


Thinking About The Thinkable: DPRK Collapse Scenarios Redux

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By Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

In the following Policy Forum Peter Hayes analyzes *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* by RAND analyst Bruce Bennett. Hayes states "Bennett's report is salutary reading and should be read widely, including in Pyongyang. Anyone who *hopes* (as against feels obliged to prepare) for DPRK collapse or who thinks that "bringing it on" is likely to incur less costs for the most vulnerable populations than transforming the DPRK inside-out as-fast-as-possible via engagement aimed at non-collapse should read chapter 3 on the horrendous humanitarian consequences of a collapse and possible war."

[Peter Hayes](#) is Professor of International Relations, [School of Global, Urban and Social Studies](#), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia and Director, Nautilus Institute.

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II. Policy Forum by Peter Hayes

Thinking About The Thinkable: DPRK Collapse Scenarios Redux

In his just-published *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse*, RAND analyst Bruce Bennett correctly argues that things would be awful should the DPRK collapse. [\[1\]](#)

In this 342 page report, he argues that there is a "reasonable probability" of collapse; [\[2\]](#) therefore, we should plan for it. No problem so far. Individuals, households, cities, militaries do contingency planning all the time, and hedge with insurance against the really bad outcomes—or ignore them at their peril.

A bit later in the report, however, he says that there is increasing *discussion* that it could collapse (which is different to the probability it will collapse, rather, it suggests the probability of discussion is increasing). And, he adds, one can't say much more "than to say it could happen, perhaps even in the next few years." [\[3\]](#)

All good. But is this a sound basis for policy, for allocating scarce resources?

WHEN VERSUS IF

Before answering this question, note that there is also a "reasonable probability" of *non-collapse* of the DPRK, with an array of possible positive and negative outcomes, all of which need to be shaped by US policy. Indeed, in another report, Bennett and co-author Jennifer Lind present a set of such

non-collapse scenarios which include current regime muddles through, a coup and modernizing regime without system change, and a “soft landing” in the welcoming arms of the ROK on South Korean terms. [4]

The United States, its allies, and partners (aka China, Russia) need to plan for the non-collapse scenarios as well and not just the worst-case collapse scenario. Of course, there are other very bad scenarios that need to be matched with contingency plans—all-out war including nuclear war in Korea, for example, is a doozy for planners which they take very seriously, whatever its “probability.”

The problem with Bennett’s report is that it quickly moved from the purely “conceptual” space” into the media space, [5] and is fast headed for the policy-political space (via Asan Institute’s North Korea Conference 2013, which began today with Bennett as a high-level speaker). [6]

Unfortunately, the RAND public affairs press release takes Bennett’s report carefully defined scope (see below) and suggests that the gist of his report is that the DPRK will collapse, and the only question is not if, but when. In fact, it ascribes the phrase directly to Bennett, not the report: “It is more a matter of “when” than “if” it will occur, says Bruce Bennett.” [7]

Unsurprisingly, journalists who cited the press release presumably without reading the report followed suit. UPI, for example, quotes the press release word for word: “It is more a matter of ‘when’ than ‘if’ it will occur.” [8]

Leaving aside the RAND spin on the report, let’s examine how the report approaches the issue of probability of collapse. “Reasonable probability” is not defined in Bennett’s report. I surmise that here, “reasonable” probability simply means it’s conceivable. In plain English, I don’t know the probability, I don’t know when it will happen, but it’s greater than zero that it will happen sometime.

Note that this kind of characterization is not subject to refutation. The continued existence of the DPRK is affirmation of the thesis that it may collapse, eventually. There is no way to disprove this thesis.

