

[Ed. Note: North Korea's response to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) President's Statement rebuking its missile launch has elicited a great deal of commentary. Here we provide alternative views to those expressed by Jim Przystup in PacNet 28 and Ralph Cossa in PacNet 28A. With this, we will close the current series of commentary on what happens next on the Korean Peninsula but are certain the issue is a long way from being resolved.]

Preparing for the Inevitable in North Korea

by Michael J. Finnegan

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According to the old saying, the only inevitabilities in life are death and taxes. North Korea, always the contrarian, touts the fact that it has eliminated taxes and allows Kim Il Sung to remain in office despite his death over a decade ago. Despite this, we can agree on two points: the death of his son and chosen successor, Dear Leader Kim Jong-il is inevitable, and this event has the potential to be the ultimate game changer, both for the peninsula and the U.S.-ROK alliance.

At a recent forum, Richard Bush of the Brookings Institution observed that the death of Kim Jong-il will present the U.S.-ROK alliance with the greatest challenge of its nearly six-decade history. He is correct on two counts. First, Kim's demise and the potential instability that will arise could present an incredibly complex political, military, economic, and social problem, beyond anything the alliance has prepared itself for. Second, Kim's death as well as the potential end to the North Korean state and the threat it poses would also challenge the existence of the alliance: if the primary purpose of the alliance is to defend against North Korea, and the North is no longer a threat, then what?

The Obama administration likely faces a strategic pause with the North as Pyongyang suspends its activities in the Six-Party Talks, takes stock of its position, and attempts to set conditions for a return to dialogue on its terms. The alliance and the administration would be well served to use this time to look beyond denuclearization concerns and attempt to craft a long-term strategy to advance alliance goals on the peninsula. In this regard, three broad tasks come to mind: plan, prepare, and consult.

Plan. Mention 'contingency planning' and even some normally rational observers become apoplectic with visions of ROK and U.S. forces marching on Pyongyang. Yes, planning for instability is an element that has been addressed by allied military planners despite the lack of political guidance on what they are to plan for; the military plans exist in what Jim Przystup referred to as "a political and diplomatic vacuum."

Escaping this vacuum and establishing the basis for managing instability following Kim's death requires a whole-of-government, whole-of-alliance plan that fully integrates all the elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) at the disposal of the United States and the Republic of Korea. Discussions leading to such a plan would need to be based firmly on ROK aspirations for long-term unification as well as the interests of the United States and other stakeholders in peninsular stability. Such an effort would, if successful, determine allied goals and the desired end state for a whole-of-alliance approach to instability, defining the objectives for each ally's effort. Such an outline would inject air into the vacuum, lead to a useful division of labor, and offer a plan, a starting point, to work from when the inevitable arrives.

This type of planning would be, by its nature, very sensitive. The public perception would need to be limited to the prudence of such conceptual planning and assurances that any such plans are solely to manage instability and not a pretext for regime change, which will be the predictable outcry. The alliance, though, cannot take counsel of its fears of such accusations, as it did in the recent past, and not plan; there is too much at stake to be unprepared.

Prepare. Once a concept is agreed to, the allies should quietly prepare to implement their plan. This means assessment, coordination, capacity building, and exercises, all done in a prudent, deliberate, and understated manner. The allies should arguably put at least as many resources into preparing for managing potential instability and avoiding catastrophe as they do for the remote chance of general war on the peninsula.

At the same time, the allies must begin long-term preparations by developing and articulating a comprehensive vision for the "21st Century Strategic Alliance" that was agreed to but left undefined in 2008. Such a vision should have peninsular, regional, and global aspects and provide the "why" for alliance actions and activities while the "what" and "how" can be developed over time. But it all starts with the joint articulation of a refined long-term alliance *raison d'être*; i.e., a rationale that goes beyond the North Korean threat.

This should be a relatively easy task: the allies should build on the 'shared values' they have been pointing to of late. However, we should not be too sanguine about this 'easy' task. The allies share values, but they do not always share a common view of how to advance or defend these values. Such a vision-setting exercise is necessary, though, if we are to understand how the alliance as an entity fits into the future of the Korean Peninsula as well as that of the respective partners.

Consult. On the basis of an alliance plan and shared vision, the partners must begin consultation with key actors

that have significant stakes in the peninsula, in particular with Japan, China, and Russia. It is essential that Japan be assured that the U.S.-ROK alliance is prepared to deal with instability on the peninsula and that in doing so, Japan's interests will not be sacrificed. A dissatisfied or overly nervous Japan is not in anyone's interest.

Beijing can play either a helpful or complicating role in addressing instability. Similar to the case of Japan, early discussions – long before instability is evident – to reassure China that the resolution of the situation will not be to China's detriment, that the allies will not 'take advantage' of the situation in a way that threatens Chinese interests, will go a long way toward ensuring that China takes a cooperative, rather than a competitive, approach to reestablishing stability in North Korea. Consultations with Russia, the remaining Six-Party Talks partner, would balance discussions with China and offer a potential cooperative avenue in the tense U.S.-Russia relationship.

This is a full agenda, and such an effort certainly will not rise above other competing priorities. But during this strategic pause, energizing the small portion of the U.S. diplomatic, military, and political apparatus dedicated to the Korea issue could pay a big dividend. Time is not on our side, though. In a perverse logic – perhaps only fathomable in a North Korean sense – we need Kim to last just a little longer. We should all say a prayer for the Dear Leader.