

Preparing for North Korean Collapse¹

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The death of Kim Jong-il has fueled increased concern about the possibility of the collapse of North Korea. Many observers wonder if the country's new ruler, the young and inexperienced Kim Jong-un, will be able to successfully consolidate power in Pyongyang. People worry that his failure to secure power would lead to a power struggle or an implosion—potentially to the collapse of North Korea.

To be sure, analysts have been predicting North Korea's demise for two decades. Any conversations about the future of the country should take into account both the regime's past resilience and the many tools Kim Jong-un has at his disposal to maintain control.² North Korea and the Kim regime may thus be with us for decades to come. But thinking about North Korean collapse is important even if one views it as a low-probability event. The magnitude of problems associated with collapse, the complexity of mitigating them, and the serious dangers associated with mismanaging this effort all highlight the critical importance of advance planning for this contingency. Coordinated planning, particularly between the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and China, is essential to avoid massive loss of life among North Koreans and dangerous escalation between countries that might step in to stabilize the country after collapse.

¹ This issue brief draws upon Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Fall 2011): 84-119.

² Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 44-74.

Government collapse in Pyongyang could create anarchy or a vacuum in which several serious problems might develop on the peninsula.³ These might include the disappearance of “loose nukes” and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) across international borders; a humanitarian disaster, if government-provided food and health services cease in the chaos of collapse; and the potential for ongoing insurgency and violence. Hunger and insecurity could trigger a massive refugee crisis if North Koreans take flight in search of food and safety.

Many people assume that under such circumstances, international relief agencies would step in to provide humanitarian assistance. But convoys of food and medicine cannot be sent into anarchic areas without military escort—particularly into a country like North Korea, which has a vast security apparatus (military, internal security, reserves) that could disrupt relief efforts. While international organizations could indeed play an important humanitarian role in stabilizing North Korea, they cannot be expected to do it alone, and would not be capable of performing many of the missions that could be necessary.

Fearing refugees and seeking to secure WMD, various countries might choose to perform military missions to stabilize North Korea following a government collapse. Such missions may include (1) stability operations to secure roads, provide public security, and deliver humanitarian relief; (2) finding, securing, and eliminating North Korea’s WMD program; (3) border control; (4) the disarmament of North Korean military forces, in order to disarm potential insurgents; and (5) a rapid reaction force standing by to deter or subdue any insurgent or military activity that might interfere with the provision of aid.

³ For discussion see Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, “Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea,” Council Special Report No. 42 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, January 2009); Marcus Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse: The Future of the Two Koreas* (Washington D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2000); Robert Collins, “Patterns of Collapse in North Korea,” *The Combined Forces Command C5 Civil Affairs Newsletter*, Seoul, Korea, January 1996, pp. 2-12; David S. Maxwell, *Catastrophic Collapse of North Korea: Implications for the United States Military* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1996).

In a recent study, Bruce Bennett, my co-author, and I described these missions and analyzed their requirements.⁴ We did not discuss whose troops should perform these missions; rather, we calculated their rough force requirements in a generic sense.

This exercise required making an assumption about how collapse would transpire. Collapse could be more dangerous (occurring during wartime, for example, and/or touching off a civil war). Such a dangerous collapse would have a long list of military missions, which would be expected to be very difficult. At the other end of the spectrum, collapse might occur in a more benign manner. In a benign scenario, North Korean elites would not vie for power, and security forces would cooperate with the foreign stability forces. This situation would resemble a vacuum in which the North Korean elites would be fleeing, and the military disappearing, as did the tatters of Saddam's army in 2003.

In our analysis, we assumed that collapse would occur in a more benign manner. We did not make this assumption because we claim to have a clearer crystal ball than other analysts—no one, ourselves included, knows how North Korea would collapse, let alone whether, or when,. Rather, we made this assumption because it was the most analytically useful. Our study shows that even in a best-case collapse scenario, the requirements for stabilizing the peninsula are staggering and the potential for miscalculation and escalation significant. In a more dangerous collapse scenario, missions would be more numerous and more difficult, and thus their requirements higher.

In our study, we drew upon a variety of metrics, historical and theoretical, to estimate force requirements for the various missions we examined. For example, analysts of stability operations typically estimate force size based on the size of the population to be pacified. Historically, easier operations (with little to no popular resistance) have required about 4 peacekeepers per

⁴ Bennett and Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea."

1,000 people in the population; harder operations have required closer to 20 per 1,000.⁵ For our study, we adopted a mid-range estimate of 13 peacekeepers per 1,000 people,⁶ which (given the North Korean population of 23 million) yields a requirement of 312,000 peacekeepers just for the stability operation—controlling roads and other transportation infrastructure; transporting, protecting, and distributing food and medicine; and taking over the responsibilities of the police to provide public security.

Mobilizing and inserting a force of this size would confront significant logistical and diplomatic challenges. Regarding the former, North Korea's poor infrastructure would make it impossible to flow such a large number of troops, weaponry, and logistical support into the theater—let alone the massive amounts of humanitarian aid that it would be their mission to deliver. On the latter point, assembling a large multinational force, negotiating any UN or other legal framework for its operations, and clarifying the rules of engagement for all involved parties would be similarly daunting. All of this would take time.