COLLAPSIST ANTECEDENTS

Bennett’s report is the latest, perhaps best, in a long lineage of collapsists. I first came across the collapsist thesis in 1991 when Aidan Foster-Carter argued that North Korea-as-we-know-it would cease to exist within five years. [9] One of the more nuanced collapsist analyses was developed at US Forces Korea in 1995 by Robert Collins, at the time that famine overwhelmed the DPRK. It presented 7 phases of collapse (see Table 1). [10]

Table 1: Seven Phases of DPRK Collapse

Phase One: *resource depletion*

Phase Two: *the failure to maintain infrastructure around the country because of resource depletion*

Phase Three: *the rise of independent fiefs informally controlled by local party apparatchiks or warlords, along with widespread corruption to circumvent a failing central government*

Phase Four: *the attempted suppression of these fiefs by the KFR once it feels that they have become powerful enough*

Phase Five: *active resistance against the central government*

Phase Six: *the fracture of the regime*

Phase Seven: *the formation of new national leadership.*

David Maxwell, formerly on the Combined Forces Command/US Forces Korea CJ3 staff and later Director of Plans, Policy, and Strategy (J5) for Special Operations Command Korea, followed in 1996 with his *"Catastrophic Collapse of North Korea: Implications for the United States Military."* [11] He foresaw four collapse scenarios, two soft and two hard, but no scenario in which the DPRK regime would continue (see Table 2).

Table 2: Maxwell's Four Collapse Scenarios

In 1996 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) appears to be on the verge of disintegration due in large part to Kim Il Sung's philosophy of juche or self-reliance (which is nothing more than the political, economic, and social isolation of North Korea), the disastrous flooding of 1995 resulting in widespread famine, and disproportionate military spending at the expense of economic development and social welfare.

4 possible scenarios for collapse were advanced; two soft landing and two hard landing.

The two soft landing scenarios result from either KJI's capitulation; or KJI-removal by coup, leading to gradual reunification in accordance with the Republic of Korea's three phase reunification plan.

The "hard landing" scenarios (complete collapse and disintegration of the national government; multiple factions, attempted coup, civil war, cause tremendous suffering, increased instability, and require intervention in order to stabilize the peninsula and prevent spill-over both to the north and south as well as massive migration of the north's population.

Twelve years later, Maxwell asked himself: "Why the North Korean People Don't Rebel?" [12] The answer, he concluded, is: "regime collapse will only occur when it loses its central governing effectiveness and the coherency of its military and security forces. As long as those two conditions exist the regime will remain in power with the people sufficiently oppressed (and their horrendous suffering continuing)."

The DPRK did not collapse at this time of extraordinary stress, but collapsists lived on. In 1997, a CIA expert panel averred (in a then-classified report) that the DPRK "Endgame" was nigh. The CIA panel warned that the North Korean regime could not remain "viable for the long term," with the majority doubting the "current, deteriorating status could persist beyond five years." Citing the "steady, seemingly irreversible economic degradation in the North," the panel concluded that "the current situation in North Korea appears beyond corrective actions that do not fundamentally threaten the regime's viability." [13]

Collin's 1995 scenarios—which he characterized to me as "an article, not a manuscript. It is not worth your time. Please ignore it" [14]—resurfaced as the core argument of Robert Kaplan's widely read October 2006 "When North Korea Falls," in *The Atlantic*. [15]

With collapsists updating their prediction roughly every 5-7 years (for example, in 2009, Foster Carter stated that "I don't see the change necessary in North Korea, so I still feel it will fall at any moment...I have been saying this for a long time" [16]), his recantation in 2011 is worth recalling. "I'm not a collapsist any more," he states, [17] calling himself "A Former Collapser." Noting that he has been characterized as a a long-running collapsist, he states:

Guilty as charged, your honour. (Pauses to wipe egg from face.)

In perhaps slight mitigation, I would plead as follows:

1. My main point was always the converse: that hopes of a peaceful evolution are, unfortunately, improbable.

I nonetheless still believe that we must try to achieve this.

2. The German precedent warns us to expect the unexpected.

3. Not before time, I have recently rethought the matter. I now expect that China will step in to prevent any risk of collapse. [18]

In recent years, many reports—too many to list here—from academia and governments funded by philanthropy and states, have beaten the collapse drum, especially when Kim Jong Il died and his young son Kim Jong Un was installed as DPRK leader.

