



## **Preempting a crisis on the Korean Peninsula: lessons from Ukraine** by Lisa Collins

*Lisa Collins ([lisadalem@gmail.com](mailto:lisadalem@gmail.com)) is a program officer in the International Law and Conflict Resolution Center at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. This PacNet corresponds with [Issues and Insights Vol. 14, No. 5: "Kim Jong- Un-prepared: Allied Contingency Plans for Korean Peninsula Unification"](#).*

Moscow's recent actions in Crimea will affect world politics for years. The aftershocks will be felt not just in Europe but in Asia as well. Contemplating Russia's annexation of Crimea, experts have lamented the impact on international law, the perceived weakness of the US and its allies, and the lessons that countries like China may learn regarding the cost of unilateral action.

In the Northeast Asian context, one problem that could be analogous to the Ukrainian crisis would be the sudden and complete collapse of the DPRK regime and military intervention by China. This would cause such a breakdown of political, military, economic and/or social fabric that a mere change of government would not fix the situation.

Beijing's stake in North Korea resembles Moscow's stake in the Crimean region. Chinese 'core interests' could dictate the need to rush in to fill the vacuum left by a collapsed DPRK regime. A large amount of Chinese property, and some nationals, are located in North Korea. Chinese scholars have even claimed sections of North Korean territory to be, historically, a part of China. This could provide China with a similar rationale for an 'emergency intervention' in the North.

The pretext for intervention is only hypothetical. North Korea appears to be stable and a debate over its collapse has raged for 20 years. A few years ago, we could not have predicted the intensity of the Ukrainian crisis. However long-term North Korean instability appears more certain than not. Being unprepared or failing to act in such a situation could have dire consequences.

There is widespread agreement that the sudden collapse of North Korea would bring together the 'perfect storm' of factors that could produce wide-scale disaster and destruction. This includes massive outflows of refugees; a breakdown of society into armed factions or civil war; multiple actors vying for control and use of weapons of mass destruction; development of wide-spread famine or humanitarian disaster; perpetration of human rights atrocities in prison camps; and a power struggle among neighboring states.

Given the stakes and the high potential for spillover effects outside DPRK borders, intervention by all North Korea's neighbors will almost certainly be guaranteed. Without prior consultation or agreement among the ROK, US, Japan, China, and Russia, the chances for miscalculation and

military confrontation are high. This might result in dueling interventions on the North Korean territory leading to war, as discussed in "Kim Jong- Unprepared: Allied Contingency Plans for Korean Peninsula Unification" [Issues and Insights, Vol. 14, No. 5](#).

Decisions over intervention could determine the future of North Korea, setting the foundation for, and determine the range of success, for all subsequent humanitarian, stabilization, and peacebuilding operations. Thus, it is vital that the US and its allies prepare for a range of North Korean contingencies and discuss scenarios for intervention.

In the wake of the Ukrainian crises, there are many lessons to be learned. One of the most fundamental is that the US and its allies need to find a way to work productively with China and Russia on the Korean Peninsula. Stalemate in the UN Security Council or unilateral military action could result in confrontation.

With this in mind, the ROK, US, and Japan should first engage in trilateral discussions and contingency planning with regard to North Korean collapse scenarios. Seoul should take the lead by building on the Park administration's efforts to catalyze regional cooperation around the topic of Korean unification and change public perceptions about the costs. Historical grievances that hinder cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo will persist but the two governments must find common ground on this aspect of North Korean policy.

The DPRK will take any public discussion of North Korean contingencies and intervention by the three allies to be an 'act of war'; the Kim regime could respond with provocations. This must not keep the allies from working quietly and intensely on scenarios and sharing experiences in stabilization, reconstruction, and peacebuilding efforts around the world. They should also work closely with governmental aid organizations and NGOs in their respective countries to prepare for the worst outcomes.

The ROK, US, and Japan must also find a way to work at with China and Russia on North Korean contingencies. There is no need to swap military secrets, but they must establish channels for dialogue between the five states in case a crisis erupts in the DPRK. The five stakeholders must also engage in discussions about the preferred 'end-state' of the Korean Peninsula. They may not achieve consensus on Korean unification scenarios, but the countries must seek some form of compromise and cooperation to create a united vision for achieving peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. A high-level mechanism for discussions on the future of the peninsula would be a good start.

Finally, there must be intense discussions about securing North Korea's nuclear weapons and nuclear material stockpile. There are efforts to restart denuclearization talks

with North Korea—the five parties could use these opportunities and channels to quietly expand negotiations on crisis scenarios.

Northeast Asia, and the world, cannot afford to take a ‘wait-and-see’ approach to a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The consequences of inaction could be even greater than that of the Syrian and Ukrainian crises combined. As events of the past year have shown, the three allies do not agree with China and Russia on international intervention. Thus, significant perception gaps with regard to North Korean contingencies, the ‘end-state’ of the peninsula, and possible interventions could breed conflict and miscalculations. Past experience with colonization and war will also make Koreans on both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel wary of outside interventions. Without careful planning, prior consultation, and compromise among the five regional powers, a crisis on the Korean Peninsula could be one of the worst in history.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*