



Viewpoint: North Korea After Kim Jong Il: Four Scenarios

Sico van der Meer

Introduction

This article presents four scenarios on the future of North Korea when its dictator, Kim Jong Il, will die. Kim is suffering from health problems and his passing away may have serious results for the stability at the Korean peninsula—and thus for the international community. The four scenarios vary between a smooth succession of Kim by his youngest son without any major changes in North Korea, to a struggle for power with anarchy and chaos as a result. If the regime implodes, both a unilateral intervention by China as a multilateral intervention by South Korea, the United States, and other countries, are possible. Although predicting developments in North Korea is impossible, the author argues that these scenarios can at least assist the international community in preparing for sudden changes at the Korean peninsula.

The surprising visit of former U.S. President Bill Clinton to North Korea in August 2009 resulted not only in the release of the two imprisoned American journalists he was aiming for. One other interesting result of his visit was that the international community witnessed that Kim Jong Il, the infamous dictator of North Korea, was still alive and in charge of the country's leadership. After some year of speculations about his health problems, he was clearly back on stage. However, no matter how bright his smile was while posing next to Bill Clinton, he was not the man he used to be. Only his clear loss of weight already showed that he has had—and may still have—serious health problems. Next to the stroke he had in 2008, as foreign intelligence services claim, there are also speculations that Kim suffers from pancreatic cancer, diabetes, and heart diseases. Some sources speculate that the life expectation of North Korea's "Dear Leader" may be five years maximum.[\[1\]](#)

What would the death of Kim Jong Il mean for North Korea, and, in broader view, for the world? Several scenarios exist on the future of North Korea after the reign of Kim Jong Il, varying from a smooth transition of power to his youngest son to an outbreak of anarchy and chaos. This essay attempts to identify the—in the view of the author—most realistic scenarios and their implications for the international community.[\[2\]](#)

From Father to Son

In 1994 Kim Jong Il succeeded his father Kim Il Sung, who led the country with a firm hand since its establishment after the Second World War until his death. Even in 1994 a lot of speculations circulated about the upcoming implosion of the North Korean communistic regime; the Cold War had ended, the country's economy had completely collapsed and Kim Jong Il was

not known as someone with a lot of power and prestige within the North Korean ruling elite. To everyone's surprise, however, no problems at all seemed to arise in Pyongyang. The succession from father to son went smoother than anyone could expect. Although Kim Jong Il did not operate as much in public as his father used to do, he steadily built on his domestic mythical status, and after some three years no one doubted his all-embracing power in North Korea anymore.

After his public appearances suddenly came to an end in 2008, except from some manipulated (elder) photographs, speculations started about the succession of Kim Jong Il himself. Suspicions about serious health problems were strengthened when, quite suddenly, his youngest son Kim Jong Un was put forward as the successor to come. At least, that is what analysts concluded when Kim Jong Un was appointed at some important political positions and when new propaganda was noticed, seemingly designed to increase the stature of his personality. Most observers assume that Kim Jong Un is being prepared to succeed his father as leader of the state.^[3]

Scenario 1: Smooth Succession

The most obvious scenario on the future of North Korea builds on the developments in 1994 when Kim Il Sung died. In this scenario, when Kim Jong Il dies his son Kim Jong Un will be pushed forward as the third generation of the 'mythical' ruling Kim family. Just like Kim Jong Il, his son will probably stay out of the spotlights at first, meanwhile focusing on his power consolidation and his domestic public image. Within a year or two everyone, both inside as outside North Korea, will consider him the self-evident leader of the state. While succeeding his father, Kim Jong Un can rely on the support of the country's military and political elite. The strength of the North Korean regime is that anyone within the elite benefits from stability only, because any change can only have a negative influence on their privileged luxury life amidst the hungry population.^[4]

In this scenario the succession from father to son will pass that smooth that nothing will change in North Korea. The world will not get rid of this pariah state some other years or even decades. North Korea is not only infamous because of its human rights violations, humanitarian emergencies, illegal activities like counterfeiting, illegal gambling activities and the production and smuggling of drugs and weapons, but most of all because of its political provocations, including nuclear tests, missile launches and nuclear proliferation activities. When this scenario becomes reality, the international community will have to go on finding a way to deal with this uncommon regime and its 'rogue' activities, just like it is trying for years already.

It is, by the way, not unthinkable that this scenario may start even sooner than the death of Kim Jong Il. Some analyst assume that Kim Jong Il, when he will have time of life, wishes to transfer his power to Kim Jong Un in April 2012. In that month the founder of the state, Kim Il Sung, would have become a hundred years old.

