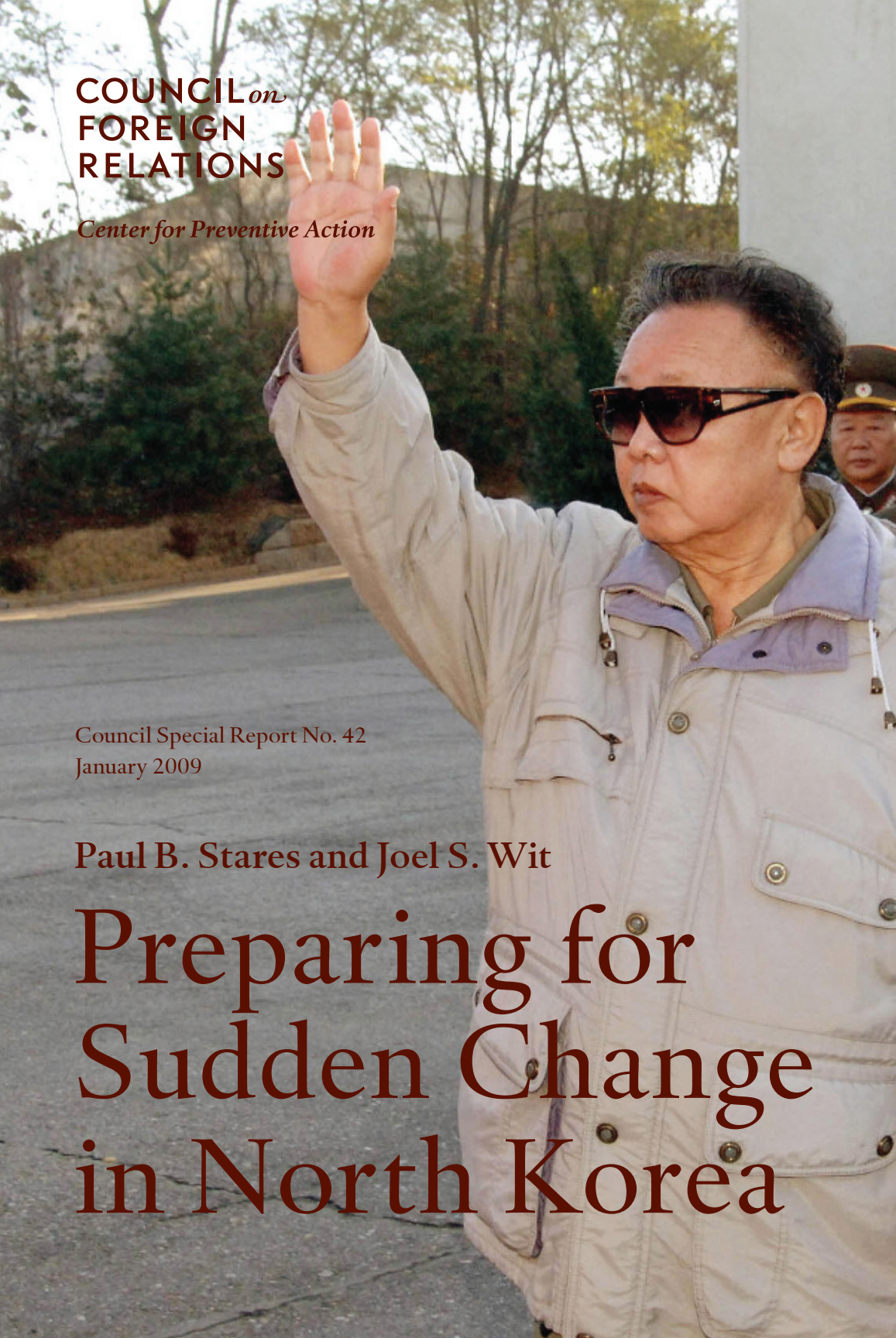

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

Council Special Report No. 42
January 2009

Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit

Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea

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Cover Photo: Undated picture from Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on November 6, 2008, shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il inspecting a drill ground of a subunit of Korean People's Army Unit 534 at an undisclosed location. KCNA said Kim inspected two army units in the company of several generals and released two pictures. It did not say when or where the visits were made (KCNA/AFP/Getty Images).

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Foreword

North Korea poses difficult challenges for U.S. foreign policy. It possesses nuclear weapons and missiles to deliver them, and despite some progress, it is by no means clear that the ongoing Six-Party Talks will be able to reveal the full extent of the country's nuclear activities, much less persuade Pyongyang to give them up. The United States maintains tens of thousands of forces on the Korean peninsula in support of its commitments to the Republic of Korea (South Korea), a country with which the North is still technically at war. And the peninsula sits in a strategically vital region, where the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea all have important interests at stake.

All of this puts a premium on close attention to and knowledge of developments in North Korea. Unfortunately, Kim Jong-Il's government is perhaps the world's most difficult to read or even see. This Council Special Report, commissioned by the Council's Center for Preventive Action and authored by Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, focuses on how to manage one of the central unknowns: the prospect of a change in North Korea's leadership. The report examines three scenarios: managed succession, in which the top post transitions smoothly; contested succession, in which government officials or factions fight for power after Kim's demise; and failed succession, in which a new government cannot cement its legitimacy, possibly leading to North Korea's collapse. The authors consider the challenges that these scenarios would pose—ranging from securing Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal to providing humanitarian assistance—and analyze the interests of the United States and others. They then provide recommendations for U.S. policy. In particular, they urge Washington to bolster its contingency planning and capabilities in cooperation with South Korea, Japan, and others, and to build a dialogue with China that could address each side's concerns.

With Kim Jong-Il's health uncertain and with a new U.S. president in office, this report could not be more timely. And with all the issues

at stake on the Korean peninsula, the subject could not be more important. *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea* is a thoughtful work that provides valuable insights for managing a scenario sure to arise in the coming months or years.

Richard N. Haass
President
Council on Foreign Relations
January 2009

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Paul B. Stares
Joel S. Wit
January 2009

Map of Korean Peninsula

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, available at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/map_item.pl.

Acronyms

CONPLAN	concept plan
DDR	disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of North Korea
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
ICRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
KWP	Korean Workers' Party
MND	Ministry of National Defense
MPAT	Multilateral Planning Augmentation Team
NDC	National Defense Commission
NPT	Nonproliferation Treaty
NSC	National Security Council
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (United Nations)
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OPLAN	operational plan
PDS	public distribution system
PLA	People's Liberation Army
ROK	Republic of Korea
SSD	State Security Department
TCOG	Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

USFK	U.S. Forces Korea
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

Council Special Report

Introduction

For most of the 1990s, North Korea was under what can only be called a prolonged deathwatch, so common and confident were predictions of its demise.[1] Despite suffering acute economic stress from the loss of its principal economic patron—the Soviet Union—in 1991, the sudden death of its founding father—Kim Il-Sung—in 1994, and then soon after a devastating famine that may have claimed as many as a million lives, North Korea managed to survive. By decade's end, North Korea's extraordinary resilience, combined with its defiant and at times belligerent attitude to the rest of the world, had convinced most experts that this was not a country about to pass either quickly or quietly into the history books. Since then, the conventional wisdom among most if not all North Korea watchers is that it will muddle through indefinitely even if its long-term future remains doubtful.

There are certainly good reasons to be skeptical about the possibility of fundamental political change in North Korea, certainly through a "people-power" type social movement that have toppled dictatorships elsewhere. The country's cult-like political system, its relative geographical and political isolation, the absence of any real civil society, and repressive state control all clearly reduce the impetus and opportunities for change from below. To the extent that speculation about the survival of the North Korean regime has continued to surface periodically, it has typically involved uncertainties about the succession of Kim Jong-Il, the country's paramount leader since his father's death in 1994. With no clearly designated successor, the possibility of a leadership crisis should he be incapacitated or die suddenly has been regularly mentioned as a potential source of instability and even regime change. However, Kim Jong-Il's apparent vigor in public appearances and private meetings with foreign dignitaries, his young age (early sixties) relative to his father's when he died (eighty-two), and the possibility that any of his three sons could be groomed to replace him were all reasons

to believe that a succession crisis would not happen any time soon—if at all.

These confident assumptions about North Korea have recently been jolted by reports that Kim Jong-Il suffered a debilitating stroke in early August 2008 after he failed to appear at an event celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the state. Despite official protestations of his good health, Kim Jong-Il disappeared from sight for several months with many rumors circulating about his physical and mental impairment.[2] However, with no outward signs that a leadership transition is under way, the prevailing expectation is that he is recuperating and the situation will eventually return to the status quo ante.