For all of these reasons, we argue that a simultaneous operation (in which over 300,000 peacekeepers stabilized the entire country at once) is improbable, so we model a sequenced approach. North Korea could be administratively divided into horizontal tiers. Stability forces would advance upward into the first tier from South Korea, stabilize that tier, and subsequently

⁵ James T. Quinlivan, "Force Requirements in Stability Operations," *Parameters*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter 1995-96), pp. 59-69; John McGrath, *Boots on the Ground: Troop Density in Contingency Operations*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper No. 16 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006).

⁶ Our analysis provides a useful architecture for subsequent debates about the expected difficulty of a North Korean stability operation. Some analysts might argue that it would be extremely difficult, due to their high level of indoctrination or their fear of South Korean retribution, the North Korean people will resist South Korean and other foreign forces. This would suggest the need for a larger stability force—staffed at a ratio of 15:1,000 or 18:1,000. On the other hand, some analysts might argue that a starved, brutalized, and grateful North Korean people will not resist the people who are feeding and healing their children. Such a conclusion would push requirements downward to 10:1,000 or below. This debate can and should be held, and should draw upon the existing literature about when insurgencies occur.

advance upward into the next tier. Because of the danger of anarchy in Pyongyang and the northern part of the country while the stability force works its way northward, this effort should be complemented by a second element in which stability forces move into North Korea from two of its major ports (Nampo and Chongjin), establish control over the lines of communication, and conduct stability operations.⁷

When we calculated how many personnel would be necessary for all five missions under this relatively benign scenario, we generated a massive requirement—approximately 300,000 to 400,000 personnel. These are more soldiers than the United States currently has in both Afghanistan and Iraq. As is evident, the big force driver is the stability operation; other missions (such as counter-WMD and border control) have much smaller requirements. Table 1 (below) summarizes our calculations.

Table 1: Force Requirements for Post-Collapse Stability Operations in North Korea

| Mission | Requirements (number of soldiers) |
|--------------------------|--|
| Stability Operation | 180,000 – 312,000 (sequenced versus simultaneous) |
| Border control | 24,000 |
| WMD elimination | 3,000 – 10,000 |
| Conventional disarmament | 49,000 |
| Combat/Deterrence | 7,000 – 10,500 |
| Total | 263,000 – 405,500 |

⁷ For more description of a simultaneous versus sequenced operation, see Bennett and Lind, “The Collapse of North Korea,” pp. 93-97.

As discussed above, many analysts would object to our assumption of a relatively benign collapse scenario. They might argue that North Korea's military will fight to the bitter end, or that regional warlordism is likely to develop among elites. Our analysis has important implications for analysts who make these more pessimistic (and quite plausible) assumptions: stabilizing North Korea under more dangerous circumstances would require tens of thousands *more* troops than we calculate here.

So far, individual countries have only recently begun to plan for managing North Korean collapse. According to media reports, American and South Korean forces from the Combined Forces Command (CFC) are talking about this contingency, and are planning and training for these kinds of missions. But *joint* planning that involves China has been stymied by Beijing's refusal to participate. (China, after all, is North Korea's key ally, and Pyongyang would not look kindly upon plans for its demise.)

But Beijing's reticence to plan with Seoul and Washington must be overcome—in Track II forums if that is all that the Chinese will allow. The consequences of a poorly planned response to North Korean collapse are potentially calamitous. Rapid cooperation is essential because many of these missions are time-sensitive—for example, the longer it takes to organize humanitarian efforts, the more North Koreans might perish or decide to displace from their homes; the longer North Korean WMD sit unsecured, the greater the risk that they will vanish across international borders into the black market.

Joint planning is also essential because uncoordinated efforts to pacify North Korea risk creating serious regional instability—for example, if China, the ROK, and/or the United States send military forces into North Korea to locate WMD or to secure borders. The specter of China's People's Liberation Army racing south, while American and South Korean soldiers race north, is

a terrifying one given the experience of the Korean War, a climate of distrust among the three countries, and the risk of crisis escalation to the nuclear level.

Who are these troops—the 300,000 or 400,000 soldiers that may be needed to stabilize North Korea? Most of them probably would be South Korean. American officials have obliquely commented that they do not envision a major ground commitment in the event that North Korea collapses. Tokyo is likely to stay out (as all of the neighbors would prefer, given Japan’s history on the peninsula). The European powers are unlikely to offer anything beyond token assistance.

Many analysts speculate that in the event of North Korean collapse and any refugee activity, China would intervene in order to stabilize its southern border. Although the notion of Chinese intervention is generally regarded as anathema in Seoul and Washington, our analysis—which warns of the daunting requirements of stabilizing North Korea—suggests that Chinese intervention could be desirable. The Chinese could, for example, guard their own border with North Korea, and could participate in a multinational humanitarian operation. The sense of mistrust between the Chinese and the ROK/U.S. could be eased if such an operation were performed under UN auspices.

If South Korean and American leaders welcome some Chinese participation, it is essential that planners coordinate the scope and limits of that intervention in advance. If, however, Seoul and Washington decide that a Chinese role is *not* welcome, then they must be prepared to solve the problems that would draw China in, and they must discuss their plans with Beijing to avoid miscommunication. The Korean people have experienced enough tragedy; Seoul, Washington, and others should make sure they are planning carefully now, in order to prevent more tragedy in the future.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies



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