

**THE COLLAPSE OF NORTH KOREA:
A PROSPECT TO CELEBRATE OR FEAR?**

**prepared by
Michael J. Deane, Ph.D.
Johns Hopkins University
Applied Physics Laboratory**

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About the Author

Michael J. Deane is a member of the professional staff in APL's National Security Analysis Department. For twenty years, he was a program manager and senior political-military analyst with Booz Allen Hamilton Inc. He has held full adjunct teaching positions at the University of Miami, George Washington University, American University, a Georgetown University. His e-mail address is michael.deane@jhuapl.edu

THE COLLAPSE OF NORTH KOREA: A PROSPECT TO CELEBRATE OR FEAR?

If tomorrow's media headlines were to announce the demise of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, aka North Korea), how would Americans react? Would we consider it good news or bad? Arguably, our initial response would be elation and we would rejoice that this volatile and hostile state, which threatens mankind with nuclear catastrophe and has starved millions of its own citizens to death, was no more. The Korean people, the Northeast Asian region, and the world as a whole would certainly feel safer for the loss. Except for the radical fringe, no one would shed a tear, no communist or non-communist, no Korean or non-Korean, no liberal or conservative.

For the past two decades, US decision-makers have molded our policy toward North Korea on two premises: first, the popular notion that North Korea is teetering on the brink of imminent systemic collapse and, second, the unquestioned assumption that such a collapse is in the best interest of the United States. In the mid-1980s, neither government experts nor academic analysts would have entertained the prospect of a DPRK continuing into the year 2005. We were mistaken, for North Korea still exists. Yet, very little effort has been devoted to understanding why we were wrong for twenty years. Even less effort is expended on reassessing US interests in a North Korean collapse, the range of options open to US policy in shaping the future of the DPRK, and the long-term implications for the United States.

I. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NORTH KOREA

Throughout its history, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has lived at the extremes of international perceptions. Its very founding and evolution have been marked by one controversy after another.

In the late 1940s, North Korea was established as a temporary compromise to avert a US–Russian confrontation. In the early 1950s, the DPRK became a key hot spot in an otherwise cold war. The Korean War erupted as a surrogate conflict between communist and capitalist forces. It was the testing ground for the will, cohesion, and might of the two superpower camps. A communist victory might well have provided the spark for a larger offensive, possibly in Europe between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact armies. A capitalist triumph might well have covered and rolled back the Soviet and Chinese threats for the long term. To these ends, the Chinese-led and US-led coalitions sacrificed heavily in lives and resources, only to reach a stalemate in an armistice that never could become a peace treaty.

From 1953 to 1991, the two superpower camps remained relatively consistent in their attitudes toward the DPRK. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the Sino–Soviet split saw the major communist states vie for influence over North Korea. In the 1980s, though the Sino–Soviet antagonism subsided, both stayed faithful to their fraternal commitment to support the DPRK diplomatically, economically, and militarily against the capitalist community. They viewed the DPRK as an optimum and cheap instrument to tie down US forces away from other contentious arenas, such as Taiwan and Eastern Europe.

During the same timeframe, the DPRK opponents—essentially the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK, aka South Korea), and Japan—continued to ally against the North. From the US perspective, no other country has rivaled the length and depth of the North Korean threat to US peace and security in the 60 years since World War II and, perhaps, in the entire history of the United States. Intense as the German, Japanese, and Vietnamese conflicts were, they were relatively short-lived. The US–USSR confrontation between 1945 and 1991 and the US–PRC (People's Republic of China) confrontation from 1939 to 1976 were at times quite contentious, but shorter in duration. Thus, the United States invested heavily in the military forces and financial resources needed to deter and, if necessary, defeat a repeat invasion of the South. For its part, the ROK has lived with the daily threat of another invasion from its northern enemy.

The Korean situation changed significantly with the 1991 collapse of communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. Except for brief and halting attempts in the 1970s, the DPRK had never sought to integrate itself into the larger international community. North Korea was satisfied with its position within the communist community, where it could successfully play the Soviets against the Chinese. In this game, the Soviets and the Chinese provided the DPRK with political and military protection and, more importantly, they sustained economic support at no cost to the North Koreans. By the latter half of the 1980s, however, this DPRK advantage began to decline as the Sino–Soviet competition dissipated and neither communist giant needed to maintain North Korea as a pawn in their rivalry. The post-1991 Russian leadership had little political incentive to continue its support and even less economic capability. At the same time, the Chinese leadership became more focused on its own domestic political and economic problems as it sought to eradicate the vestiges of the Mao era and enter the emerging global community. The fall and/or reform of the lesser communist states in East Europe or Southeast Asia left the DPRK more and more isolated.

Abandoned, the DPRK immediately began to crack and most assumed that it would crumble. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the accepted wisdom of outsider observers was that North Korea would collapse sooner (within the next five years) or later (within the next five to ten years). Only a squeamish few predicted that North Korea could muddle through for a while and no one foresaw that it would survive past the first few years of the new millennium. Consequently, those states that cared at all about the DPRK's fate built their policies toward and relations with North Korea on the central assumption of the latter's collapse. The eventuality of the DPRK's fate was simply one of timing, not fact.

