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Can the United States Cause the Collapse of North Korea? Should We Try?

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In this brief analysis, I attempt to answer two questions:

- Can the United States cause the collapse of North Korea?
- Should we try?

I have proceeded under the assumption that the answer to the second question does not necessarily depend upon the answer to the first: history is replete with examples of governments pursuing foreign policies that had little, if any, hope of success.

Defining "Collapse"

In attempting to answer these two questions, one must first briefly define collapse. As used by observers of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the term collapse describes a rapid, traumatic process culminating in the dissolution of the North Korean state. A toppling of the Kim Jong Il regime would not itself constitute a collapse of North Korea, even though it might set in motion the eventual disintegration of the state. Collapse could occur relatively peacefully, or as a result of civil or military insurrection. Collapse might even include a brief, albeit costly, military clash with South Korea.

For the purposes of this paper, I am ruling out consideration of any collapse scenario that is the result of a deliberate war of national reunification, whether initiated by the North or the South. There is little doubt that the United States and South Korea together possess the military capability to bring about the collapse of North Korea through force of arms, but few if any American or South Korean officials would advocate such an approach–with its enormous costs–so long as there are viable alternatives.

U.S. Objectives

Any discussion of the viability and desirability of trying to bring about the collapse of North Korea must begin with a common understanding of U.S. objectives on the Korean peninsula. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell has put it quite succinctly, defining our long-standing security goal as "a non-nuclear, peacefully reunified Korean Peninsula." In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Charles Kartman defined U.S. goals slightly differently, placing a somewhat greater emphasis on the role of the Korean people in determining the appropriate timing for any steps toward reunification. Kartman said, "our overall policy goal is to build a durable and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula as a key contribution to regional stability, with an emphasis on facilitating communication and progress by the Korean people themselves [emphasis added] toward national reunification."

I assume that the long-term goal of the United States is to affect–at minimum cost–the reunification of the Korean peninsula under a liberal democratic government, friendly to the United States and fully integrated into the region's political, economic, and security regimes. If the United States were ever to embrace the concept of a divided peninsula as a desirable end-state, this would obviously have a decisive impact on the answer to the second question above.

Policy Options

If one rules out a military attack aimed at destroying the North Korean state, the United States can employ three basic strategies in pursuit of the objective articulated above:

- Containment–relying on deterrence for the present, while hoping for the eventual collapse of North Korea as a consequence of its economic and political isolation and the high costs of waging a "cold war" against the United States and South Korea
- Active Destabilization–an aggressive policy combining military pressure, economic strangulation, and political destabilization, all designed to topple the regime of Kim Jong Il and bring about the collapse of the North Korean state as soon as possible
- Engagement–with the near-term goal of reducing tension on the peninsula, luring the North out of its isolation, and encouraging the DPRK "to become a responsible member of the international community."

These strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive but rather reflect different blends of carrots and sticks applied in pursuit of different near-term objectives. For example, a policy of containment would not preclude efforts to put in place confidence-building measures to minimize the risk of war. It probably would, however, rule out lifting sanctions or taking other steps that might contribute to the economic and military well-being of North Korea.

Clinton Administration Approach

Convinced that deterrence alone is insufficient to deal with North Korea and wary of the risks of instability on the Korean peninsula, the Clinton administration has chosen to pursue a policy of engagement. This policy has sometimes been referred to in shorthand as the "soft landing" strategy. The engagement policy has several elements, including:

- emergency food aid
- energy assistance, provided by the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) under the terms of the Agreed Framework
- POW/MIA remains recovery operations, building contact between U.S. and North Korean military officers; and
- diplomatic incentives to spur North Korean acceptance of international norms in the area of nonproliferation.

The administration has at times been vague, perhaps deliberately, about its endgame. The long-term objective of reunification is clearly subordinate to the near-term objective of promoting stability. Eventually, engagement could itself result in the "collapse" of North Korea, but this is usually described as a possible "side-effect" of the strategy, not its objective. In fact, the policy was devised, in part, to ward off a potentially dangerous North Korean collapse. The preferable path to reunification under the engagement strategy is one of managed incremental political accommodation–perhaps culminating with confederation, "one country, two systems," or even a U.N.-brokered peace agreement and plebiscite.

Can the United States Cause North Korea to Collapse?

The imminent demise of North Korea–a "hard landing"–has been the subject of intense speculation since the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist regimes in 1989-91. Some observers envisage a rapid German-style absorption of the North. Others predict reunification growing out of instability in the North brought on by reform, failed attempts to maintain the status quo, or a hard-line military overthrow of Kim Jong Il. The recent food crisis, coupled with six years of economic contraction and the death of Great Leader Kim Il Sung, together have encouraged the view that the DPRK is on the verge of collapse.

