRK's media, see Carlin and Wit, *North Korean Reform*.

56. In the mid-1990s, there were widely cited reports of a mutiny in the KPA. It was mercilessly repressed. See, for example, Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997.

57. For more on defectors, see Kelly Koh and Glenn Baek, "North Korean Defectors: A Window into a Reunified Korea," in Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, eds., *Korea Briefing, 2000-2001: First Steps Toward Reconciliation and Reunification*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002, pp. 205-225; and Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, "Learning from Those Who Departed Earlier," unpublished manuscript, March 2006.

58. Andrei Lankov, "North Korean Refugees in Northeast China," *Asian Survey*, December 2004, Vol. 44, No. 6, pp. 856-873.

59. On succession as a "wild card" issue, see Bryan Port, "Succession: A Dictator's Dilemma," January 18, 2007, Policy Forum On-line, available at *www.nautilus.org/fora/security/07005Port.html*.

60. For an analysis of China's thinking about North Korea, see Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades in Arms to Allies at Arm's Length*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2004; and Andrew Scobell, "Beijing's Kim Jong Il Headache," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July/August 2007, pp. 35-38.

61. The author has benefited from the insights of Colonel Dwight Raymond and Scot Tanner on this and other points.

62. Jae Cheol Kim, "The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in North Korea: A Preliminary Assessment," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 6, December 2006, pp. 898-916.