Despite this unchallenged assumption, the DPRK has continued to endure unchanged in most respects from the pre-1991 period to the outer limits of its predicted survivability. In this context, North Korean watchers are confronted with three obvious questions:

- What led outsiders of the late 1980s and early 1990s to forecast the DPRK's collapse?
- Where did the predictions of collapse go wrong?
- Has the prospect of DPRK collapse subsided or does it still hold only to occur at a later date?

Less obvious, but no less critical given the continuing existence of the DPRK for the foreseeable future, is a fourth question:

- Is the collapse of the DPRK in the best interest of the United States?

The present analysis seeks to focus on an investigation of the fourth question as a practical issue, not a moral, ethical, or historical dilemma. The analysis accepts the inherent "evil" nature of the North Korean leadership and system. This is assuredly not an effort to defend the continued existence of the DPRK as "good" in itself. In so doing, the analysis must address the first three questions in at least a summary way to set the fundamental issues and identify the critical options.

II. PREDICTIONS OF DPRK COLLAPSE

At the core, predictions of DPRK collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s were based on a simple economic determinism model. Certainly, the demise of the Soviet Union and the elimination of the communist community deprived North Korea of diplomatic, political, and military support. However, the real impact was minimal since the DPRK was not faced with imminent external aggression. Rather, the critical impact was the downturn in economic preferential treatment and assistance that the Soviet Union and China had long provided to prop up the North Korean system.

Before the Korean War, the more prosperous North was the center of Korean industrial development and the less affluent South was chiefly agrarian. Adopting the Stalinist economic model, the DPRK ignored the forces of the market and the needs of the populace in favor of emphasis on heavy industry and military production. Unfortunately, the DPRK lacked the seemingly endless supply of resources and manpower that underpinned the Soviet model. Unlike the Soviets, the North Koreans could not simply offset the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of its economic plans with greater inputs of quantity. Even within planned priority sectors, development implementation was imbalanced in large measure because support industries, such as energy and mining, were unable to supply the power and raw material needs of the new factories. Moreover, the high priority of domestic economic self-sufficiency in successive economic development plans, diversion of critical resources to military production over several decades, and the artificial constraint of consumer and commercial goods throughout the period resulted in low domestic revenues and, perhaps more economically important in the long run, very little foreign trade benefits. Refusing to change and reform the system, the DPRK became highly dependent on the largesse and assistance of its communist partners. As early as the 1970s, most of the North's food and fuel, for example, was received from the Soviet Union at a favorable price.

At the end of the 1980s, the DPRK economy remained highly centralized and tightly controlled. Economic plans, developed by the State Planning Commission, established production priorities, resource allocations, output targets, prices, and other key economic goals. State- or collective-owned enterprises managed all of the major economic sectors, such as banking, energy, transportation, communications, and foreign trade. State-owned firms produced most of the industrial output. Collective-owned farms dominated in agriculture. Individuals were restricted to small private farm and livestock plots for personal consumption or sale in peasant markets. Otherwise, state- or collective-owned outlets monopolized the distribution of goods and services.

The DPRK's Third Seven-Year Plan, introduced in 1987, acknowledged that many targets of the Second Seven-Year Plan went unfulfilled and thus confirmed that a major economic slowdown had occurred in the 1980s. The new plan scaled back overall economic growth rate targets, as well as targets in key industries. For the first time in North Korean economic planning, the Third Seven-Year Plan acknowledged in principle a need to expand foreign trade and joint ventures.

Though the PRC tried to pick up the Soviet aid shortfall in the early 1990s, China could not stave off an increasing decline in the major DPRK economic sectors, especially agriculture. Moreover, with little capability to compete in the international market, the DPRK ran higher and higher foreign debts, which it was unable to repay on schedule. The DPRK's ensuing bad credit rating compelled its trade partners to demand payments in hard currency, including Russian and Chinese insistence on oil payments in hard currency at international market prices. Without a major and fundamental reform of the North Korean system, a severe economic depression was

predictable and inevitable.

From 1990 to 1998, the DPRK economy experienced an unbroken period of negative real gross domestic product (GDP) rates, while exports fell dramatically and the trade deficit grew substantially. Table 1 shows the decline in DPRK GDP since 1990, as compared to the ROK, which was completing several decades of slow, but steady economic growth. By 1999, North Korea's real GDP was only about three-quarters of the 1989 amount. Thereafter, a modest turnaround stabilized the North Korean economy, but stagnation continued and key sectors continued to experience major problems.

Like the overall economy, major industrial sectors also plunged. Clearly, the DPRK energy and power sector had become a problem. Before the Korean War, abundant water and coal resources made the North a major power producer, supplying about 90 percent of the entire peninsula needs. For years prior to the 1990s, the DPRK had sought to decrease its hydro-based power and increase its coal-based power plant construction to facilitate power plant-to-industrial user co-location, shorten construction time, and alleviate unpredictable weather—especially drought—impacts. Even with new plant construction, the DPRK was never able to meet its planning targets or industrial requirements.