COLLAPSE BY ASSUMPTION

Let's now return to Bennett's report. Rather than tackle and resolve the issue of the credibility of the collapse thesis, Bennett elects to put it aside and *assumes* as the premise of his report "that, at some point in the future, the North Korean government will collapse." [19] Provided readers read the report, ignore the press release and the media coverage, and keep in mind that this is an assumption, then I have no problem with proceeding by assumption.

Conversely, to the extent that policy analysis and decisions are skewed by analysis based on assumption, without examining the equal and opposite best cases of collapse (without war and intervention) and non-collapse, we are at risk. So it's critical to see how consistently Bennett sticks to this premise.

He moves towards making an empirical case for collapse at one point, suggesting that the trend is towards a more brittle DPRK: "Various factors are evolving in a direction that will render North Korea more susceptible over time to the kinds of system shocks that would eventually cause its government to fail." [20] One can quibble with this conclusion—there are countervailing indicators (such as widespread use of cell phones by a proto-middle class, for example) that suggest the regime is confident, and increasingly resilient, at least domestically. We can agree to disagree on this score, or at least admit that no-one knows, possibly not even Kim Jong Un, whether the regime is more or less stable.

But at various places, Bennett shifts gears and controverts the assumption on which the report is premised. "At some point," he declares, "the North Korean control system will fail—but it is very difficult to determine when that might be," [21] The question arises (leaving aside predicting the timing): how do you know? This assertion is consistent with the assumption of failure, but crosses the line into empirical and theoretical consideration of whether, when and how it might fail—thereby reintroducing the issue of probability and uncertainty that was defined out of the analysis by assumption at the start of the report.

Later in the report, he presents a more realistic evaluation on this score: "The North Korean government is still coherent, and the security services still impose serious penalties on those acting against the government. Thus, it is premature to send messages to North Korea encouraging the open rebellion of the North Korean people: Such messages will only get potential rebels killed or imprisoned." [22]

So like Maxwell, he finds that regime control may continue, possibly indefinitely, and possibly even tighter. Which it is—more or less control, more or less probable collapse—is left to the reader to figure out, perhaps for another twenty years of collapsist incantation of the regime's demise.

"When" matters: measured in terms of wars avoided, economic cost, human rights cost, ecological cost, all of which are global, regional and Korean level and distributed differently to different parties, the positive outcomes of non-collapse appear to be greater, *a priori*, than collapse. Timing matters a lot in the cumulative cost-benefit ratios of the two collapse-non collapse trajectories. Collapse way in the future can be discounted heavily; collapse tomorrow is awesome. Slow gains towards ultimate non-collapse today may not make a big difference to the calculus of all the parties to the conflict except for the DPRK; but would make a big difference over time, that is, years and decades.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

So what's a decision-maker to do when this 342 page report thuds into their In-box?

One approach is to select those action-items that would save the day in the collapse and post-collapse scenarios imagined in exquisite detail by Bennett that also work in non-collapse scenarios, for example, developing and practicing delivery of humanitarian aid, and even seeking ways to engage DPRK counterparts in dry runs before collapse, at a military-to-military level. I am the first to admit that huge humanitarian crises could occur in the DPRK almost overnight (but without collapse and war) which destabilize the regime. Their resolution would require many of the same capabilities that Bennett suggests need to be developed by the US, the ROK, and third parties. For example, we *know* that a protracted cold snap in the DPRK could disable the power distribution transformers in and around Pyongyang in ways that could not be repaired, period. At which point, millions of people would be w/o light and heat in major public buildings, apartments, etc. in -30 degrees C. What would we do? And what will we do if there's a major radiological accident in the DPRK once their old plutonium reactor and new light water reactor are up and running—especially if the cloud is bearing down on Seoul? There is no shortage of nightmares to lose sleep over.

