

## THREE POSSIBLE FUTURES OF NORTH KOREA



*Until recently, much conventional academic, journalistic and governmental wisdom in the United States and the Republic of Korea ("South Korea") concerning likely near-term futures of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("North Korea") conflated wishful thinking with scientific forecasting. For example, many "collapse" scenarios are flawed by that error. However, by mid-1997, the consensus of opinion had markedly shifted to placing greater confidence in the likelihood that North Korea would "muddle through." Cf. Michael Green, "North Korean Regime Crisis: US Perspectives and Responses," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 7-9)*

*In his article, "Three Possible Futures of North Korea," Stephen Kiser eschews impressionistic inferences, systematically and comparatively suggesting that North Korea has more resilience than many analysts have believed. Kiser embeds his scenario building and forecasting in University of Hawai'i doctoral candidate Jan Huston's "punctuated evolutionary systems" model. Kiser does not expect a collapse of North Korea before the years 2004-2007. And if North Korea does collapse, Kiser argues, the imploding dynamic will be different from that forecast by the US Department of State and Central Intelligence Agency*

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Stephen Dwight Kiser

North Korea is one of the few remnants of the Cold War. The Korea peninsula, divided at the end of World War II and engulfed in an ensuing war due to that partition, remains a place of uneasy coexistence. The revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union makes the future of communist North Korea all the more cloudy and uncertain.

The current situation on the Korean peninsula certainly suggests a North Korea in peril, especially vis-a-vis South Korea. Economically, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is in shambles while the Republic of Korea continues to develop into an economic powerhouse. Even the massive North Korean military is beginning to experience internal decay, as the weakening economic structure can no longer support it. South Korea, on the other hand, is becoming less and less dependent on the United States for its defensive needs, as it develops a much more professional force and acquires higher-quality weapons.

Pyongyang has also performed miserably elsewhere in the international arena. It's two "allies," China and the former Soviet Union, have both recognized Seoul, primarily for economic reasons. Indeed, North Korea has effectively isolated itself through sabre-rattling (including grounding an infiltration submarine on South Korea's coast and threatening to launch long-range ballistic missiles towards Japan), while South Korea continues to expand both economic and political ties throughout Asia. Thus, politically, economically and militarily, North Korea is losing ground.

Three futures methodologies or models were used in this paper. They include 1) trend extrapolation, 2) simple forecasting, and 3) an application of Jan Huston's punctuated evolutionary systems model, as developed in "Passion to Evolve," his dissertation-in-progress.

Trend Extrapolation. North Korea is experiencing negative trends in all its major institutions, suggesting

an imminent collapse. The North's economy has declined roughly 9% annually for the last five to seven years. Most factories are operating at roughly 30% capacity. Foreign trade continues to decrease, as many of North Korea's trading partners are demanding cash for trade, which Pyongyang simply does not have. Food production continues to decrease.

While floods in 1995 and 1996 contributed to significant food shortfalls those years, the real problem is systemic. North Korea has a centrally-planned agricultural system that can not effectively feed its people. That, coupled with a very poor food distribution system (hamstrung by fuel shortages), and a decreasing use of fertilizer on already over-worked land ensure the food situation will only get worse. The food shortfall for 1996 was estimated at 2.3 million metric tons, or roughly one third of total food need.

As a result of the decline in the economy and food production, disease and malnutrition is increasing. According to Red Cross officials and even a US congressman, several hundreds of thousands of North Koreans face severe malnutrition and possibly starvation in the next year. Cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis and malaria are becoming widespread as public infrastructure (water supplies, health facilities, etc.) cease to function properly, and the population becomes weakened due to a poor diet.

Politically, there is a definite decrease in the significance and influence of the Korean Worker's Party. Since the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994, Kim Jong-Il has increasingly relied on the military as his power base. He has even publicly scolded the party on several occasions, to include a scathing speech in December 1996, where he blamed the Party for all the country's problems. Now, it is not unreasonable to characterize North Korea as a military state which happens to be communist, instead of describing them as a communist state which happened to have a large military. This decrease in the Party's influence and corresponding increase in the military's power can not bode well for North Korea's future, as it is generally agreed most of the hard-liners in North Korea are military figures.