Until the beginning of the 1990s, the DPRK refused to follow the PRC in establishing free economic zones. In the Chinese model, free economic zones were precisely defined and geographically limited areas that encouraged foreign investment as a means to secure an infusion of advanced foreign technology and capital. The foreign investors were granted low taxes and cheap labor as incentives. Within the zone, market forces prevailed in business and trade decisions. In December 1991, the DPRK created its first free economic zone in the northeast. However, in contrast with the Chinese, the North Koreans have consistently constrained the development of these economic zones for political reasons.

In September 1995, the DPRK announced to the international community that severe weather conditions had caused wide-spread flooding of agricultural regions. As a consequence, stated North Korean authorities, the DPRK was experiencing massive crop failures and major food shortages (see Table 2). (Later estimates would put the death toll in the early 1990s at about 1–2 million people, or 5–10 percent of the population.) While surprising in itself, the announcement was followed by a shocking DPRK appeal to the UN World Food Program and other international aid donors for assistance.

Table 1. DPRK GDP Growth Rates, 1990–2003

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
DPRK	-3.7	-3.5	-6.0	-4.2	-2.1	-4.1	-3.6	-6.3	-1.1	6.2	1.3	3.7	1.2	1.8
ROK	9.0	9.2	5.4	5.5	8.3	8.9	6.8	5.0	-6.7	10.9	9.3	3.1	6.3	NA

Note: Unit = % real change

Table 2. Food Available Versus Food Shortfall in Harvest Years for Late 1990s

Year	Domestic Sources			Foreign Aid Received (MT)	Total Available (million MT)	Need (MT)	Shortfall (MT)
	Harvest (million MT)	Post-Harvest Losses (30%)	Net (million MT)				
1995–1996	4.10	1.23	2.87	903,374	3.77	5.99	2.22
1996–1997	2.84	0.85	1.98	1,171,665	3.15	5.40	2.25
1997–1998	2.66	0.80	1.86	1,321,528	3.18	4.61	1.43
1998–1999	3.48	1.04	2.43	Unk	Unk	Unk	Unk

Note: MT = metric tons

While severe weather conditions undoubtedly exacerbated the DPRK food shortage, the real causes arose from conscious decisions of the DPRK leadership and the population's response to those policies. For example, the leadership's imposition of *juche*¹ as the basis for domestic industrial development had resulted in almost no foreign currency or market competitive capabilities. The DPRK could not offset food shortages by purchases abroad. Second, the imposition of *juche* over agricultural development had resulted in poor agricultural practices, perverse economic incentives, and declining fertilizer and pesticide inputs. Moreover, as industrial output declined, the DPRK lost any prospects for indigenous recovery. Third, government decisions in 1994–1995 to cut food subsidies in the eastern coastal plain and reduce per capita rations for farmers nation-wide from 167 to 107 kilograms had resulted in popular resistance to government efforts to control food collection and distribution. Instead of shipping food to the urban industrialized areas, the farmers hoarded the available stocks. As these dwindled, the farmers spent less time on the state- and collective-owned farms, where state control was tightest, and more time on their private plots, where the state control and accounting was non-existent. The greater the shortages became, the higher prices became in the peasant markets. In their own self-defense, many farmers diverted their grain sales away from the mandatory government purchases.

By insisting that the forces of nature were to blame for the food shortages, the DPRK sought to portray the problem as accidental and short term, rather than inherent and long term. In this way, the regime hoped to fend off any demands for systemic reform and deflect all demands of donors for in-depth scrutiny, close monitoring, and detailed accounting that might lead to systemic reform.

During the second half of the 1990s, the impact of economic downturn and food shortages became mutually reinforcing. The economic decline in combination with the Kim Jong-il Administration's insistence on maintaining heavy industry and military production as its main priorities left little for agro-industrial production of machinery, fertilizer, etc., for stemming the agricultural problem. As agriculture fell, resistance rose in the agricultural areas to supplying the urban industrialized areas with food.

Under the stark economic situation described above, outside assessments easily reached the conclusion that the DPRK economy was in stagnation or possibly free fall. It was a short leap to assume that the social and political systems were close behind. Unfortunately, the DPRK did not disappear as an independent sovereign entity in strict accord with the simple economic determinism model of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Where did the prediction go wrong?

¹*Juche* is typically translated as self-reliance. In fact, it is a philosophy of strict domestic control and international independence.

III. REASON ONE: THEORETICAL FALLACY

On one level, the calculations were undeniably correct. The DPRK collapsed as a viable independent economic entity in the mid-1990s, that is, at least five years earlier than most outside assessments forecasted. The regime could no longer plan or control economic activity, except in very narrow priority areas. Nor could it provide even a “legal” subsistence living for most of its citizens. Beyond that, however, the simple economic determinism model was incorrect in its prediction because it was incorrect in its theoretical paradigm.

The fundamental fallacy of the simple economic determinism model lay in the attendant assumption that economic collapse must escalate directly and swiftly to systemic collapse. Despite the Marxist premise, modern state experience provides no precedent for such a path. Even Mao astutely observed that radical systemic change is more likely to come from “the barrel of the gun” than economic imperative. Indeed, recent history demonstrates that states with economic decline equivalent to the North Korean survive essentially intact.

If not the simple economic determinism model, what then?