It is possible, however, that Kim Jong-Il's condition may actually be much worse than press reports suggest and that his capacity to govern —if it hasn't already been seriously compromised—may be short lived. There has long been speculation that he is a diabetic and therefore prone to kidney failure, heart complications, and at a higher risk of stroke.[3] Indeed, preparations for his succession may already have begun (or been accelerated) but discreetly, to prepare the rest of the country for the transition. The designated leader or leaders may even have assumed considerable governing powers with both Kim's blessing and the support of other senior members of the regime. Given how little we know about the inner workings of North Korea, this is entirely plausible. If true, continuity of the regime, albeit under new leadership, will have been maintained with most likely minimal impact on the rest of North Korea and its outward posture.

However, other scenarios that bring about more fundamental change to North Korea should not be summarily dismissed. It is possible, for example, that succession planning would not proceed smoothly—if at all—leaving a vacuum at the top or a weak transitional arrangement should Kim suffer a fatal relapse. This might tempt certain individuals or factions to seize power, resulting in a potentially disruptive and even violent leadership struggle. What outcome might ensue and what course North Korea might take as a consequence is impossible to predict, but a prolonged and potentially violent contest for supremacy in Pyongyang—North Korea's capital—would undoubtedly place immense stress on the rest of the country, given how much the state is controlled from the center. Resilient though it has proven to be, North Korea is still a fundamentally weak state.[4] Its economy has never recovered from the contraction of the 1990s and the population remains chronically

short of food and other basic necessities. Indeed, before news broke of Kim's illness, the UN's World Food Program (WFP) had warned that the country was facing widespread food shortages and even famine.

Under these circumstances, the uncertainty and stress imposed by a lengthy and perhaps ultimately inconclusive leadership struggle on the overall system of governance might prove too much. As numerous cases from around the world attest, totalitarian states—despite outward signs of strength—are remarkably brittle when stressed by internal forces. North Korea is an exceptional state for all the reasons outlined, but at a certain point the pressures could become too intense for the country to stay intact. In this case, earlier predictions of collapse and the end of North Korea as an independent sovereign state might finally come to pass.

These various scenarios would present the United States and the neighboring states with challenges and dilemmas that, depending on how events were to unfold, could grow in size and complexity. Important and vital interests are at stake for all concerned. North Korea is hardly a normal country located in a strategic backwater of the world. As a nuclear weapons state and exporter of ballistic missile systems, it has long been a serious proliferation concern to Washington. With one of the world's largest armies in possession of huge numbers of long-range artillery and missiles, it can also wreak havoc on America's most important Asian allies—South Korea and Japan—both of which are home to large numbers of American citizens and host to major U.S. garrisons committed to their defense. Moreover, North Korea abuts two great powers—China and Russia—that have important interests at stake in the future of the peninsula. That they would become actively engaged in any future crisis involving North Korea is virtually guaranteed.

Although all the interested powers share a basic interest in maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia, a major crisis from within North Korea could lead to significant tensions and—as in the past—even conflict between them. A contested or prolonged leadership struggle in Pyongyang would inevitably raise questions in Washington about whether the United States should try to sway the outcome.[5] Some will almost certainly argue that only by promoting regime change will the threat now posed by North Korea as a global proliferator, as a regional menace to America's allies, and as a massive human rights violator, finally disappear. Such views could gain some currency in Seoul and even Tokyo, though it seems unlikely. Beijing, however, would certainly

look on any attempt to promote a pro-American regime in Pyongyang as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and a challenge to China's national interests.

This and other potential sources of friction could intensify should the situation in North Korea deteriorate. The impact of a severe power struggle in Pyongyang on the availability of food and other basic services could cause tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee North Korea. The pressure on neighboring countries to intervene with humanitarian assistance and use their military to stem the flow of refugees would likely grow in these circumstances. Suspicions that the situation could be exploited by others for political advantage would add to the pressure to act sooner rather than later in a crisis. China would be the most likely destination for refugees because of its relatively open and porous border; its People's Liberation Army (PLA) has reportedly developed contingency plans to intervene in North Korea for possible humanitarian, peacekeeping, and "environmental control" missions.[6] Besides increasing the risk of dangerous military interactions and unintended escalation in sensitive borders areas, China's actions would likely cause considerable consternation in South Korea about its ultimate intentions toward the peninsula. China no doubt harbors similar fears about potential South Korean and American intervention in the North.

Should the situation unravel further and North Korea begin to collapse entirely, another set of issues would come to the fore and likely place still more strain on allied cooperation and regional stability. For South Korea, the disintegration of the North Korean state would present both the opportunity to reunify the Korean people and the challenge of coping with the aftermath of change. Having seen the enormous social and economic costs that reunification imposed on Germany, Seoul might balk at rapid absorption and choose instead a slower, incremental path—assuming it had the choice. Although Washington's inclination will be to defer to Seoul's wishes, it may still prefer not to delay or risk the opportunity for Korean reunification that it has long seen as desirable for the stability of northeast Asia. The possibility, therefore, of discord arising between Washington and Seoul over the pace and character of reunification is not inconceivable. In any case, Washington's acute concern about the security and safety of North Korea's nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction might force it to take unilateral action. Such action could put it at odds with Seoul, not

to mention Beijing. Tokyo's legitimate concerns would also need to be taken into account.

China's likely preference in such circumstances would be to sustain North Korea as an independent state for as long as possible. Should that goal prove untenable, Beijing would seek to preserve important Chinese interests, such as maintaining strategic depth, regional influence, and economic stability—all of which could bring it into conflict with Washington and Seoul. The prospect of North Korea being absorbed by South Korea and U.S. forces potentially being deployed near China's northeastern border are matters of acute concern. The same fears helped trigger China's entry into the Korean War. Moscow undoubtedly shares many of Beijing's concerns, though Russia appears less poised to intervene should the situation deteriorate. Its diplomatic and possibly logistical support would still be critical in managing a major crisis on the peninsula. However, with the deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations since the Georgia crisis of August 2008, Russia's role in any future North Korean contingency might not be as passive or as cooperative as many have so far assumed.

How the potential challenges associated with sudden, destabilizing change in North Korea are handled will have profound consequences for the subsequent evolution of Korea, the stability of northeast Asia, and the future course of U.S.-China relations. Unfortunately, there are good reasons to be concerned about the level of preparedness of all the principal actors, including the United States and its allies, and with it the potential for misunderstanding and outright discord.

During the 1990s, when it looked as if North Korea would collapse, the United States and South Korea began to consider a range of contingencies involving instability in the North. These discussions were designed largely to improve military-to-military coordination and rarely involved joint political or civilian consultation. Seoul has in fact been reluctant to share details about its own national reunification plans with Washington. Once the likelihood of a North Korea collapse receded, this planning ceased to be a high priority. For Seoul, the imperative shifted to preventing rather than managing instability and sudden collapse in North Korea through a deliberate policy of direct engagement designed to help Pyongyang feed its citizens and develop economically. Thus, when the United States pressed South Korea in 2005 to upgrade an earlier joint concept of operations plan (CONPLAN 5029) that

addressed various sources of instability in North Korea and turn it into a more detailed and concrete operational plan (OPLAN), the initiative was rebuffed out of fear that it would antagonize Pyongyang and limit Seoul's sovereign prerogatives in a crisis.[7]

Tokyo also developed plans in the 1990s to prepare for the possibility that North Korea might suddenly collapse, but Japan's pacifist constitution has limited the scope of joint planning and coordination with the United States. More important, historical animosities and continuing political frictions with South Korea over a variety of issues have effectively prevented any real allied dialogue among the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan, much less contingency planning for instability in North Korea.

Over the same period, China has remained reluctant to engage in any sustained dialogue about the possibility of political instability with other contingencies in the North for fear of alienating its relationship with its erstwhile Cold War ally. High-level political consultations and military-to-military discussions have taken place between the United States and China in recent years, but they have left little room for anything more than superficial exchanges on the topic. Even the Six-Party diplomatic process involving the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas aimed at denuclearizing the peninsula has provided little opportunity to build consensus among the principal players. Its deliberations beyond the issues of nuclear disarmament have been general and the involvement of North Korea limits the scope for discussion.