Loyalty, especially among party elites, is questionable. The defection of Hwang Jong-yap in early 1997 is indicative of the decreasing lack of loyalty to the Kim regime. Defectors have not only increased three-fold during the previous three years, but the types of defectors have also changed. Greater numbers among the "privileged" class, to include high-ranking military and political officials, are beginning to leave the country for South Korea. It is likely the number of defectors will continue to increase in the near future.

All these trends certainly suggest North Korea will collapse in the near future. Conditions are ripe for a coup d'etat, especially from an ambitious military commander. However, the use of trend extrapolation is inappropriate for the Korea situation. It ignores Korean history and culture. The Korean people have survived conditions much harsher than the ones they face now. Japanese occupation and eventual colonization from 1876 to 1945 witnessed horrendous conditions and treatment of the Koreans by their imperialist rulers. The Korean War (1950-1953) utterly destroyed the nation. While conditions in North Korea are unarguably difficult, times in Korea have been worse and the country still survived. Hence, this methodology is flawed because it does not take into account that history.

Forecasting. A second futures methodology, which allows for the Korean history and culture to influence its outcome, is simple forecasting. Given the above conditions, but placing them in the context of Korean culture and history, four possible futures exist: 1) homeostatic continuity ("muddling through"), 2) real economic and political reforms, 3) end of the Kim regime, or 4) military invasion.

The first scenario of homeostatic continuity is the most likely future for the next six to nine years. Kim Jong-Il has essentially been at the helm of the North Korean ship since the early 1980s, and he has shown on many occasions the willingness to make minor changes to ensure the survival of the regime. He is likely to continue this "muddling through" in the future. Indeed, efforts to open a free trade zone at the port of Najin, wooing foreign investment, begging for food, and allowing farmers markets to exist are all examples of Kim making the necessary adjustments to alleviate the most immediate problems facing his regime.

The second scenario of real economic and political reform is probably the most preferable future. However, it is unlikely to occur. Kim is ruling in a more authoritarian style than that of his father.

For example, Kim Jong-Il has been increasingly relying on the military, to the point of using it as an internal police force. Additionally, since most North Koreans revered the elder Kim more than the younger, adherence to *juch'e*, internal and external laws, respect for the Kim family seems to have waned. Indeed, many diplomats seem to think they can engage in illegal activities (including money laundering, drug operations, gambling ventures) without reporting to Pyongyang. In response, the younger Kim has apparently sensed the need to "flex his muscles" and crack down to maintain order. Hence, the military has become an internal police force, extensive executions are taking place, and more and more political indoctrination is required. Such efforts to maintain order were never witnessed (probably because they were not needed) in the previous Kim regime.

Indeed, he appears to be introducing his own Red Banner Philosophy, which apparently is a replacement for the elder Kim's philosophy of *juche* (self reliance). While the younger Kim's philosophy is not clear, it appears the Red Banner thought will emphasize a greater revolutionary spirit and an greater reliance on the military. Thus, it is likely North Korea's society will increasingly be controlled under the auspices of the military. This is exactly opposite of what economic and political reforms are needed.

The third scenario, the end of the Kim regime, opens many possible futures. Kim could be assassinated or could die from natural causes. Currently, there is no obvious successor. Hence, a sudden end to the Kim regime would leave a power vacuum, which there would be a power struggle to fill. It is possible a civil war could break out. At a minimum, such an internal struggle would cause the powers that be to ignore the economic and food situation until the succession issue was solved, which would certainly exacerbate those problems. Estimating what the successor to the Kim regime would do to solve the nation's problems is dubious, as any different kind of leadership could emerge following a sudden end to the Kim regime.

The final scenario--military invasion--is least likely. The conditions which caused the Korean War to erupt in 1950 do not exist today. North Korean senior military commanders no doubt understand the forces they face south of the thirty-eighth parallel are much better equipped than the forces they faced nearly fifty years ago. Without a realistic chance of national reunification by force, and with a South Korean populace that is much more satisfied with its government than it was with the Syngman Rhee regime (i.e., little to no guerrilla activity in an attempt to overthrow the Kim Young-Sam presidency, compared to extensive and wide-spread guerrilla activity during 1945-1950), North Korea is not at all likely to choose the military option.