This conviction that the North is about to plummet into the abyss of history has, in turn, raised the question of whether the United States might be able to "nudge" North Korea over the edge. At the height of the North's famine and uncertainties about the succession of Kim Jong Il, some members of the South Korean government have speculated that the North was such a weak "tree" that giving it a few good shakes might make it easy for Seoul to pull it out of the ground, roots and all. Opponents of food aid in the U.S. Congress suggest, implicitly, that if food aid were denied, the brutal North Korean government would be overthrown by a disillusioned populace.

Down…

There can be no doubt that the North's economic difficulties are real and severe. The loss of the Socialist market and, more important, the suspension of economic assistance from the former Soviet Union caused a great shock to the North's economy from which Pyongyang is still trying to recover. A shortage of critical inputs, including coking coal, timber, and electric power, has led to the virtual collapse of industrial production. This, in turn, has reduced hard currency earnings, making it difficult for the North to modernize its obsolete industrial infrastructure.

The end of East Bloc assistance and the subsequent drop in industrial output has also affected the North's agricultural sector. Long a food-deficit country, the North has experienced a steep decline in the production of food grains attributable to shortages of energy, seed, and fertilizer. Natural disasters have also taken a toll. Lacking hard currency reserves or goods to barter, the North has become increasingly dependent on food aid from China and the West to make up for shortfalls in domestic production.

The North has very little chance of resolving its economic difficulties without substantial foreign aid and investment. The DPRK defaulted on its loans in the early 1970s, and it does not have access to traditional sources of credit, including the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank. Although it is surrounded by some of the world's more dynamic economies, it is not integrated with them and has not profited from their development.

…But Not Out

Yet for all its difficulties, North Korea has proven amazingly resilient. There is almost no evidence of significant popular dissatisfaction with the Kim Jong Il regime, despite chronic shortages of food and fuel and the gradual decline in the standard of living. North Koreans interviewed by visiting Western food aid officials do not appear to blame the regime for their hardship. There have been rumors of food riots, but these have not been substantiated. Overall, the food situation has improved in recent months with the fall harvest and the delivery of Western and Chinese food aid. Widespread starvation has been averted.

Although information on the North's ruling elite remains scant, there is no indication of a serious rift within the leadership that might threaten the current regime. Security forces have responded swiftly and ruthlessly to even the hint of isolated cases of unrest or disloyalty. There are no bases of power in North Korea other than the security forces and the Korean Workers Party (KWP), both of which appear to be firmly under Kim Jong Il's control.

Kim has been the Supreme Commander of the People's Army since 1991, and has made a great show of solidarity with the armed forces. In 1996, 38 of Kim Jong Il's fifty-eight public appearances were military related. Since 1993, when he was named chairman of the National Defense Commission, Kim has overseen the appointment of all major military leaders. He has systematically rewarded his followers with top positions within the Korean People's Army. Despite the fact that it took Kim Jong Il more than three years to assume the position of General Secretary of the KWP, there is no evidence of any significant opposition to Kim's leadership of the Party. The defection of senior KWP theorist Hwang Jong Yop was certainly a blow to the prestige of North Korea, but it did not set in motion a cascade of additional high-level defections or purges, suggesting it was, in the end, an isolated case.

The regime has adopted numerous "coping mechanisms" to manage its current difficulties, including the following:

- expanding of "gray markets" for food and consumer goods at the village, town, and provincial level
- delegating to provincial and industry officials the authority to conclude foreign trade agreements
- assigning military units to provide added labor to the agricultural sector
- soliciting foreign food aid, even at the expense of "face" and intrusive monitoring
- inviting investment at the Najin-Sonbong special economic zone under terms largely dictated by foreign entities
- securing a steady flow of heavy fuel oil by signing the Agreed Framework.

Finally, the North has energized its propaganda machine to mobilize the people for the lean times ahead. Recalling the so-called Arduous March undertaken by Korean communist guerrillas in the 1930s, Pyongyang has rallied its people to endure the current crisis as they did the anti-Japanese struggle in Manchuria. Indeed, hardship is nothing new in North Korea. South Korean officials are quick to remind visitors from the United States that North Koreans have a toughness of spirit that allows them to overcome conditions that might break another population. There is undoubtedly a measure of self-congratulatory cultural hubris in such remarks. Nonetheless, the conduct of the North Korean special forces team stranded in the South last fall suggests that there is no shortage of courage in the North, even against long odds.

So far, the regime has proven reluctant to begin the fundamental restructuring of its economy that will be required if the North is to succeed in a post-Cold War world. But even the North's more limited innovations have allowed the regime to "muddle along" longer than many observers expected in the early 1990s. Kim Jong Il will continue to take whatever steps he deems necessary for the survival of the regime. Surrender–particularly to a South Korean state that was willing to sentence two of its own ex-presidents to lengthy prison terms–is not a palatable option.