Given these concerns, the purpose of this Council Special Report is to encourage greater attention and heightened preparedness by the United States to meet the potential challenges of sudden and destabilizing change in North Korea. The report is organized into three parts. The first examines in greater detail a range of plausible scenarios that might be precipitated with the succession of Kim Jong-Il. The intent is not to be exhaustive but rather to illustrate how events might unfold in significant and challenging ways. The second part analyzes the potential implications of these scenarios for the United States and other principal actors. The third and final section proposes some guiding principles as well as a set of practical policy recommendations to help the United States prepare for the possibility of sudden and destabilizing change in North Korea. These measures have been conceived and designed in ways that recognize the obvious international sensitivities about discussing the future of North Korea, especially given that it remains a

critical partner in various endeavors, not least the denuclearization of the peninsula. In the best of circumstances, governments rarely want to discuss their national contingency plans or divulge how they intend to react in a given situation. Although this puts real constraints on the level of cooperation in advance of a major crisis in North Korea, the risks are too great and the stakes too high to rely on last-minute improvisation for a peaceful and stable outcome.

Scenarios for Change in North Korea

North Korea could change suddenly in any number of ways. Given the various structural impediments that reduce if not eliminate the prospects for change from below, the most plausible scenarios still entail some kind of a leadership transition or, put differently, change from above. Thus, for the purposes of this study, three succession scenarios are considered without any judgment about their relative likelihood.

The first is a successfully managed succession process that preserves the current regime under new leadership. The second is a contested succession that ultimately produces regime change in Pyongyang. The third scenario is a failed succession process that produces no clear and effective national leader, fatally weakening North Korea as a functioning state and leading to its eventual demise. Different variations of these scenarios can, of course, be postulated. For example, the succession might be contested but the current regime prevail. Or the current regime might be successfully replaced but the system it created crumble. Other events, whether deriving from internal or external events (for example, a large-scale humanitarian disaster, a severe economic shock, or major military crisis) could also all play a role in either triggering or accelerating the different scenarios. Nevertheless, the three chosen scenarios capture the most important possible outcomes.

MANAGED SUCCESSION

There are no outward indications that Kim Jong-Il has designated a successor, certainly not in the way that his father groomed him for leadership over some twenty years, placing him in progressively more senior positions of responsibility while sending clear signals of his choice to the rest of the regime and the general public to buttress his legitimacy.[8] Although Kim's current illness may have accelerated such

preparations, the transitional arrangement or eventual successor is by no means obvious.

Given the earlier precedent of father-to-son succession, a continuation of the Kim dynasty would be the most likely outcome save that each of Kim Jong-Il's three sons are widely considered deficient or compromised in some way. The oldest—Kim Jong-Nam—is widely viewed as lacking in stature in part because he was born out of wedlock but, particularly, because he was disgraced after being arrested for using a false passport at Tokyo airport in 2001 while on a visit to nearby Disneyland. Subsequent reports indicated that he was being actively rehabilitated with senior government appointments and visits abroad with his father but later sightings of him living a privileged existence in Macau have suggested otherwise, however. The other two sons—Kim Jong-Chul and Kim Jong-Un—have also from time to time been mentioned as possible successors. A brief bout of propaganda extolling the virtues of their common mother led several observers to conclude that this was the preferred line of succession. Both, however, are considered too young and inexperienced. There have also been unsubstantiated rumors about their health and physical attributes.[9]

For these reasons, a caretaker arrangement involving one or more of the following has been seen by some to be more likely: Chang Song-Taek, Kim Jong-Il's brother-in-law; Kim Ok, Kim Jong-Il's current wife/partner; and Kim Yong-Nam, the president of the Presidium. Although Kim Ok is believed to wield influence as Kim Jong-Il's "personal secretary," her authority is considered largely ephemeral because it is derived solely from her relationship to Kim Jong-Il.[10] Chang Song-Taek, by comparison, has developed his own power base as director of the administrative department within the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), where he has major responsibilities overseeing the domestic intelligence, police, and judiciary agencies. Chang also has close family connections to the police and army, including a brother who is corps commander of the Pyongyang Military District.

A variation on this managed succession scenario is the emergence of a more formal collective leadership to include senior members of the National Defense Commission (NDC), who essentially run the country. The NDC is seen as a likely basis for a collective leadership for several reasons. First, the NDC became the supreme governing body of North Korea when Kim Jong-Il decided, after his father's death, to use his chairmanship of it to wield power rather than assume the more

formal title and duties of state president.[11] Second, all ten members of the NDC (seven generals and three civilians) owe their positions to Kim Jong-Il, though some had had personal ties with his father. Third, the mainly military composition of the NDC is seen as helping ensure the support of the armed forces. Some have also speculated that one of the sons could play a figurehead or regent role to lend legitimacy to the new collective leadership.[12]

Under this scenario, the transfer of power would be more or less seamless. The regime that has ruled North Korea since 1948 would essentially perpetuate itself. Given Kim's extensive patronage system—he has personally promoted 1,131 of the 1,400 generals in the officer's corps and provided the ruling elite with many perquisites, such as privileged access to housing, education, food, liquor, and personal transportation—the incentives for members of the existing regime to not rock the boat are high. It is also seems likely that the new leadership would continue on the policy course set by Kim Jong-Il, but this cannot be assumed. The new leader or leadership may believe that a change in course—perhaps one more open and cooperative with the outside world—is not just desirable but necessary if North Korea is to survive. A process akin to what occurred in Vietnam, which opened substantially and undertook market-based reforms while maintaining obeisance to Ho Chi Minh and his system of political control, could be the preferred course.

CONTESTED SUCCESSION

Though information is sparse, the existence of personal rivalries and different factions within the North Korean regime has long been the source of speculation.[13] If true, the succession of Kim Jong-Il could become a messy, contested process with certain individuals or factions vying for power. Some might consider themselves the rightful heir and the designated successor—assuming there is one—to be illegitimate in some way. Alternatively, the source of a leadership struggle could be simply a contest for absolute power regardless of anything ideological. It could also emerge somewhat later because of fundamental policy differences, perhaps of the kind alluded to, rather than out of anything personal.

How a power struggle would play out and who the eventual winner or winners might be is obviously impossible to predict, but a prolonged, divisive, and potentially even violent succession struggle is not out of the question. Much would hinge on the leadership skills of the individuals involved, their personal networks, and their organizational capacities, to say nothing of their sources of funding—foreign and domestic, including access to the Kim family's bank accounts—that would enable them to buy support and valuable resources in any power struggle.[14] Not surprisingly, the backing of the armed forces and also probably the State Security Department (SSD)—North Korea's intelligence agency—is considered pivotal to the outcome of a possible power struggle.[15] Indeed, the Army—with or without the SSD—may even be the prime instigator. Unconfirmed reports of past assassination attempts and military purges not to mention the apparent precautions Kim takes to ensure his personal security when traveling around the country all suggest that a military-led coup is quite plausible.[16] Whether one would ultimately succeed and how peacefully it would be carried out depends on the amount of support its leaders might enjoy among the rest of the armed forces. Distinct factions based on regional affiliations, university education, and military academy graduating class are believed to exist in the armed forces, which could cause the armed forces to splinter and coalesce around those competing for power in Pyongyang.[17]

Under this scenario, a new regime would eventually emerge, but not one that would draw its legitimacy from the Kim dynasty. The possibility of a clean break or a new policy course would clearly exist. As under a managed succession scenario, either could involve a more positive attitude toward internal political reform and external engagement. The precedent and model would therefore be more like China than Vietnam. Conversely, it could also lead in the opposite direction—toward tighter, more repressive state controls and even less international cooperation.

FAILED SUCCESSION

For whatever reason, the successor arrangements might ultimately fail to produce a governing regime that enjoyed broad based support and legitimacy. There might be a self-declared government in Pyongyang, but its writ might not extend much beyond the city limits. A situation

akin to the 1989 breakdown of political authority in much of eastern Europe could take place. But, unlike eastern Europe, the loss of direction and control from Pyongyang could produce more fundamental and widespread collapse with serious humanitarian consequences.

Despite the proclaimed system of *juche*, or self-reliance, North Korea's economy is extremely weak and continues to depend heavily on foreign assistance, particularly for vital energy supplies. Similarly, the agricultural sector is chronically incapable of providing enough food to feed the people. The relatively limited amounts of arable land are vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, such as flooding, and a recurring shortage of fertilizer also reduces yields. These problems combined with widespread postharvest wastage (or illicit diversion), a decrepit transportation system, and a rickety public distribution system (PDS) mean that access to adequate food is a constant challenge to many North Koreans. Indeed, as recently as September 2008, the UN World Food Program (WFP) warned that the food situation in many parts of North Korea had become dire. Severe rains during the peak of the growing season in August 2007 reportedly damaged up to 25 percent of standing crops of maize and rice and led to a poor fall harvest and overall shortfall in food stocks.[18] Other factors—a reduction of food assistance from South Korea and China, rising worldwide commodity prices, and a shortage of fuel to distribute food internally—have compounded an already serious situation. A UN-sponsored survey reported that close to 75 percent of the respondents had sharply reduced their daily food intake and more than half were eating two rather than the usual three meals a day.[19] Although the WFP has since organized a concerted campaign of food assistance, including a major contribution of 500,000 tons from the United States, North Korea remains acutely vulnerable to future crises of this kind.[20] If a succession crisis were to compromise the delivery and distribution of food and other assistance, the situation could become critical in North Korea.