On this point, Bennett agrees: "Many of these same preparations would need to be taken in preparation for a peaceful unification." [23] And: "many of the same preparations would be required to achieve a successful unification whether Korea achieves unification peacefully or through a collapse. A collapse would clearly be the more challenging case, and thus it makes an appropriate focus for planning, to make sure that the approach is adequately robust to cover both cases." But that's it for the hedge, in a 343 page report.

However, this move evades the real issue. Bennett is working at one end of the "possibilities spectrum of DPRK futures, focused on its "collapse" in very bad way, with an unknown but "likely unlikely"—say, as Bennett does, 2% per year probability. [24] There's an equal and opposite possibility of a non-collapse outcome with lots of good aspects at the opposite side of the distribution curve, whatever its shape (also perhaps a 1-2% per year).

In-between is the realm of the "more likely" to "very likely" which can still mix up a lot of surprise, change, discontinuity,, more or less good/bad outcomes, just not the very bad case Bennett assumes nor the very good case. In reality, the array of possibility in the 95% of the probability spectrum reaching from the two outliers is where policy should (and does) focus.

To the extent possible, it's good to develop strategies to anticipate the two outliers--and for those strategies to be incorporated into mainstream policy and integrated into core strategy if they also work in the "in-between" areas of possible outcome. Some of these strategies may be "no regrets" that is, something you should be doing anyway at no marginal cost. Also, I and colleagues have examined the energy relief and rehabilitation implications of DPRK collapse, which Bennett cites. [25] So I am not heedless of the need to prepare for the collapse scenario. But we also address in detail the recovery and development non-collapse scenarios and spell out the policy

implications of both lines of argument. [26]

The problem is that analysts and policymakers (not to mention journalists) often focus on the worst cases, because they are frightened of them or misunderstand their probability. When people prepare for the worst...to some extent, they bring about a world in which the worst then occurs. The further problem is that when they think about the "best outcomes," they assume that these outcomes will take care of themselves because they are "good." And note that non-collapse can also bring about awful outcomes—internal suppression on an even greater scale than now in the DPRK; war and stalemate rather than total defeat for the DPRK. These contingencies are similarly “unlikely” but should also be examined for their policy implications, not just the outright collapse scenario.

In short, there is no substitute for full blown foresight analysis that develops scenarios based on a range of radical uncertainty about the future of the DPRK, including non-collapse scenarios which do not lead to wars, but might mix up very very good with very very bad outcomes. [27] One obvious scenario, for example, that would challenge the status quo powers in different but fundamental ways would be a DPRK transition to a democratic, nuclear-armed state. Best, as you can see, does not equal good for everyone.

The final argument that Bennett advances is that should the DPRK collapse, "The cost of unification will be far less if proper preparation is made for North Korean collapse than if the current status quo prevails." [28] That's likely true. But by the same logic, so is the parallel argument: "The avoided costs of collapse and the benefits of non-collapse will be far greater if proper preparation is made of North Korean non-collapse than if the current status quo prevails." (not a quote from the report) He also argues that collapse outcomes may be very very bad, and the United States, the ROK, and other parties are insufficiently prepared. True: but are they any better prepared for the outcomes of DPRK non-collapse scenarios, negative and positive? Have they thought through in depth the strategic implications thereof, and compared them with the very very bad outcomes of the collapse scenario? I speculate, for the most part, they haven't (except in Beijing!).

CONCLUSION

Bennett's report is salutary reading and should be read widely, including in Pyongyang. Anyone who *hopes* (as against feels obliged to prepare) for DPRK collapse or who thinks that "bringing it on" is likely to incur less costs for the most vulnerable populations than transforming the DPRK inside-out as-fast-as-possible via engagement aimed at non-collapse should read chapter 3 on the horrendous humanitarian consequences of a collapse and possible war.

If that isn't enough to drive you to trying first and foremost to improve the odds on the non-collapse side north of the DMZ, I am not sure what could.

But what is critical is to realize that there are two sides north of the DMZ; it's the same “fence,” whichever side you are looking at.

Note: Revised to correct affiliation of David Maxwell on September 25 2013, 4.56PM PST

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org