The “collapse” within a state can occur in many forms: political, economic, social, military, security. However, no single form of collapse in itself is sufficient to produce total systemic collapse. Equally critical is the character of change within each form, specifically the scope, speed, depth, circumstance, motive force, and cause. Indeed, actual historical experience suggests that many critical and complex factors must exert their influence to produce state-wide systemic collapse. This section posits 15 such factors and briefly examines why these factors—individually and collectively—failed to develop sufficiently to bring down the North Korean system.

1. Economic Distress
2. Economic Infrastructure Disintegration
3. Social Dislocation
4. Loss of Pro-regime Mass Consensus
5. Decline in Regime Legitimacy
6. Mass Mobilization
7. Alternative Moral Authority Options
8. Alternative Political Leadership Options
9. Loss of Control over Myth Interpretation
10. Decline in Elite Allegiance and Cohesion
11. Domestic Inter-group Rivalry
12. Inability and/or Unwillingness of Security Forces to Enforce Control
13. Interstate Integration and State Openness
14. Foreign Attraction
15. Foreign Threat

From earlier analysis, it should be clear that essential economic factors for change existed in abundance. The DPRK experienced extreme economic distress at the macro-level as well as within the priority industrial sectors and key agricultural sectors. The failures of the economic planning system and the public distribution system are but two examples of the overall economic infrastructure disintegration that ensued. Wide-spread unemployment, mass starvation with millions of deaths, and refugee escape despite the penalty of death if caught underscore the extent of social dislocation that occurred.

Of the remaining twelve factors, only one—foreign threat—existed, but actually operated as a factor sustaining the regime, not contributing to its downfall. The regime exploited the foreign threat to control its own populace and ensure resource mobilization in line with its priorities. Further, it issued counterthreats of horrible consequences up to nuclear devastation to manipulate the external environment and win foreign concessions and “rewards” for not implementing its threats. The latter assisted the regime in not only controlling its populace but also avoiding systemic change and reform.

Likewise, in its favor were the regime’s ability to maintain a pro-regime mass consensus at least to the level sufficient to maintain regime legitimacy. No mass movement, whether organized or spontaneous, emerged in opposition to the regime. No alternative moral or individual leader arose to challenge the authority of the regime. As a group, elite allegiance to the current system remained solid. In the DPRK, no group challenged for influence outside of the regime framework before the crisis and none arose during. Elite cohesion in support of the regime remained strong and the security forces never lost control. Strong control over myth interpretation, determined isolation and self-sufficiency despite the tremendous national cost, and uncompromising refusal to interact widely with other societies and systems prevented significant development of foreign appeal and attraction among the North Korean populace.

IV. REASON TWO: PRACTICAL FALLACY

In addition to the theoretical fallacy, a very practical fallacy was also at work. The simple economic determinism model assumed a mechanical application without interference or diversion from the outside.

In reality, however, the DPRK is a major military actor and this fact could not be ignored by the rest of the international community, especially its neighbors. Established in war, the DPRK remained a fully mobilized system, whose only *raison d'être* seemed to be a future war. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the DPRK was in the process of developing weapons of mass destruction—certainly chemical and biological and soon nuclear—as well as the means to deliver them unimpeded to distant regional targets. North Korean conventional forces, the fourth largest in the world, represented a significant threat of destruction and annihilation to its primary enemy, South Korea, as well as its secondary enemy, Japan. Western analysts assessed that the small DPRK built and maintained this impressive military capability to pressure its neighbors in peacetime, fracture their cohesion in crisis periods, and invade South Korea if the North were ever to achieve military advantage. While the international community feared a growing DPRK, it no less feared a collapsing North Korea. Aside from the Soviet Union, which still defies explanation in the minds of many observers, history provides few examples of strong military powers that simply faded away without a fight.

While all feared what a collapsing DPRK might bring, states assessed the potential implications and probable impacts from very different perspectives. The United States took the most narrow view. The Clinton Administration accepted that the DPRK implosion was imminent and, thus, would soon disappear as a problem. The key motivation of US policy was to manage this collapse, especially the military threat. To this end, the Clinton Administration and later the Bush Administration concentrated on dismantling the North Korean nuclear programs, deterring the DPRK by a strong military commitment to South Korea, and maintaining as leak-proof an economic sanction regime as possible to encourage the North Korean economic collapse. Under the Clinton Administration, the cornerstone of US policy came to rest on the US promise to replace the DPRK's heavy-water nuclear reactors (HWRs) with light-water reactors (LWRs), which were less capable of producing the plutonium and highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons, by the year 2003. As an incentive, the United States further promised in the 1994 Agreed Framework accord to provide the DPRK with sufficient heavy fuel oil (HFO) to offset the decline in electricity production between the shutdown of the DPRK reactors and the construction of the new LWRs. In addition, the United States would provide humanitarian assistance, especially in the form of food aid through the UN World Food Program, to curtail the mass starvation of North Korean citizens. More distant "carrots" held out the prospect of US-DPRK political normalization and an end to economic sanctions. Specifically, the timing of the first of the two LWR projects scheduled for completion by 2003 and the post-1994 lukewarm delivery of incentives and carrots by both the Clinton and Bush Administrations seem to underscore that expectations of imminent DPRK collapse played a major role in shaping US policy and behavior. Minor nuances aside, therefore, the Clinton and Bush Administrations shared an essentially common policy toward the DPRK that might be summarized as: Contain it militarily, obstruct its nuclear and missile programs if possible, but largely ignore it in other respects, and eventually it will go away of its own weight.