Should Pyongyang's authority begin to break down irredeemably and North Korea as a functioning state enter a terminal phase, its rapid absorption by South Korea is widely viewed as the inevitable next step. Seoul, however, in conjunction with any residual authority remaining in the North, might choose to manage this in stages or at least to slow down the pace of absorption through an interim confederated political arrangement as a precursor to full union. In the immediate aftermath

of the fall of the Berlin Wall and before German reunification appeared inevitable, just such an arrangement was pushed by East German leaders in a desperate effort to retain some degree of independence from the West. Although the likely costs of rapid absorption would be a factor in Seoul's calculus, so too would be the attitude and behavior of other interested players.

Challenges and Dilemmas

These three scenarios would present decision-makers in Washington and the capitals of northeast Asia with challenges and dilemmas of varying complexity and severity that derive from the potential spillover effects of change in North Korea as well as the potential spill-in pressures to intervene in various ways. In general, unfolding events would likely be hard to discern given the limited sources of information within North Korea. Decision-makers would, as a consequence, have to grapple with ambiguous and conflicting reports that may lag significantly behind events on the ground. As in any crisis, competing pressures and impulses would doubtlessly arise: whether to respond or wait and see, whether to shape and even accelerate events or to let them take their natural course, and whether to act unilaterally or in concert with others.

A managed succession scenario would be the least challenging because it would be only a minimal departure from the current situation. Other than possibly causing a temporary hiatus in decision-making in Pyongyang as the reins of power were transferred, the spillover effects would likely be minimal. Regardless of who assumes power, however, the United States and its allies are likely to view the transition period as a time not only to seek reassurances about prior North Korean commitments but also to probe the regime in Pyongyang about its intentions. It is conceivable that different assessments emerge about whether the new leadership represents continuity or change that in turn become the source of friction over which policies to rescind or renew. Something similar occurred after Gorbachev assumed power in the Soviet Union, the United States and several of its European allies disagreeing over whether he was a real reformer and sincere about his desire to improve relations with the West.

Meanwhile, China would likely be trying to establish a working relationship with the new leadership to maintain its influence in North Korea. This could put it at odds with the other interested powers,

especially South Korea, who view China's designs toward the peninsula with some suspicion. As in the past, Pyongyang would likely exploit this situation to its advantage by playing one power against another.

In contrast, a contested succession would present more difficult challenges and dilemmas, though much would depend on how turbulent and prolonged such a struggle became. The possibility that Washington would favor one side over another, perhaps because it was seen as more reformist or predisposed toward external cooperation, is quite conceivable. This would immediately raise the question of how to lend support without possibly compromising its internal prospects, not to mention its very survival. Again, fundamental disagreements could develop among the allies over how to respond, with some wishing to be more assertive than others. The dilemmas could grow more acute if one of the competing factions either openly or discreetly called for assistance, say from South Korea. Seoul would doubtlessly find it difficult to resist such an appeal. But what if another faction were to simultaneously appeal to Beijing for support? Beijing too might find such a request hard to ignore, especially if it believed that the cost of inaction would lead to the erosion of its influence in the North. Relations between Seoul and Beijing could become seriously strained with Washington potentially caught in the middle.

A different but no less challenging spillover effect is the possibility of border incidents involving the North Korean military. With the likelihood that the North Korean military would be put on heightened alert during any succession scenario at the same time as neighboring nations are trying to learn more about what is happening inside North Korea and the intentions of the North Korean military, the risk of dangerous incidents and interactions occurring would inevitably increase. A long history of such incidents should validate the seriousness of this concern.[21] A power struggle in Pyongyang involving competing factions with conceivably different sources of support in the North Korean military could also result in border incidents staged to build domestic political support. Those incidents would most likely occur in the DMZ or in the West Sea, where the North and South have clashed before over areas of disputed sovereignty. Last is the possibility that a contested leadership crisis could lead to the wholesale defection of North Korean military units, whether out of defeat, despair, or desperation. Because the military have access to transportation and fuel, this possibility cannot be dismissed lightly. In either case, the potential for a crisis to escalate because of misunderstanding or miscalculation is considerable.

The most commonly feared spillover effect of a violent or prolonged succession struggle that causes a catastrophic breakdown in the food distribution system and public order is a large exodus of refugees. China would be the most logical destination given the formidable obstacle that the heavily mined and guarded demilitarized zone (DMZ) poses to reaching South Korea. Beijing would have the option of accepting and taking care of these refugees, possibly drawing on many of the same internal resources that allowed China to cope with its own natural disasters, such as the recent earthquake in Sichuan. But, given its past attitudes toward North Korean refugees, as well as fears of the negative political and economic consequences of accepting increasing numbers onto its territory, Beijing might opt for seizing a narrow strip of land inside the North to prevent any influx. Judging by the negative South Korean reaction to recent reports that China is prepared to do just this, a reaction that derived from long-standing and deep-seated suspicions about China's designs for the peninsula, relations could become seriously strained, thereby complicating management of the crisis.[22]

Should a humanitarian crisis inside North Korea intensify in the wake of a Pyongyang power struggle, the pressure within neighboring countries—particularly South Korea—to intervene and provide assistance would almost certainly grow. Since the UN World Summit of 2005, member states have affirmed a collective responsibility to protect innocent civilians in the face of repressive or deliberately negligent government behavior. Many are sure to invoke this obligation in a severe crisis. As past cases illustrate, however, humanitarian intervention presents a host of sensitive political and operational challenges. In the case of North Korea, they would likely be magnified, given the inherent suspicions of the regime toward the outside world, as well as among neighboring countries, about their different national agendas for the future of North Korea.

Whatever the humanitarian imperatives, a possible breakdown of internal controls over North Korea's stockpile of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) would likely provide even stronger pressures to intervene. There is little or no information on what those controls are today, but the stockpiles are almost certainly the responsibility of the North Korean military. If the cohesion of the military were to begin to fray, preventing leakage of WMDs, materials, and technologies beyond the North's borders would become an urgent priority. Although neighboring states share a common interest in preventing such a leakage,

serious differences could still arise over the necessity and execution of any military operation designed to secure WMDs.

In the event that North Korea were to collapse and its future as an independent state begin to look doubtful, the principal parties would increasingly focus on a different, though related, set of challenges having to do with the formation and final status of a unified Korea. For the United States, fostering reunification in line with broader national security objectives—bringing greater stability to the region, advancing economic integration and rules-based trade, and promoting self-determination and human rights—would be of the utmost importance. Those objectives, combined with strong support for what would likely be a leading South Korean role in dealing with Pyongyang's collapse and the knowledge that Washington should play an important role in balancing other regional powers, would inform American policy. Aside from seeking to work cooperatively with China and other concerned countries on the broad range of challenges posed by instability, the United States can be expected to play a more direct role in helping ensure the establishment of security and stability in the North. Nevertheless, that role would almost certainly not include providing significant ground troops that might remain in the North, but rather logistical and other support. American forces can be expected, however, to play a direct role in removing the threat posed by the North's WMD programs—locating and seizing weapons, materials, and technology before any leakage occurs beyond its borders.

For Seoul, North Korea's collapse would present both major opportunities and enormous burdens. Although the long sought-after goal of reunification would beckon, Seoul would also face, according to one CIA assessment, "the prospect of massive movements of people as well as uncontrollable demands for economic aid and the legal, administrative problems of absorbing a large and economically backward North."[23] Added to those challenges would be the potentially enormous difficulties of establishing security and stability in the North in the wake of the regime's collapse. These problems, along with the persistence of regional animosities in the South, have led some experts to question whether Seoul could "survive the vortex of national unification."[24] As a result, as indicated, South Korea might opt to establish a separate or confederated entity in the North to manage the pace of reunification.