Scenario 2: Struggle for Power

A second scenario on the future of North Korea is less positive about the unity within the country's elite. Supporters of this scenario expect a struggle for power within this elite as soon as Kim Jong Il passes away. Like a good dictator befits, they argue, Kim Jong Il uses a tactic of 'divide and rule' to stay in power. Within the North Korean elite several factions are opposing each other, and it is only their 'Dear Leader' that holds them together. These factions are also supporting different successors for Kim. Next to groups who support Kim Jong Un, especially Kim's eldest son, Kim Jong Nam, is said to have quite some support within the elite. People who have supported Kim Jong Nam during the last years, are said to fear for their lives when Kim Jong Un and his supporters will come to power. To prevent a day of reckoning in which they will be punished for supporting the 'wrong' son, this faction could initiate a struggle for power immediately after the death of Kim Jong Il. Some experts also think a power struggle might occur because some groups within the elite doubt the leadership capabilities of Kim Jong Un and prefer a military junta to lead the country instead.

This power struggle scenario can be made in two variants, depending on the outcome. In the first variant, the struggle is short and the world will hardly notice. A new leader will come forward from the power struggle, whether it is Kim Jong Un or someone else, and with support of the (surviving part of the) elite this leader will reign the country just like Kim Jong Il did. Maybe there will not come forward one broadly supported winner of the power struggle, but will a military junta be installed—possibly with Myanmar in mind. Even such a junta would presumably not make much difference for the world outside. Whoever comes to power in North Korea, stability will be the first priority so in general the policy of Kim Jong Il will be continued.

The second variant has a 'chaotic' outcome: no winner comes out of the power struggle and the regime collapses while struggling. Because the North Korean governing system is very centralized, a power vacuum at the top will immediately cause problems elsewhere in the system. Observers who support this variant argue that a power struggle at the top will unavoidable start the implosion of the regime, leaving the country in anarchy and chaos.^[5] What will happen next, is explained in scenarios 3 and 4.

Scenario 3: Chaos and Chinese Intervention

The third scenario builds on the second scenario. In this scenario the succession from father to son fails and a power struggle and/or chaos arise. The difference with the previous scenario, however, is that China will not tolerate North Korea to fall into chaos and will intervene.

China attaches great strategic value to North Korea. The leadership in Beijing regards North Korea as a buffer-state keeping the sphere of influence of the United States—South Korea, Japan and Taiwan—at a distance. Above all, however, China wishes stability. The fundamental long term policy of the Chinese government is that domestic stability, sustained by economic progress, has top priority. Chaos at the borders is not at all contributing to this policy, especially

not when, like in the North Korean case, large flows of hungry refugees are expected to cross the border into China. Chaos in North Korea may have a destabilizing influence on the Chinese border areas, which is even more undesirable considering the fact that the Chinese provinces bordering North Korea are densely populated and of considerable economic importance. Although China officially advocates non-intervention as a standard in its foreign policy, the strong wish for stability will probably be more important than the non-intervention principle.

As soon as the regime in North Korea starts to totter, China will intervene, supporters of this scenario assert. Detailed plans on intervention in North Korea are already available in Beijing, some sources state.^[6] Large-scale intervention is something China would preferably prevent, so action should take place before sending large amounts of troops into North Korea would be required. In case a power struggle starts in Pyongyang, China wants to prevent the struggle to seep through from the top toward lower governmental levels. This is why, considering supporters of this scenario, China will intervene at an early stage of the power struggle by replacing the top level by a Chinese-minded puppet government that will take firm control of the country.

This scenario may seem quite unrealistic, probably only useful for a James Bond movie. Nevertheless, this scenario is more plausible than at first sight may appear, some analysts argue. Because all levels of the North Korean elite have a lot to gain by keeping the system stable, a smooth replacement of the top level while leaving the rest of the elite untouched may meet little resistance. Moreover, except from this strong wish for stability within the North Korean elite, well-targeted Chinese economic aid and investments could be helpful to softly remove any unrest among this elite. Presumably, the newly Chinese installed top will slowly start economic reforms, just like happened in China itself: aiming for a combination of a communist political system and a semi-capitalist economy. This kind of reforms will require a lot of patience and investments during a long period, to prevent any unrest. The positive aspect about this scenario, its supporters claim, is that the world will be at least freed of the 'rogue activities' of the North Korean regime.