Limited U.S. Leverage

If the United States were to reverse course and attempt to cause the collapse of North Korea, there are very few tools at its disposal. Specifically, the U.S. could do the following:

- suspend all food aid
- halt KEDO fuel deliveries and suspend construction of the light-water nuclear reactor
- ratchet up military pressure, including TEAM SPIRIT joint military exercises
- discourage allies, including South Korea and Japan, from providing assistance to the North or taking any steps–investment, trade–toward normalizing relations.

However, absent Chinese support, the combined impact of these initiatives would be minimal. And there is no doubt that China would strenuously oppose any efforts by the United States to destabilize North Korea or to lead an international coalition with the objective of strangling the North. China's national interests would not be served by the collapse of North Korea, which could result in hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring into northeast China. China is determined to extend a "life-line" to North Korea, and can afford to do so. Put simply, the fate of North Korea is not in the hands of the United States.

Lost food aid could easily be replaced by China, which already provides 700,000 to 1 millions tons of food grain annually to the North on concessional terms. Similarly, U.S. heavy fuel oil supplies could be replaced by China, which is already the North's largest supplier of oil. With respect to any U.S. military moves, the North already devotes the lion's share of its resources to its armed forces. Additional allocations in response to U.S. force enhancements or provocative exercises are unlikely to "break the bank." Nor would a renewed emphasis on military spending in the North prove politically divisive, particularly in the context of a more aggressive U.S.–Republic of Korea (ROK) force posture. In fact, China might feel compelled to resume military aid to the DPRK if it became convinced that the United States was trying to intimidate the North.

U.S. allies are not likely to support a policy with the avowed purpose of destabilizing the Korean peninsula. In fact, most would vigorously oppose such an approach and might take steps to undermine the effectiveness of any U.S.-led punitive sanctions. Whatever enthusiasm might have existed in some quarters of the South Korean government for a policy of destabilization, it has certainly waned with the growing South Korean economic crisis. The costs of reunification will be enormous, and the South would prefer to defer that expense, even as it continues to mount. There is no evidence that the new South Korean president will abandon the diplomatic path of his predecessor just as four-party peace talks are set to convene in Geneva. In fact, it is more likely that the new president will seek to reduce North-South tension.

In sum, the answer to the question "Can the United States cause the collapse of North Korea?" is probably not.

Should We Try?

The answer to the second question depends on three factors: the chance of "success," the risks involved, and the availability of preferable alternatives. As discussed above, a policy of destabilization stands little chance of toppling the Kim Jong Il regime or bringing about the collapse of the North Korean state. Such a policy would isolate the United States diplomatically and play to the strengths of the dictatorial North Korean regime.

The risks associated with any effort to cause the collapse of North Korea are not inconsiderable. As already mentioned, the DPRK leadership does not see surrender as an option. The North is almost certain to respond to a policy of intimidation and strangulation by ratcheting up its own military threat. Unless the North collapsed quickly–which seems unlikely given the sources of regime stability and the likely intervention of China on the North's behalf–it would respond to U.S. pressure with truculence.

The North would very likely commence reprocessing operations on any spent fuel it could recover from its Yongbyon nuclear facility, returning the Korean peninsula to the dark days of 1993-94. The North might also resort to terrorism–an arrow that remains in the North's quiver. The risk of war, either as the result of a deliberate North Korean attack or through inadvertent escalation, would increase dramatically.

Despite its obsolete military hardware, the North could still inflict considerable damage on U.S. and South Korean forces with little advance warning. Long-range self-propelled artillery located in hardened tunnel complexes along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) could fire thousands of high-explosive or chemical-biological rounds on Seoul in the initial hours of any conflict. SCUD missiles, also possibly equipped with unconventional warheads, could range the entire Korean peninsula. As the United States discovered during the Gulf War, destroying mobile SCUD launchers is difficult, even in the desert. It would prove a daunting task in the mountains of North Korea.

Finally, as to alternatives, there are at least two–containment and engagement–that appear far more likely to achieve the U.S. objective of peaceful reunification than would a policy of destabilization. Both alternatives have a lower risk of conflict than does the collapse scenario, and both enjoy support from our allies.

Thus, the answer to the question "Should the United States try to cause the collapse of North Korea" is *certainly not*.

Conclusion

I close with a "bonus question" being asked by critics of engagement on Capital Hill: "Should the United States intervene to try to prevent a collapse of North Korea?" The short answer to this question is *certainly not*. A collapse that occurs through no fault of our own, and despite China's best efforts to prevent it, should be looked upon as a blessing to the people of North and South Korea. The purpose of engagement is not to prop up Kim Jong Il. Engagement is a pragmatic policy designed to minimize the risk of war while laying the groundwork for the eventual peaceful reunification of Korea under conditions favorable to the United States and South Korea.

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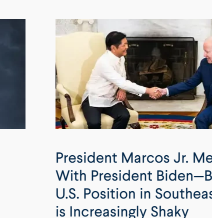

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