Confronted with a unifying Korea, China would do everything to shape its formation in ways that protected and furthered its interests on

the peninsula. Foremost would be a desire to prevent the United States from establishing military bases in the North or stationing troops, if only temporarily, near its border. Another major objective would be to ensure the security and safe disposal of North's nuclear weapons and other WMDs. Heading off a refugee crisis that could severely disrupt its economy, result in heavy financial costs, and radically increase the number of ethnic Koreans on its territory who might eventually demand greater autonomy from the central government would also be an important priority. Finally, Chinese actions would be designed not only with the nation's long-term political and security interests in mind, but also with important economic objectives, such as significantly expanding cross-border trade and investment, particularly major infrastructure development projects.[25]

Whatever trepidations Japan might have about a reunified Korea would be tempered by a desire to maintain good relations with Seoul and the realization that Tokyo does not have much influence to manipulate the political outcome. Any effort to put a brake on unification or to hinder Seoul's aspirations would also likely invite greater Chinese involvement. Still, Tokyo would have to conduct a delicate balancing act, providing resources to assist Seoul while allaying Chinese and South Korean fears that it wished to reassert Japanese influence on the peninsula. The potential payoff would be economic, in the form of open trading relations, growth and stability, and increased access to natural resources in the North.[26]

Moscow's objective would be to continue efforts to reverse the marginalization of its influence in northeast Asia, as well as to promote its economic interests. Russia would seek to limit the expansion of other power's influence, which might come at its own expense in supporting a leading role for South Korea in the North. Like other neighboring countries, Russia would attempt to play a role in the economic development of North Korean territory, if for no other reason than that North Korea adjoins the Russian Far East. The economic benefits for Moscow would include access to warm water ports, potential development from trans-Siberian resource extraction, a Korean peninsula rail system linking northeast Asia, and the rising demand for Russian energy resources.[27] Whether Moscow's efforts to expand its influence would be welcomed by Washington would depend on the overall state of U.S.-Russia relations. For the most part, the two countries have worked well together on peninsula issues, notably in the Beijing Six-Party Talks. Whether the

chill in relations following Russia's invasion of Georgia has a lasting negative effect remains to be seen.

Although much will hinge on the circumstances that have brought North Korea to the brink of extinction, the core issues to emerge can be anticipated with reasonable confidence. The most salient concerns would be maintaining security and stability in the North, locating and securing Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction, dealing with potentially serious humanitarian problems such as large-scale refugee flows or starvation,[28] managing the political and legal issues relating to the formation of a transitional government, and addressing the economic challenges posed by the demise of the North and its possible integration with the South.

SECURITY AND STABILITY

Establishing security and stability is generally viewed as essential before political, humanitarian, and economic issues can be addressed. This would be no small task given that as many as five million of North Korea's citizens are under arms and have for six decades been devoted to an authoritarian regime. Many could be starving and desperate. Ensuring public order in such circumstances would almost certainly require the commitment of significant military forces and other resources from the Republic of Korea, the United States, and perhaps other countries in the region as well.

How large a force would be required to bring security and stability to North Korea would depend on the level of acquiescence to foreign intervention. Based on previous experiences elsewhere, the rule of thumb for the number of troops required for successful stability operations in a permissive environment is somewhere between five and ten per thousand people. Because North Korea has a population of approximately twenty-three million, a successful operation could require between 115,000 to 230,000 military personal. In addition, tens of thousands of police might also be needed to support these forces in more basic tasks. Those requirements would place a significant strain on South Korea, particularly in view of the current plan to reduce its army by some 30 percent over the next decade.[29] Although American forces would not likely become directly involved in daily security operations, they could provide vital assistance in the form of transportation

services, command, control, communications and intelligence infrastructure, the distribution of humanitarian supplies, and the repatriation of refugees.

If former elements of the North Korean military, its security and intelligence forces, or its large special operations force were to resist the presence of foreign forces, the size of the needed stabilization force would escalate dramatically. Indeed, experience has shown that special operations forces are the most likely candidates to mount such resistance. Given the large number of such units in the North, the challenge could be considerable. In an insurgency, according to one Defense Science Board study, as many as twenty occupying troops are needed for every thousand persons, implying a force of 460,000 troops, more than three times the number of American troops in Iraq. Coping with such a contingency would likely be impossible for the South Korean and American forces to manage alone.

Establishing an effective disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program takes on added importance in view of the dangers posed by active resistance. Much has been learned through similar experiences in eastern Europe, Afghanistan, and Iraq. A number of important questions will have to be addressed, including which units if any should be maintained for an interim period to assist with public security or disbanded immediately, whether to retain their existing leadership and weaponry or selectively replace them, and how to find gainful employment for those not retained. Significant military and civilian manpower will also be necessary to run an effective DDR program.

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Locating, safeguarding, and disposing of materials and stockpiles of the North's estimated six to eight nuclear weapons, four thousand tons of chemical weapons, and any biological weapons, as well as its ballistic missile program, would be a high priority, especially for the United States. Neighboring countries would want to ensure not only that those weapons do not pose a threat to national security, but also that any unified Korean state is WMD-free. In addition, a new unified Korea would have to be a party to relevant international agreements—the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention—prohibiting signatories from possessing such weapons.

One lesson from the recent difficult experience in Iraq is that locating and seizing WMDs requires special teams of thousands of security forces and technical personnel equipped with advanced detection technologies. Two primary tasks exist. First, known facilities would need to be secured. In the nuclear area, a prime objective would be the Yongbyon installation and its plutonium production facilities. Second, and much more difficult in view of the North's four decades of experience in hiding its military installations, would be locating and securing other, less well-known WMD facilities. For example, North Korean officials have told their American counterparts that their nuclear weapons are assembled and stored at facilities other than Yongbyon. Washington might have lists of suspected locations, but that information is likely to be inaccurate or incomplete. The same is probably true for nonnuclear WMD programs and installations.

Carrying out this mission could prove tricky for a number of reasons. First, the effort to find and secure North Korea's WMD would have to begin even before the large-scale intervention of outside powers to avert the danger of outright theft. In Iraq, after central control broke down, and before intervening forces could reach them, a number of potential sites were stripped by insiders or the local population. A similar situation might arise in North Korea. Second, given the paucity of reliable information about North Korea's nuclear infrastructure and stockpile, conducting an on-the-ground program to ferret information from key personnel as promptly as possible would be essential. Rather than repeating the mistakes made in Iraq—treating scientists and technicians as if they were criminals—incentives would need to be provided to secure their cooperation. Third, because neighboring countries—particularly China—also have a vested interest in locating and securing North Korea's WMDs, any competing efforts that they mount could cause serious complications. Multilateral cooperation, though perhaps politically difficult to secure, would clearly be advantageous to pursue.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

South Korean planners have projected collapse scenarios in which up to one million refugees might flee the North with more than five hundred thousand entering China, up to three hundred thousand to South Korea, and the rest to Russia and Japan. China would likely choose to staunch the flow within North Korea and South Korea might end up

having to do the same. Although Seoul has made plans to provide care and housing using abandoned schools and other installations in the South Korean countryside and intends to harness the help of nongovernmental and private organizations, the difficulty it has experienced in handling the few thousand refugees who have already left the North raises doubts about its ability to manage an influx of hundreds of thousands. Containing the problem within North Korea, however, would require humanitarian assistance to keep the population from leaving their homes, which would in turn present its own set of challenges.

Depending on the circumstances, such operations might have to be conducted in the face of stiff resistance by former elements of the North Korean military. If different factions inside the North appeal to different constituencies (that is, China or South Korea) for support, there is also a danger that, in lieu of multilateral cooperation, humanitarian operations may become politicized and considered a tool for achieving national influence. It is even possible to imagine competing humanitarian operations as the thin edge of the wedge of competition for influence in the North. Another complex challenge facing whoever takes on humanitarian assistance will be to fashion a food distribution system that is efficient, dependable, and helps the neediest people in ways that do not reinforce the old leadership structures or negatively affect the North's ability to transition to a more open system. For example, the existing state-controlled distribution network was an instrument of the North Korean state created to help fulfill its priorities. Yet it is unclear whether that system should be reconstituted, assuming it can be.

POLITICAL AND LEGAL CHALLENGES

Establishing a new, legitimate governing authority in the North would likely pose similar challenges. Although South Korea would seek the lead in this process—viewing its primacy as its legitimate right and responsibility—it would still require the support and at times active involvement of the other interested powers to succeed. At the outset, the principal challenge would be to develop a legal justification for intervention that can, in turn, serve as the basis for subsequent efforts to create a new political system in the North. Seoul could invoke Article 3 of South Korea's constitution, which lays claim to the entire Korean peninsula and adjacent islands, to argue that intervention is

not subject to international law; the United States and its allies, however, might seek early UN approval, perhaps under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and lay the groundwork for securing the support of other states, especially China. As a legitimate occupying power, South Korea would also take on obligations under the Hague Convention to restore and maintain public order and safety that would in turn strengthen its legal claim for the ultimate absorption of North Korea if and when that were deemed desirable.