As a neighbor of North Korea, South Korea took a significantly different perspective. By the mid-1980s, the ROK citizenry, especially the younger generation, had become inured to the

DPRK military threat. The older ROK generation, with direct experience of the Korean War, still harbored a certain level of fear about a possible military clash. The younger generation, lacking this experience, preferred to focus on economic development and the benefits of integration into the global community. To the younger generation, the on-going US military presence was more likely to provoke a North Korean attack than any DPRK plan to bring about re-unification by military means. Thus, the primary fear from a collapsing DPRK was the socio-economic implications of a political and military collapse. For the ROK, a sudden collapse of the Kim family stranglehold would bring about enormous social dislocation as refugees from the North sped to the South in the near term and a huge price tag to rebuild the North's crumbling economy and outdated infrastructure in the long term. Estimates put the cost of DPRK reconstruction at up to US\$1 trillion over ten years to raise it on a par with the South. In this context, the ROK priority was to engage the DPRK in a web of diplomatic and economic entanglements to moderate the military threat and slow down the rate of DPRK disintegration. US\$1–2 billion dollar a year was a minor price to pay within the overall ROK economy. In this way, if DPRK collapse were still to occur, the inherited situation would be less severe and less of a shock to the South.

As a more distant neighbor, Japan initially sided with the United States in a policy of lukewarm containment. Though an actor concerned with events on the Korean Peninsula, Japan let others take the lead in dealing with the DPRK. A turning point was marked in August 1998, however, when the DPRK fired a Taepo Dong-1 (TD-1) missile into the Pacific Ocean on a trajectory across Japan. In the aftermath of the TD-1 launch, Japan sought to strengthen its own defenses. It also sought to play a more active role in slowing down the DPRK collapse by providing considerable financial support to the LWR project and increasing humanitarian assistance.

The PRC, likewise with a shared border, had assisted the DPRK with its military development since the 1950s. A strong DPRK buffer was viewed positively by the Chinese leadership, especially in prior decades. The PRC assisted the DPRK in the development of a nuclear capability, but doubtlessly frowned on the DPRK's weaponization of this nuclear capability. Still, like the ROK, the more immediate PRC problem was its porous border with "fraternal" North Korea and the potential for a large refugee influx. The PRC and the DPRK had no heavily guarded Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to stave off the escape route in peacetime. Already in the late 1980s, the DPRK economic downturn, especially the wide-spread famine, had increased the stream of illegal North Korean refugees across this border into some of the most economically depressed regions of China. Most of the refugees stayed in northeast China and further exacerbated the Chinese economic problem there. More importantly, under ROK pressures, a few were allowed by China to emigrate and eventually found their way to South Korea, where they became a political nightmare for the North. Thus, Chinese policy aimed primarily to slow down the DPRK economic collapse with aid and assistance and curtail the refugee problem to avert political problems.

The Russian Far East has a shared border with the DPRK and a refugee problem, but on a smaller scale than the PRC. Moreover, after decades of "fraternal" cooperation and support, the Russians viewed the DPRK as a relatively minor military issue. To a certain degree, the growing military strength of the DPRK at the same time as the Russian Far Eastern Fleet experienced significant decline was an irritant, but not a near-term problem. All things considered, Russia was confronted with so many problems in the late 1980s and the 1990s that the DPRK was well below the Russian radar of concerns. Russian economic interest peaked in the mid-1990s when there arose a possibility that the LWRs constructed in the DPRK might use a Russian model. Once that option was closed, Russian attention waned. At DPRK insistence, Russia became a member of the Six-Party Talks in 2003. However, Russian interest was attracted more by its desire to attenuate its marginalization and again play a "big power" role in international affairs, rather than

any attraction to the DPRK.

In sum, only the United States was focused on the military, especially nuclear, danger emanating from a collapsing DPRK. The other four major players—South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia—had significantly different perspectives and priorities.

The inability of the five major actors to share a common perception of the problem led to five incompatible approaches to dealing with the DPRK as it seemed to be in the process of collapse. One state—the United States—wanted to manage the collapse, but assumed that the collapse would be soon and total. One state—Russia—had minimal essential interest outside of international prestige. Three states—South Korea, China, and Japan—had or developed an interest in inhibiting the downward spiral.

As incentive or compensation—depending on one’s viewpoint—for “good behavior,” the international community provided essential material assistance to the DPRK after the mid-1990s. In addition to minor medical and technical assistance, the chief programs have been related to construction of LWR project and HFO donations, which are coordinated by the Korean Peninsula Economic Development Organization (KEDO), and food aid, which is channeled mostly through the UN World Food Program (see Table 3).

Table 3. Foreign Contributions to the DPRK (Excluding China), 1995–2003

Area	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Total
KEDO	26.31	62.17	66.60	124.44	94.71	520.89	456.77	500.10	425.54	2232.52
LWR	3.00	6.00	0.00	45.00	0.00	412.55	322.82	316.62	354.77	1470.76
HFO	12.21	31.54	51.25	64.94	77.59	76.12	72.16	121.75		507.55
Food	544.5	510.1	914.6	812.4	1,026.8	1,0263.6	1,525.6	1,209.0	964.8	

Note: KEDO, LWR, and HFO data are given in US\$ millions. Food data is given in thousands of metric tons.

