



## **Preparations Needed for North Korean Collapse**

By Bonnie Glaser and Scott Snyder

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North Korean leader Kim Jong-il is considered an international pariah in most nations, but he was welcomed with open arms in China May 3-7. The visit underscored North Korea's isolation: Kim's last foreign visit in 2006 was also to China. Despite approving tough United Nations sanctions after Pyongyang's second nuclear test, Beijing continues to provide energy and food assistance to the North that remains indispensable for the regime's survival. Yet, even with China's help, there are growing signs of economic and political volatility in the DPRK and the risks of instability—including regime collapse—cannot be ruled out.

In late 2009, the North's leadership revalued the nation's currency, causing severe inflation and popular unrest. The regime then barred foreign currency and closed markets, eliminating vital sources of food and other necessities. Kim suffered a stroke in 2008, but it remains to be seen whether plans to transfer power to his youngest and least experienced son can be carried out smoothly. It cannot be excluded that the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* is an outcome of internal succession politics—a move by a faction seeking to gain power, or even by the leadership itself, seeking to maintain a grip on the military during the transition.

It is premature to predict near-term regime collapse in North Korea, but it is not too early for major regional parties to plan for the effects of instability, potentially including massive refugee flows and unsecure nuclear weapons, materials, facilities, and knowhow that could be smuggled out of the North and into the hands of the highest bidder. Responses to instability could include decisions by China, South Korea and the US to dispatch troops into North Korea to restore order and to locate and secure weapons of mass destruction facilities. Absent advance coordination, these forces could come into conflict with each other.

Despite the obvious risks, the US has been unable to establish multilateral cooperation on a coordinated contingency response plan. Bilateral planning has been stepped up with South Korea under the Lee Myung-bak administration, but China remains unwilling to discuss instability response with the US or the ROK.

Why is Beijing loath to reveal its likely plans in the event of North Korean instability? First, China harbors deep

suspicious about US and ROK intentions, fearing that the allies may use instability in the North as a pretext to carry out South Korea-led reunification and to station US troops close to China's border. Second, Beijing worries that instability response coordination with the US and South Korea would sour relations with Pyongyang. Finally, China may be seeking to preserve the "strategic ambiguity" of its response in order to deter all sides, including Pyongyang, from taking actions that would destabilize regional security.

Beijing is not alone in its hesitancy. Seoul has long been reluctant to coordinate contingency plans with any nation besides the US, worrying that increased transparency may open the door to great-power meddling. The ROK is particularly anxious about China, which it believes might obstruct efforts to reunify the Korean Peninsula under democratic and free market principles.

The US cannot afford to let great power politics stand in the way of planning an effective response to North Korean instability; the risks are simply too great. Instead, it should seek to create favorable conditions for the primary parties, namely itself, South Korea, and China, to discuss likely responses to North Korean instability, while keeping its ally Japan informed.

All three governments should be prepared to offer reassurances to reduce the likelihood of miscalculation in the event of instability in North Korea. For example, the US could assure that it would work with the United Nations; would coordinate with China to secure WMD facilities, materials, and expertise; and would not station troops north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel after stabilization and reconstruction operations are completed. At the same time, the allies should seek assurances from Beijing that it would not intervene in North Korea's domestic political situation to prop up a failing regime and would not obstruct ROK reunification efforts. Moreover, all three nations should agree that their armies would not engage each other in the North, and that no nation would exploit instability in the DPRK as an excuse to threaten any other state.

Despite forecasts of North Korea's collapse since the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, the country is still intact. But the risk of North Korean instability remains real. Every day that Kim Jong-il's health continues to deteriorate without clear succession arrangements makes political instability after his death or debilitation all the more likely. And, every day that the regime continues to develop nuclear weapons and missiles or to pursue destabilizing actions makes the effects of instability all the more dangerous.

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