Assuming that it were to receive such consent, South Korea would soon after have to grapple with the question of whether former government officials would be allowed to play any role in a transitional government and the criteria that would be used to retain some and not others. Care would need to be taken to give the population a sense of confidence that it would not suffer by participating in the creation of the new political order. Those steps might include establishing ties with community leaders and demonstrating a clear competence in delivering basic services and any necessary relief supplies. One approach would be to set up provincial councils responsible for delivering public services and organizing elections for local officials and representatives to any national bodies. On the national level, South Korean government ministries could extend operations to the North to develop and implement policies.

Beyond establishing institutions, putting in place a fair, transparent, and democratic process for the North Korean people to identify and eventually select their own leadership would pose an even more difficult long-term challenge. Creating a sense of ownership would require establishing democratic procedures and the beginnings of a pluralistic culture that has never existed in the North. Useful steps would include identifying various civic and social structures to serve as the backbone for a process for choosing representatives, determining whether the pool of people with leadership ability to run for office is adequate, and deciding whether to allow former officials to participate in the process.

Finally, because international approval of Seoul as an occupying power would not give it the right to establish a transitional administration, the South would have to ask for a Security Council resolution to effectively override the Hague Conventions and the Fourth Geneva Convention. At the appropriate time—probably toward the end of any transition—the South might also want to adopt the same legal strategy the Federal Republic of Germany used and claim that a unified Korea never ceased to exist.

ECONOMY

A collapse of the North Korean economy would require devising policies that address three important issues. The first, under the broad heading of macroeconomic stabilization and management, includes six components: setting up workable new monetary and financial mechanisms, including deciding on the future of the North Korean won; addressing the consequences of recent economic reforms in North Korea, particularly inflationary conditions with no significant supply response leading to increases in production; deciding whether to promote rapid or gradual economic reforms and how to balance mobilization of resources with constraints on absorptive capacity and efficiency of investment; dealing with questions of priority and sequencing economic reforms from the perspective of sustaining macroeconomic stability; surveying existing capabilities and asset conditions early on to help establish a macroeconomic strategy designed to address these issues; and building human and institutional capacity to formulate and implement macroeconomic policies and programs—including North Koreans retained to help with transformation and South Korean experts most likely to be called on to play a direct role—appropriate for economic conditions in the North.

The second economic issue is the transition from planned to market economic mechanisms. This task requires genuine price liberalization, establishing a carefully managed foreign exchange regime, developing new policies and institutional capacities in public finance and expenditure, banking, and both a legal system and ownership rights over productive assets (especially land). Dealing with the state enterprise system may require liquidating unviable firms, improving management, privatizing, and creating a level playing field with the emerging private sector. Institutional change would be much faster and simpler if developed with former North Korean authorities in a framework that might lead to eventual reunification. In any case, a short-term drop in economic output should be expected before the economy can be stabilized and put on a growth path.

The third challenge is reconstruction and development. A public investment program and recurrent expenditure plan would be needed to remove critical infrastructure bottlenecks, restore economic growth and attracting foreign investment, and provide for basic social services.

Initially this effort would be donor financed and synchronized with a workable macroeconomic and financing strategy but, in the medium term, would be based on raising domestic savings rates and coordinated with measures to increase tax revenues and develop banking systems.

The final challenge involves redeploying military assets and personnel to economically productive uses. The process of demobilization might be long and drawn out, and thus require the use of positive incentives. The most important task would be to absorb military manpower into the labor pool of an increasingly market-oriented economy perhaps for use in infrastructure rehabilitation projects. Transforming military factories into economically viable enterprises or liquidating them would be another priority.

Rehabilititating and transforming the North's economy would inevitably require working out the roles and contributions of national and local authorities, neighboring countries, and the international community. Japan would likely be a major provider of financial assistance, including debt forgiveness, export credits, and official development assistance (ODA) funneled through bilateral and multilateral channels. Although China's level of economic engagement would be critical in determining the distribution of labor among foreign powers, it could vary depending on the demise scenario and whether a pattern of multilateral cooperation were established. International financial institutions would play a central role in mobilizing and supervising the efficient use of resources, in supporting transformation and reconstruction and in facilitating integration with South Korea. The American role may be limited to providing assistance for humanitarian programs, advice and training for economic reform, health service improvements, agricultural development and funneling support for infrastructure projects through international financial institutions. Although UN agencies may initially focus on humanitarian assistance, they might shift later on to helping with economic reforms and reconstruction. Koreans overseas could increase remittances and provide much needed expertise in helping to gain access to business partners and markets abroad.

As the prospect of a united Korea becomes more real, the issues of resolving the suspended state of the Korean War—which was never formally concluded with a peace treaty—and dismantling the various UN armistice structures remain. The formal territorial boundaries of Korea would also have to be settled, which, as indicated earlier, might not be

uncontroversial. Korea's continuing commitment to various arms control agreements, its future alliance obligations, and the status and composition of foreign forces on its soil, as well as its national defense intentions—not least its future plans concerning the size, structure, and deployment of its armed forces—would all be of great concern to the interested powers.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Although the situation in Pyongyang following Kim Jong-Il's recent illness could soon return to the status quo ante, continuing uncertainties about his health and succession arrangements warrant heightened attention and preparation for the possibility of sudden change in North Korea. The stakes are simply too high and the risks too great for U.S. policymakers to assume that this will not happen any time soon or that very little can usefully be done in advance given all the inherent impediments to contingency planning. Before discussing the specific initiatives that should be pursued to prepare for sudden change, it is useful to lay out some basic principles to guide U.S. preparation for, and management of the major policy challenges that could arise as a consequence.

First, the United States should continue to promote behavioral change within the current regime rather than actively seek to overthrow it unless extreme circumstances dictate otherwise. Aside from the difficulties involved in effecting regime change, any attempt would compromise current denuclearization efforts and much-needed humanitarian assistance, to say nothing of alienating important allies and partners. Currently the best vehicle for pursuing this is the Six-Party Talks, which if successful will also do much to limit some of the more worrisome dangers should the situation in North Korea become unstable for whatever reason. At the same time, however, the United States should not support efforts to prop up the current regime beyond the point at which it has clearly ceased to govern effectively. Being ready then to adapt quickly and push the process of change in the desired direction, as the United States did so effectively during German reunification, is critical.

Second, unless overriding national interests compel unilateral action, the United States should defer to South Korean wishes and leadership in the management of change in North Korea. Nothing

would alienate Seoul more than high-handed U.S. action. This is not to suggest that the United States should shrink from making its concerns known or from trying to steer South Korea in directions it considers desirable—quite the contrary. Being a loyal and supportive ally requires that it be candid and, if necessary, critical at times. Such support simply needs to be offered in ways that do not undermine the trust and confidence that is the foundation of an effective alliance. In this respect, the United States should continue to state both privately and publicly its desire to support the creation of a united Korea that is democratic, prosperous, nonnuclear, and at peace with its neighbors, and that has the sovereign right to choose its security arrangements, including its alliance partners.

Third, the likely challenges associated with sudden change in North Korea are too big and complex to be addressed by the United States and South Korea alone. Cooperation between the principal powers provides the best chance of coping with these daunting problems and of ensuring a stable, peaceful, new regional order. Failure to accommodate national interests, on the other hand, could have profoundly negative consequences for the evolution of Korea, the stability of northeast Asia, and U.S. relations with major allies and other countries in the region.

Policies should therefore be crafted that are either inclusive or at least reassuring to the other interested parties. Again, the precedent of German reunification is instructive. Although Korea's geopolitical context is quite different than that of Germany at the time of reunification, many of the core issues—certainly the security-related ones—that would likely come to the fore in the event of Korean reunification are actually quite similar. Only through an intensive and deliberate diplomatic effort driven largely by Washington to reassure the security concerns of the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and the two Germanys were these issues resolved.[30]

With these guiding principles in mind, the United States, in concert with its allies in the region, should pursue certain recommendations to improve their ability to respond to the potential challenges of sudden change in North Korea. These can be organized into three mutually reinforcing sets of initiatives: enhancing U.S. readiness, promoting allied coordination and preparedness, and fostering regional transparency and capacity-building.