V. THE DPRK FUTURE

From the DPRK standpoint, North Korea has won a tremendous victory over its enemies and former allies. From 1995 to the present, the international community has paid for the DPRK economy to attain a certain degree of stability. The domestic socio-economic situation rebounded as the industrial decline and food shortages halted thanks largely to foreign assistance. The Kim family weathered the transfer of power from father to son without challenge or disruption, implying considerable stability in the political system. The myth system remains unchanged—Kim is still the all-perfect Dear Leader, *juche* is still the guiding principle, and the “imperialist” world is still seeking to attack the DPRK at any moment in a nuclear aggression. The military possesses an unchecked and unconstrained rudimentary capability to construct a nuclear weapons program. And, most importantly, all was achieved at no cost to the regime or its nuclear program. The entire burden was shouldered by outsiders (if one dismisses in a Malthusian-like way the 1–2 million deaths from regime-acquiesced starvation). The regimes of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were never compelled by either internal requirements or external demands to introduce fundamental reforms in any political, economic, social, security, military, or foreign policy arena. They gave up nothing, including the universally dreaded nuclear weapons program, to obtain external assistance.

Yet, the DPRK situation remains shaky in the long run. If foreign assistance precluded the need for the regime to introduce reform willingly, the same lack of reform ensured a continuation of the underlying problems. The regime solved nothing; it only delayed the prospect of collapse. Another crisis appears inevitable in the future. Let us return, then, to our initial question: Is the collapse of the DPRK in the best interest of the United States?

In a cost-free environment, the obvious answer is “yes.” The DPRK is a thorn in the side of the international community and all states would benefit from its loss. However, a DPRK collapse would not be cost-free. Indeed, the DPRK’s closest neighbors—the ROK, the PRC, and Japan—believe that it is cheaper to maintain North Korea for the longer term and possibly indefinitely than to have it collapse in the nearer term. Only the United States, which perceives the DPRK problem essentially and almost exclusively through the prism of military threat, considers a DPRK collapse as good in the near term. To highlight the differences, the ranking shown in Table 4 attempts to illustrate at a very gross level the order of concerns among the relevant states by five general categories.

As the US involvement in Iraq, both the 1991 and 2004–2005 experiences, underscore, US policy is best at the opening moves, very strong in the mid-play, but generally unprepared militarily or politically for the endgame. We concentrate our time, talents, and resources on prosecution of the conflict, leaving the long-term post-conflict developments to take care of themselves. In large measure, this deficiency is a natural consequence of our Judeo-Christian underpinnings, Massachusetts Puritan ethics, and Virginia plantation mind-sets, which are all grounded in a linear interpretation of history and events. Specifically, they assume without much reflection that all people of the world desire and will strive to be just like us if given the opportunity. Endgame planning is largely unnecessary.

Table 4. Order of Concerns

South Korea	China	Japan	Russia	United States
Social	Social	Economic	Political	Military
Economic	Economic	Political		
Political	Security	Military		
Security	Political			
Military	Military			

This analysis seeks to address the endgame. What are the possible DPRK futures and, from the endgame perspective, how would US policy choices contribute to molding the future DPRK? At a very general level, we can describe that the DPRK of the future will emerge from the current situation with either a “soft landing” or a “hard landing.” A soft landing assumes no major catastrophes. The DPRK regime has the will and capability to introduce reforms that modify the general nature of the system without a fundamental overthrow of the system as it currently exists. A hard landing assumes fundamental overthrow of the system as it currently exists. While not ideal, Table 5 identifies the general characteristics of change associated with the soft landing and the hard landing.

Table 5. Characteristics of Change

Characteristic	Soft Landing	Hard Landing
Scope	Partial	Total
Speed	Slow	Fast
Depth	Superficial	Essential
Circumstance	Adaptation	Revolution
Direction	Change from Above	Change from Below
Cause	Internal Forces	External Forces

VI. DPRK FUTURES AND US POLICY OPTIONS

In contrast to the simple economic determinism model of the late 1980s and early 1990s, US policy options and behavior alternatives must take into consideration that numerous factors will operate and converge to create the DPRK future. As noted earlier, the prior prediction misunderstood the major and essential determinant role that external behavior—especially foreign economic assistance, food aid, and military threat—would play in preventing the DPRK collapse. Thus, it is necessary to examine US policy option and behavior alternatives and their potential influence in molding the DPRK future. To this end, we will examine three general US options that would tend to support a soft landing and four US options that would tend to support a hard landing (see Table 6). These seven were chosen for review not because they exhaust US option alternatives, but because they represent the options most frequently supported and/or opposed in current literature on North Korea.

Engagement of the DPRK

Engagement envisions comprehensive interaction. The objective is to draw the DPRK in a broad front of political, economic, social, and military entanglements in an effort to attain mutual benefit and promote moderation and long-term adaptation within the DPRK. The expectation is that such entanglements would eventually cause the DPRK to adopt a more benign view of the external world, lead the DPRK to pursue a more normalized state of external relations, and defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It might include as initial steps: multi-level political contacts, multi-forum military talks, normalization of political relations, withdrawal of economic sanctions, Korean family reunifications, increased tourism, non-government exchanges, and kidnapped Japanese repatriations.