Thus, when using simple forecasting, the most likely future for North Korea is homeostatic continuity for the next six to nine years. While such continuity could last for dozens more years, it is unwise to assume no significant shifts in the economic and political situation in Asia or the world, which could have a dramatic impact on North Korea, will not occur beyond that time frame. However, this methodology does not explain how, when or if North Korea will change significantly in the future. This shortfall can partially be answered using Jan Huston's punctuated evolutionary systems model.

**Punctuated Evolutionary Systems Model.** Huston first wrote about the metaphysics of the "punctuated evolutionary systems" model in 1992. Essentially, it is a model which can describe the birth, growth, aging and evolution or extinction of every system, organization, or organism in existence. The model is characterized by the assumption of non-linear, rapid changes in systems. As the system grows, it does not change gradually. Rather, it changes in jerks and starts. Once the system has grown to a point where it can no longer be optimized in its current form, the system will either rapidly change to a completely new form (punctuated evolution) or rapidly cease to exist (punctuated extinction).

The model has five stages. First, the entity being studied (in this case, North Korea) is created. This stage is

called the emergent self-organizing open system. The second stage, dialectical development, witnesses the system growing both in size and in complexity, primarily through the interaction with other systems. By the time the system reaches the third stage of development, called the dialectical complexity stage, the system is approaching its maximum, optimized potential in its current form and structure.

Any further increase and/or complexity leads to the fourth stage, chaotic destabilization. During this stage, the system is no longer stable, and will not continue to exist in its current state. The system, which has become too complex due to its continued growth, is no longer self-organizing. The system will then, inevitably, experience a non-linear break (stage five) where it will either evolve to a higher system (not a better form of the old system, but a better new system) or go into extinction.

Placing North Korea into this model, it is easy to see that the country is in stage four, chaotic destabilization. While the system is resilient enough to withstand traditional pressures, such as food shortages and disease, it is brittle in terms of political ideology and hierarchical power structures. It is these two factors political analysts must examine to determine when North Korea will advance to stage five, and experience a non-linear break, or punctuated change, be it evolution or extinction.

Right now, some serious blows to the ideology and hierarchical power structures have occurred.

The first was the death of Kim Il-Sung. Pyongyang appeared to weather that blow well, probably because the succession issue was obviated decades before Kim's death.

The second blow was the defection of Hwang Jong-Yap, who, among other things, was the author of Kim Il-Sung's juche philosophy.

Future challenges to the North Korean ideology (be it juche or "Red Banner" Philosophy) and hierarchical power structure will include the introduction of a foreign population into North Korea (e.g., a large business-class in the Najin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone or a large number of foreign engineers constructing the light water reactor, as part of the Korean Energy Development Organization [KEDO] and the Agreed Framework) continued high-level defections from the military or government, or continuous and unimpeded information about the outside world flowing into North Korea, reaching both the elites and the ordinary citizen. Any of these factors would significantly challenge the ideology of North Korea, and some (like the defectors) would challenge the power structure.

If North Korea is going to evolve instead of devolve, a group of reformists must begin to rise in the ranks of the government. Unfortunately, Hwang was probably one of the leaders who wanted reform, and one of the few people who had the influence to not only protect himself from hard-liners but also garner support from other would-be reformers. Without this group of reformers waiting to assume control of the North Korean state when and if the opportunity (in whatever form) arises, it is likely North Korea's non-linear break will result in the collapse everyone is predicting now.

The difference between the two collapse scenarios (those calling for collapse in the near future and the non-linear break collapse scenario) is two-fold.

First is the cause of the collapse. The U.S. State Department and Central Intelligence Agency are predicting a collapse primarily due to internal food shortages and economic conditions. The Huston model would suggest the collapse would occur due to a collapse of ideology and/or a collapse in the hierarchical power structure.

The second difference is the time frame. While estimates vary widely, the most common position among US government organizations is a collapse within one to three years. The Huston model does not give a specific time frame, but rather points to specific indicators to watch, suggesting when activity occurs with

those particular indicators, collapse is imminent.

My own analysis leads me to believe challenges to the political ideology and hierarchical power structure will not be significant enough in the next six to nine years for such a non-linear break to occur.

Prospects. In conclusion, divining the future of any system is difficult. This is all the more true in the case of North Korea, one of the most closed societies and governments in the world. However, by applying proper futures methodologies and models, it is possible to develop appropriate scenarios for the Hermit Kingdom's future and, at least, identify proper indicators of change.

[Home](#) | [Back to Contents](#)