ENHANCE U.S. READINESS

The United States should upgrade its ability to discern and comprehend domestic political, economic, and other developments in North Korea. Although the U.S. intelligence community devotes substantial assets to monitoring North Korea, the ability to identify and understand potential domestic sources of instability in light of Kim Jong-Il's illness should be expanded to take advantage of a variety of new sources of information. For example, closer collaboration with members of the European Union, who now have diplomatic representation with North Korea, would be desirable. That collaboration, which would focus on exchanging information and analysis, could also prove useful in building and refining different predictive models for the North. Additional information gathered in the future could either be incorporated into those models or used help refine them further.[31]

Establishing broader contacts with Pyongyang during ongoing denuclearization negotiations will likely also prove helpful. If they prove successful, North Korea's nuclear program will become increasingly transparent as a result of Pyongyang's own declarations and on-the-ground activities designed to verify overall compliance. In this context, including Nunn-Lugar like programs, particularly in the area of redirecting the North's nuclear workforce to peaceful pursuits, could prove especially valuable. That in turn might make it easier to conduct operations in the event of collapse, because a scarcity of accurate intelligence would likely be a major problem. Also, if denuclearization progresses, the challenges that North Korea's nuclear stockpile poses will diminish. In the best-case scenario, its weapons and materials will already have been disposed of before instability occurs. But even on-the-ground progress toward achieving that goal—perhaps further disabling nuclear facilities and gradually reducing Pyongyang's weapons stockpile—would help lessen the burden on any operation designed to seize and secure the North's nuclear program. Other disarmament talks with the North—such as focusing on eliminating its missiles and other WMD programs—would have similar benefits.

Another potentially useful avenue would be to reestablish the working relationship between the U.S. and North Korean militaries to recover the remains of American soldiers missing or killed in action during the Korean War. That cooperation was discontinued by the Bush

administration. Restoring those contacts as well as broadening them to cover other topics of mutual concern, aside from possibly helping to improve relations between the two countries, might provide greater insight into the North Korean military, especially its leadership, which could prove useful in helping to analyze unfolding events in the North.

In addition to improving its ability to understand developments in North Korea, the United States should review, update, and broaden its national contingency plans to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated political, security, economic, and humanitarian response in the event of destabilizing change. These efforts should go beyond amending the current U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and ROK Ministry of National Defence (MND) Joint Contingency Planning Operation to include a comprehensive interagency assessment of how the United States would respond to the potential political, military, economic, and humanitarian challenges discussed so far. The review should therefore be coordinated by the National Security Council and involve other relevant U.S. government agencies, such as the Department of State, the Department of Treasury, and the Agency for International Development (USAID).[32] Whether conducted separately or as part of this effort, the NSC should also review its overall policy and strategy toward the Korean peninsula, including the possibility of political reunification.

PROMOTE ALLIED COORDINATION AND PREPAREDNESS

The United States should work closely with South Korea and Japan to improve allied coordination and preparedness for contingencies in North Korea. For the same reason that U.S. national contingency planning must be broad based, so too must consultations and preparations with the allies. Thus the current joint military planning between the United States and South Korea needs to be augmented with a coordinated political, diplomatic, economic, and legal strategy to tackle the core issues likely to arise. Both sides are likely to have a great deal to gain from such consultations and planning. Because South Korean agencies are probably much further along in thinking about how to deal with instability in the North, they could assist U.S. agencies in formulating U.S. contingency plans. For its part, the South Korean government would benefit greatly from the vast recent experience—both positive

and negative—that U.S. civilian agencies have gained in dealing with similar political, economic, and humanitarian problems in other parts of the world, particularly over the past five years in Afghanistan and Iraq. These planning efforts might also benefit from regular tabletop exercises or simulations of generic contingencies and possible responses. Such exercises are already common in joint military planning. The U.S., Japanese, and South Korean militaries conducted several exercises of this kind in the late 1990s and presumably are continuing similar periodic military coordination efforts. Such exercises need to be broadened to enhance joint planning and coordination in a more comprehensive way to include the nonmilitary aspects of such contingencies.

Washington and Seoul should also begin to develop a common vision for a potential reunified Korea. Developing such a common vision is likely to be politically sensitive, but certain issues are fair game for consultation. These include discussing the future role of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula as well as a unified Korea's commitment to the global nonproliferation regime notably membership in the NPT, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

The United States should actively encourage Japan's participation in trilateral talks on the challenges that instability and change in North Korea pose. Japan, as noted, has important and legitimate interests in the future of the peninsula and the United States and South Korea would need its logistic support and economic assistance should North Korea collapse. Quiet consultations are not just appropriate, then, but also necessary. Those consultations might initially focus on comparing assessments of the internal situation in the North and then broaden to include planning for contingencies of most concern to Japan, such as the possibility of large-scale refugee movements or the danger that in a chaotic North Korea missiles or even WMDs might be used against neighboring countries. One option might be to include discussion of such contingencies in the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), which to date has primarily focused on nuclear negotiations with North Korea.[33] Given the sensitive topic, less visible diplomatic or other channels would also be a possibility.

Practical measures can also be taken to improve allied capacity to respond to the potential challenges particularly in the provision of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. All three countries currently work together in the Multilateral Planning Augmentation Team

(MPAT) overseen by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which brings together the militaries of more than thirty countries to plan for and respond to natural disasters.[34] This multilateral effort, which proved useful in the global response to the December 2004 tsunami in the Pacific, could be augmented with more intensive interallied consultations, planning, and training. Crisis response consultations could focus on understanding internal civilian and military processes for dealing with disasters, discussing potential trilateral responses, and thinking about how these efforts might be integrated into broader multilateral frameworks. They might also include an examination of how capabilities and activities conducted under the rubric of the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea alliances—command and control arrangements, intelligence assets, joint exercises, and even some procurement plans—could contribute to trilateral crisis response efforts.[35]

FOSTER REGIONAL TRANSPARENCY AND CAPACITY BUILDING

To reduce the risk of misunderstanding and friction in a crisis involving North Korea, the United States should pursue a quiet dialogue with the People's Republic of China to discuss issues of mutual concern. Chinese interest in engaging in discussions about North Korea and, more generally, the stability of northeast Asia has clearly increased as a result of the Six-Party Talks, but obvious political sensitivities have hindered the scope of these exchanges. Chinese reticence to engage in a more focussed dialogue about North Korea may have lessened, however, as a result of uncertainties about Kim Jong-Il's health. At the very least, the possibility of such a dialogue should be explored, perhaps in the first instance through informal discussions among nongovernmental experts from both countries that might also include several official observers. If productive, such discussions could be elevated to more formal albeit still discreet talks, perhaps directed initially at the economic and humanitarian situation in North Korea and then graduating to more sensitive political and security issues.[36]

The aim of such talks would be not only to raise potential concerns and discuss possible responses but also to minimize misunderstandings that might arise and seriously exacerbate a crisis. This might

include a mutual pledge to consult and share information as well as to create better channels of communication, including special military-to-military links.[37] Commitments designed to reassure each other of strategic intentions in the event of instability or collapse would also be desirable. For example, the United States might pledge to not establish military bases north of the 38th Parallel. Chinese participants might eschew any intention to shift the current territorial boundaries of Korea. How the two countries might conceivably act together to prevent various WMD-related contingencies including nuclear leakage might also be explored.

Whether at some point these discussions could be expanded to include other countries such as South Korea and Japan is unclear. A great deal will probably depend on the state of the overall bilateral relationships—particularly between China and Japan—and of continued cooperation in dealing with Korean peninsular issues. But there is no reason why such dialogues should not be held bilaterally between China and the three allied countries, particularly if South Korea, Japan, and the United States have coordinated their overall views to send the same policy signals to Beijing.

To complement the initiatives to enhance allied coordination and capacity for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, similar efforts should also be directed to improve the readiness of other regional actors. Until recently, China's PLA has been hesitant to play an active role in both planning and executing disaster relief operations outside its territory. But the benefits to doing so are obvious and real, from positive public relations to helping improve China's military medical system. And Beijing's willingness to be more active may increase as its military modernizes and its capabilities grow. It has evidently showed some interest in participating in activities conducted by MPAT, but that participation has been opposed by certain elements inside the U.S. government. Washington should support a more active Chinese role because such a role would present opportunities for the United States to build cooperation and trust through personnel exchanges, joint missions, and other activities. Moreover, establishing such cooperation would likely benefit closer collaboration in the event of instability in North Korea.[38]

Discreet discussions should also be held with the UN agencies, European counterparts, and nongovernmental organizations with active development assistance programs in North Korea to determine

their preparedness to respond to new contingencies. One recent study that could serve as the basis for such an examination is the international humanitarian response to the 2004 explosion at Ryongchon train station in North Korea, which left thousands homeless in addition to the many injured or dead, disrupted the county's electricity supply system, and damaged its water systems. UN agencies and European organizations that played a leading role included OCHA, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), WFP, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), Concern Worldwide, German Agroaction, and Premiere Urgence.[39] Although the overall response was effective, it illustrated some of the logistical and technical challenges that would be repeated on a much larger scale in the event of a broader failure of the regime. Quiet consultations might also focus on the possibility of using indigenous North Korean groups to help cope with system failure. For example, because of training provided by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (ICRC), the DPRK Red Cross has become a much more effective organization, which, if still functioning, could play an important role working with outside relief groups.