Soft Landing	Hard Landing
Engagement of the DPRK Compensation and Concessions to the DPRK Comprehensive Reconstruction the DPRK	Isolation of the DPRK Surgical Strike against the DPRK DPRK Containment and Regime Dismantling Major Military Offensive against the DPRK

Compensation and Concessions to the DPRK

Compensation envisions an economic-based form of engagement, which is focused on elimination of the DPRK “threat,” especially the North Korean nuclear and missile programs, through outright purchase. The objective is to provide the regime with sufficient resources to stabilize its political and economic position. The expectation is that the regime will thereby become less dependent on the external threat myth as social control and economic mobilization instruments. The benefits will far outweigh the gains of the DPRK military development and export programs. In addition to the action listed under engagement, it might include as initial steps: purchase, acquisition, and dismantling of nuclear facilities and missiles, cost-free construction of a national non-nuclear power grid, cost-free supply of heavy fuel oil sufficient to

offset power losses, and humanitarian food aid sufficient to alleviate agricultural shortfalls.

Comprehensive Reconstruction of the DPRK

This option envisions a comprehensive, multi-aspect engagement, which seeks radical change in the DPRK through wide-scale revitalization of the country. The objective is to assist the regime in undertaking systemic reform and modernization. The expectation is that the new North Korea will enter the international community as a responsible member and eventually integrate peacefully with South Korea. In addition to the action listed under engagement and compensation, it might include as initial steps: economic planning assistance, industrial management education, advanced agricultural instruction, infrastructure improvements, cost-free agro-industrial equipment modernization, outstanding foreign debt repayment, credit approval, and favored nation trading status.

Isolation of the DPRK

The isolation option envisions the maintenance of a firm US/ROK-led political, economic, and diplomatic blockade of the DPRK, supported by a strong military deterrence posture and limited engagement beyond a few key areas of interest. The objective of the limited engagement is to secure DPRK cessation of its nuclear and missile development programs and a halt to the export of missiles to third world countries. The expectation is that firm isolation will eliminate the network of external support essential to the DPRK and produce a crisis, whose dimensions are broader and deeper than the 1990s. Without external support, the DPRK will be unable to recover and will be compelled to choose either total systemic collapse or fundamental system-wide reform.

Surgical Strike against the DPRK

This option envisions precision military strikes against core assets in the DPRK nuclear and missile development programs, as well as strategic military forces. The objective is to eliminate the DPRK's major military capabilities before they can grow beyond the embryonic stage. The expectation is that lacking these capabilities the DPRK will lose its leverage and then must choose either total systemic collapse or fundamental system-wide reform.

DPRK Containment and Regime Dismantling

This option envisions a more active form of isolation. The objective is to foster the gradual demise of the DPRK's communist system and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under South Korean leadership. The expectation is that the current North Korean regime is incapable of genuine peaceful coexistence, integration into the international community, and mutual interdependence with other countries. It might include as initial steps: regional and world-wide diplomatic isolation, the buildup of clear US/ROK military superiority on the Korean peninsula, extensive economic sanctions, and leak-proof denial of external economic and humanitarian assistance.

Major Military Offensive against the DPRK

This option envisions a major US/ROK-led military offensive against North Korea. The objective is the total elimination of the DPRK system, comparable to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Bath Party system in Iraq. The expectation is that the defeated North Korea will reunify and integrate with South Korea as a responsible member of the international community. It might include as initial steps: the creation of an international anti-DPRK political alliance, the development of a coordinated US/ROK offensive war plan, the buildup of clear US/ROK

offensive military superiority on the Korean peninsula, the imposition of a seamless naval blockade of the DPRK, and the securing of regional basing rights from Japan and possibly Russia and/or China.

VII. THE KEY ISSUE FOR US POLICY-MAKERS

Since the late 1980s, the key issue for US policy-makers has been the speed of DPRK collapse. In practice, US policy and behavior toward North Korea have been formulated consistently on the assumption of a rapid collapse. The fact of a non-collapsing DPRK compels us to seek a different key issue on which to predicate US policy and behavior.

One possible issue is the DPRK's level of military power, namely, the DPRK's combat capabilities and order of battle. In itself, however, level of military power is insufficient. There are several states—Britain, France, Russia, and China—that have even greater military power but do not evoke equivalent fear. Clearly, the DPRK's level of military power is important in assessing the outcome of a conflict but not the likelihood of a conflict. If level of military power were the key issue, the simple answer for US decision-makers would be to build a higher level of military power. Then, relations and interactions with the DPRK would become irrelevant.

Another possibility is the DPRK uses of military power, namely, the DPRK's military doctrine and strategy. The time-honored answer is that the DPRK, like all states at all times in history, develops its Armed Forces to deter its enemies in peacetime, manage escalation during crisis times, and defeat its enemies in wartime. This provides no differentiation, no threat per se, and, thus, no guidance to decision-makers.

