

Policy Forum 08-046: We Have No Plan



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By Victor Cha

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I. Introduction

Victor Cha, Director of Asian Studies at Georgetown University, adjunct Senior Fellow at the Pacific Council for International Policy, and former director of Asian Affairs for the U.S. National Security Council, writes, "It would be completely irresponsible not to have a quiet discussion among concerned governments about how to deal with potential North Korean instability... it has to be done -- and done well -- before the next rumor proves to be true."

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II. Article by Victor Cha

- "We Have No Plan"

By Victor Cha

Last week some South Korean Internet news sites reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il had been assassinated outside of Pyongyang. The Unification Ministry quickly confirmed that the reports were false. Readers will remember about a little over a year ago the reports that Kim may have had heart surgery, and then prior to that, reports of another attempt on Kim's life. In each case, however, the reports cannot be confirmed, and everyone goes back to their regular routine.

But what if one day a report turns out to be true? What would be the impact on the peninsula's stability? What would be the economic impact? Last week's rumor, for example, triggered massive selling of Asian currencies, as markets feared a potential and costly collapse of North Korea. Most important, is there a plan in place if something happens in North Korea tomorrow? The answer is no.

In what would be the single most important contingency that could impact the South Korean economy and security for decades, there is no agreed upon plan for how to deal with a collapsing North Korea. Here is just a sample of the unanswered questions: Do parties in the region have an agreed upon definition of what constitutes state failure in the North? Who determines when to intervene? Should humanitarian intervention take place under a UN Security Council mandate or under U.S.-South Korea authority? Who is responsible for securing borders? Who is authorized to make contact with internal elements in a collapsing North Korea? Who is responsible for securing nuclear and missile sites? Who is responsible for neutralizing artillery?

Given the stakes involved, you would think that the U.S., South Korea and other regional partners had some type of agreed upon plan. Nope. There is a "concept plan" that has been discussed in the past between Washington and Seoul, but all dialogue ceased under the previous administration in Seoul. The Roh Moo-hyun government rejected planning discussions because it believed that such discussions would offend Pyongyang and give the impression that the U.S. and Seoul were actively conspiring to collapse the regime. The Roh government instead tried to work on its own plan, without sharing any common concept of operations with the U.S.

It would be completely irresponsible not to have a quiet discussion among concerned governments about how to deal with potential North Korean instability. Kim Jong-il is not getting any younger. The food situation is not getting better. And the brittle system of political control, although still effective, will become increasingly less so if the six-party nuclear deal indeed leads to a lessening of sanctions and Pyongyang's greater interaction with the outside world.

This discussion needs to take place in three stages. First, the U.S. and South Korea need to reengage fully in discussions on a "concept plan" that includes agreement on the division of labor in tasks if the two governments were to encounter signs of a collapsing North. In addition to answering all of the questions above, the U.S., in my opinion, should be responsible for securing all weapons of mass destruction and missiles sites, while South Korea would be in the lead on humanitarian assistance and domestic stabilization. Once the U.S. and South Korea reach agreement, they should then coordinate trilaterally with Japan to deal with potential refugee flows and additional logistics issues related to humanitarian aid.

Once the three allies reach a common understanding, then Washington and Seoul need to engage

with Beijing. The key with China in a North Korea contingency is to reduce any uncertainty or potential for misperception. For example, a collapse might lead China to secure a buffer along the Yalu river to prevent an outflow of North Korean refugees into China. It might secure that buffer south (rather than north) of the Yalu in order to be effective. Without any prior discussions of scenarios and likely actions the U.S., China and South Korea might take, such an action by the Chinese in the midst of a fluid domestic situation in the North might be misinterpreted as threatening by the U.S., South Korea and Japan. This is only one small example of many other potential insecurity spirals that could develop over a North Korea contingency without serious prior planning on all sides.

The commodity sought through such U.S.-South Korea-China planning discussions is not trust (an over-used term in Asian diplomacy), instead, it is transparency. Transparency -- knowing what the other side is doing in a contingency and why they are doing it -- is the most valuable commodity in a crisis. Planning for a potential regime collapse does not equate to a policy of regime collapse. Nevertheless, many would see a high-level coordination group as offensive to Pyongyang and potentially detrimental to six party talks. That is understandable, but it should not be an impediment. This can take place in more low-profile forms, such as through policy planning talks which the U.S., South Korea and Japan already engage in. Or it could be done at a track 1.5 level with universities, think-tanks and government officials. But it has to be done -- and done well -- before the next rumor proves to be true.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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