Other potentially useful skills and capacities could be fostered among regional actors, including opportunities to conduct bilateral and multilateral training exercises for generic postconflict stabilization and reconstruction operations. Since 2003, the United States and Mongolia have conducted an interoperability exercise called Khaan Quest, designed to prepare Mongolian soldiers for their participation in coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much of the work focuses on UN tactics and multilateral operating procedures. In the future, similar training exercises could be expanded to involve other countries in northeast Asia.[40] The United States has certainly much recent and relevant experience to impart.

Finally, the United States and its allies should promote the establishment of a standing institutional mechanism for regional security cooperation in northeast Asia that, among other benefits, might prove especially useful in coordinating and legitimating responses in the event of instability and collapse in North Korea. The current Six-Party Talks have already begun to address the possibility of creating a more permanent regional security dialogue. Whether that effort succeeds will depend on overall progress toward denuclearization. But even if the Six-Party Talks fail to achieve their primary goal, the habit of regular

consultation that has developed since they began is a strong endorsement for institutionalizing this mechanism among the five parties (excluding North Korea). Neither should the focus of such a mechanism be confined necessarily to the discussion of security issues. Economic and environmental concerns, to the name the obvious, would also benefit from greater dialogue and collective action.

Although regional, and in some cases domestic, political realities limit the ability of both the United States and the countries of East Asia to plan openly for sudden and potentially destabilizing change in North Korea, implementing these recommendations should improve their ability to cope with the likely challenges. As this study has stressed, the potential implications of these challenges are too important to be left to hasty improvisation, whatever the temptation may be to put off until tomorrow what doesn't have to be addressed today. Improving contingency planning, sharing the results of this planning, improving consultation on the future of the Korean peninsula, and taking concrete steps to build up generic, potentially useful capabilities—though certainly not sufficient in and of themselves to cope with these challenges—will establish a much firmer foundation for the future.

Endnotes

1. North Korea is officially called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Its more common name, however, will be used throughout this report.
2. Blaine Harden, "N. Korea Releases New Photos of Kim," *Washington Post*, November 4, 2008.
3. See "Kim Jong-Il's Life Expectancy," available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/dprk/kim-jong-il-life.htm.
4. North Korea was ranked fiftieth in two global indices of state fragility: the Failed States Index, Fund for Peace, Washington, DC (2008) and the Brookings Index of State Fragility, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC (2008).
5. Indeed such sentiments are already being heard. See John R. Bolton and Nicholas Eberstadt, "The World Should Not Fear the Collapse of North Korea," *Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2008.
6. See Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea" (working paper, United States Institute of Peace, January 2008), p. 21.
7. See Korea, U.S. Agree to Compromise N. Korea Concept Plan," *Chosun Ilbo*, June 5, 2005; "OPLAN 5029–Collapse of North Korea, available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oplan-5029.htm; and Victor Cha, "We Have No Plan," *Chosun Ilbo*, June 9, 2008. See also Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2008), pp. 248–50.
8. Prior to his father's death, Kim Jong-Il had become supreme commander of the Korean People's Army. Indeed, to some observers, he had already taken over effective control of the state well before his father's death in 1994. See Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2000), pp. 87–91.
9. One is considered very effeminate and the other reportedly suffers from epilepsy.
10. Some have speculated that she may play a role akin to the wife of President Woodrow Wilson after he suffered a debilitating stroke in office.
11. The responsibility for representing the state and receiving foreign dignitaries has been bestowed on the president of the Presidium, Kim Yong-Nam. Kim Il-Sung has been designated Eternal President.
12. Interestingly Kim Jong-Il admitted to former secretary of state Madeleine Albright during her visit to Pyongyang in 2000 that he is attracted to the influential role played by royal family in Thailand. See Madeleine Albright, *Madame Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Miramax, 2003), p. 466.
13. See Robert S. Litwak, *Regime Change: U.S. Strategy through the Prism of 9/11* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 281.
14. The authors are grateful to Alexander Mansourov for these insights.

15. The SSD has also been subject to purges in the past. See Patrick McEachern, "Interest Groups in North Korean Politics" (paper, Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, LA, January 2008).
16. See "Leadership Succession," available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/dprk/leadership-succession.htm. During his regular inspections of the troops, for example, the soldiers are reportedly ordered to unload their firearms. See Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question*, p. 458.
17. Such assertions appear to be based more on extrapolations from the South Korean experience than any hard evidence. See Jeffrey Robertson, "Political Change in North Korea" (research paper no. 19, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section, Parliament of Australia, January 23, 2008), p. 10.
18. World Food Programme, "Emergency Assistance to Population Groups Affected by Floods and Rising Food and Fuel Prices," 2008, available at http://www.wfp.org/operations/current_operations/project_docs/107570.pdf.
19. Ibid.
20. See Stephan Haggard, Marcus Noland, and Eric Weeks, "North Korea on the Precipice of Famine" (policy brief PB08-6, Peterson Institute for International Economics, May 2008).
21. For details of a recent incident of this kind that occurred during the nuclear crisis of 2003, see Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2008), pp. 163–64. An incident involving an errant missile launch or the interception of a suspected ship carrying illicit cargo are other distinct possibilities. Such incidents could lead to retaliatory measures, ranging from the imposition of tougher sanctions to selective military strikes, which place additional pressure on North Korea at a vulnerable time.
22. "S. Korea Must Engage in Multilateral Planning for NK's Collapse," *KBS Global*, September 26, 2008; Victor Cha, "We Have No Plan," Nautilus Policy Forum Online, 08-046A, June 15, 2008, available at http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08046Cha.html.
23. "Exploring the Implications of Alternative North Korean Endgames: Results from a Discussion Panel on Continuing Coexistence Between North and South Korea" (paper, Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis, January 21, 1998), p. 8.
24. Ibid.
25. For Chinese views, see Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea" (working paper, United States Institute of Peace, January 2008); Bonnie Glaser and Chietigj Bajpaeem, "Inside North Korea: A Joint U.S.-Chinese Dialogue" (working paper, United States Institute of Peace, January 2007); Scott Snyder and Joel Wit, "Chinese Views: Breaking the Stalemate on the Korean Peninsula" (special report, United States Institute of Peace, February 2007).
26. For an overview of Japanese policy, see Michael Armacost and Kenneth Pyle, "Japan and the Unification of Korea: Challenges for the U.S.," in *Korea's Future and the Great Powers*, edited by Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings (Seattle: University of Washington, 2001).
27. Kent Calder, "The New Face of Northeast Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 1 (January/February 2001).
28. This section draws on papers written by Scott Snyder, Donald Gross, Bradley Babson, Paul Stares, and Joel Wit for a 2005 United States Institute of Peace project, North Korea: The Day After.

29. Bruce Bechtol, "Preparing for Future Threats and Regional Challenges: The ROK-U.S. Military Alliance in 2008–2009" (paper, Nineteenth U.S.-Korea Academic Symposium, Shifting Strategic and Political Relations With the Koreas, sponsored by the Korea Economic Institute, September 16–18, 2008).
30. This process culminated in a formal Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany signed by the six powers, something that would likely need to be replicated in establishing a united Korea.
31. Interview with former U.S. intelligence analyst, fall 2008.
32. Based on interviews with U.S. State Department officials, fall 2008.
33. For a detailed examination of the TCOG, see James L. Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism: Improving U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation to Manage Complex Contingencies*, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005).
34. Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism*, pp. 62–95; "Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT): What is MPAT?" Unclassified Briefing, June 2008, Asia-Pacific Area, available at http://www1.apan-info.net/Default.aspx?alias=www1.apan-info.net/mpat.
35. Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism*, pp. 94–96.
36. Michael Finnegan, "What Now? The Case for U.S.-ROK-PRC Coordination on North Korea" (PacNet no. 48, Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 11, 2008).
37. In 2007, the United States and the PRC established a Defense Telephone Link, a precedent that could be extended to the regional level.
38. Drew Thompson, "International Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance: A Future Role for the PLA," *China Brief*, vol. 8, no. 11 (May 21, 2008), available at http://www.jamestown.org.
39. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Train Explosion in Ryongchon County," December 11, 2006, available at http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf.
40. Schoff, *Tools for Trilateralism*, p. 105.

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