A third possibility concerns DPRK intentions, namely, the purpose for which the DPRK is building its military power in general and its nuclear and missile programs in particular. With a propensity for legalistic and technocratic worldviews, most US decision-makers shy away from the issue of intentions. "Actions speak louder than words" is the standard US mantra. "Trust, but verify" is the skeptic's alternative. "Intentions are unknowable" is the lazy man's retort. However, the very question of whether the DPRK of the future is a threat to the United States and US interests and, thus, the correct policy for the United States to pursue forces decision-makers ultimately to address the issue of intentions.

In the third possibility, the essential choice for US decision-makers is between two stark alternatives. The DPRK is building its military power, especially its nuclear and missile capabilities

- Because DPRK survival depends on a benign environment and foreign economic assistance. DPRK nuclear and missile power are critical as bargaining chips in diplomatic blackmail. The DPRK regime assumes that external largesse will be directly equivalent to DPRK military power, military threat, and nuclear and missile capabilities.
- Because DPRK survival in an inevitable future war depends on its military power. DPRK nuclear and missile power are critical as instruments of war-fighting and war-winning. The DPRK regime views external negotiations as buying time and bargaining as acquiring resources in support of its war-making requirements.

If the first alternative is the DPRK version of a "soft landing" intention, the second is a decidedly "hard landing" intention.

VIII. SOFT LANDING VS. HARD LANDING OPTIONS: BENEFITS AND PITFALLS IN A US POLICY CONTEXT

From a practical standpoint, all seven options for US policy outlined above have their specific trade-offs. While none is assured to provide an absolutely positive endgame for the United States, the likelihood of a positive outcome increases substantially if US policy choices and behavior most closely accord with DPRK intentions. Conversely, to state the obvious based on the past 15 years of experience, a misalignment of US policy and DPRK intentions will probably only worsen the situation, that is, the military danger will escalate.

Soft Landing Options

The three soft landing options all assume a DPRK willingness to reform over an extended period of time if presented with the proper types and levels of assistance. The ultimate discriminator is, therefore, the cost and pace that the United States finds acceptable until the North Koreans can evolve into a tolerable and self-sufficient member of the international community. The major pitfalls of the soft landing options, even under the best of circumstances, are two. First, the economic price tag increases tremendously from millions of dollars a year as engagement moves into compensation and concessions and then to hundreds of millions per year to implement reconstruction. Second, because soft landing is a timely process, the DPRK will maintain and, presumably, build up its nuclear and missile capabilities during the process if only as a bargaining chip and/or insurance of US ongoing commitment.

Hard Landing Options

The four hard landing options all assume that the DPRK is unwilling to reform no matter what incentives the international community holds out. There is no carrot, only stick. The ultimate discriminator is, therefore, whether US militant action prevents or enhances the prospect of a North Korean attack with weapons of mass destruction against South Korea, Japan, and the United States. The major pitfall arises insofar as US militant action might evoke the carnage that it seeks to avoid.

IX. THE KOREAN PENINSULA WITHOUT A DPRK: THE TRUE ENDGAME

Let us assume that US policy is successful in bringing about the true endgame, namely, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under Seoul's authority. Is this a prospect to celebrate or fear?

Arguably, the US/ROK relationship since the 1950s has rested on the potential for war on the Korean Peninsula. In the decades following the Korean War of 1950–1953, this relationship was strong because both the US and ROK leaderships held the threat of war as a primary concern. In the 1990s, the South Korean global integration, economic boom, and generational change diluted the South's fear of war and its preoccupation with the North. The corollary was a rise in anti-American sentiments among the South Korean populace, a desire to oust American soldiers and influence, and a need for national self-assertion. Indeed, all signs suggest that eliminating the last vestiges of Northern threat would drive the South further away from the United States as the ROK "little brother" exerts its independence from the US "big brother."

In the long term, therefore, the context of North–South reunification is more important for US policy than simply the demise of the DPRK. Unless the United States is fortunate in implementing a compensation and concessions option, a US soft landing policy orientation could leave the newly unified Korea as a growing nuclear power with delivery capability sufficient to strike the United States. Moreover, if neither China nor Russia emerges as a perceived military threat to the consolidated peninsula, the newly unified Korea is very likely to request the immediate withdrawal of all US forces, which are still costly, but now lack a mission, from the country and possibly the region. On the one hand, the unified Korea might choose to disarm and dismantle its inherited nuclear and missile programs. On the other hand, it might marshal its greater economic and industrial capability to modernize and augment the existing DPRK programs, thereby developing its "union card" for joining the front ranks of the global community. This is certainly not a prospect to celebrate, for it proliferates the very nuclear capability that US policy seeks to prevent under less constraining US presence than before the DPRK demise. A US hard landing policy orientation, based on US militant action and not a clear indication of imminent North Korean attack, would only serve to exacerbate the perception of the United States as the source of conflict and danger. In this context, a newly unified Korea might be hostile, if not outright belligerent, to longer term US interests in the region. This is a prospect to fear, for it simply replaces one danger with another, more powerful danger on the peninsula and throughout the region.

In sum, unless the United States is successful in buying and dismantling the DPRK's nuclear facilities and missiles, most US options are likely to result only in a North Korea or a unified Korea of greater military danger than we face today.

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