Even skeptics of this early Chinese intervention scenario agree that China may want to intervene as soon as stability at its border may be threatened by a collapsing North Korean regime. Even when the scenario in which China will replace the North Korean political top is deemed too unrealistic, most analysts agree that China has plans available to take action when instability is looming. Plans are said to have been developed to close hermetically the borders with North Korea, and to develop troops into the North to provide humanitarian aid to the population, to establish some law and order, and maybe even to secure nuclear weapons and materials. It is often assumed that China would prefer a United Nations mandate for these actions, and some experts even expect that China would prefer to start a UN operation jointly led by China, South Korea and the United States.^[7] More information on this joint intervention can be found under scenario 4 in this essay. Besides, some analysts suppose that China is preparing a joint intervention with Russia to intervene and stabilize North Korea when necessary—not only to prevent instability at their borders, but also to prevent a US intervention.^[8]

Scenario 4: Chaos and International Intervention

Just like the third scenario, the fourth scenario also builds on the second one, where a power struggle was described, ending in anarchy and chaos. In this fourth scenario, it is an international coalition that will intervene, most likely under the flag of the United Nations, trying to stabilize the situation in North Korea.

Not every analyst values this scenario as very plausible, because not much states will be eager to send troops into a chaotic North Korea—not even South Korea and the United States. The North Korean population will most probably consider every foreign military as an enemy, as a consequence of a lifetime of paranoid state propaganda and brainwashing. Combined with the abundant amount of (heavy) weapons available, this paranoid attitude may turn a (humanitarian) intervention into guerrilla warfare. This is why experts argue that an intervention should take place before the North Korean system seriously collapses. Such an early intervention is, however, only feasible when operated by China. The Chinese are the only foreigners that have some confidence among the North Koreans, being an ally for decades already. A Chinese early intervention, or in other words: a coup d'état, could possibly be accepted by the governing levels under the direct top—see scenario 3.

Perhaps, however, South Korean forces might also be welcomed by the North Korean population in serious emergency situations like chaos and famine. Even in spite of the state propaganda picturing South Korea as a pro American enemy, South Koreans are still considered brethren to some extent. Some experts therefore argue that an international intervention led by South Korea may be the best option to stabilize an imploded North Korea.^[9] Even a UN intervention that is jointly lead by China, South Korea and the United States may not be excluded, although it could be questioned whether these countries could come to an agreement about what will be the policy on the future of North Korea after the intervention.

One way or another, when North Korea will sink into anarchy and chaos, the international community will have to do something. There is no doubt that the neighboring countries will keep their borders closed to prevent being flooded with hungry, brainwashed North Koreans (who are also considered work-shy and socially maladjusted by much South Koreans). The first priority for the international community will no doubt be preventing the chaos to cross the borders. Stabilizing North Korea itself and providing aid to the population will be second in line.

When an international military force will be deployed to stabilize the country, it is expected that an international interim government will be installed in Pyongyang. This interim government should prepare North Korea for unification with South Korea. Considering the giant social and economical gap between the two Koreas, this will be a very long term process. Analysts estimate it may take 25 to even 60 years before North Korea will be ready for unification—that is, if one wants to prevent South Korea to collapse under the burden of unification.

The Impossibility to Predict

Predicting developments on the Korean peninsula is a dangerous activity, because few affairs are as capricious as national and international politics. Nevertheless, it is always good to be prepared for possible developments. Even though it seems most plausible that North Korea will survive almost unchanged for another decade or two—see scenario 1 and 2—it can not be excluded that the regime will suddenly implode. The collapse of the Soviet Union, to mention just one example, came rather unexpected too.

What becomes quite clear in this article, is that the United States and its Western allies do not seem to play a key role in the scenarios presented. North Korea itself, China, and to a lesser extent South Korea are the key players when reflecting on possible future developments at the Korean peninsula. Only in the fourth scenario, when discussing the possibilities of an intervention by the international community, the United States may play a major role. Even while watching developments closely from the sideline, however, it is good to be prepared for possible developments that may require sudden action.

This article does not aim to predict anything about the future of North Korea, but is only presenting four scenarios that may be useful while reflecting on the subject. Although it is not clear which of the presented scenarios may become reality—maybe even none of them—it is without doubt to be recommended for the international community to be prepared for everything. That could be muddling on with the (nuclear) provocations from Pyongyang, but also dealing with sudden chaos at the Korean peninsula. Having flexible and adaptive plans available to deal with this spectrum of possibilities is certainly advisable.

About the Author

Sico van der Meer is a Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, “Clingendael.” His main research theme is the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

References

1. Shim Sun-ah, "Renewed Speculation over Kim Jong-Il's Health," *Vantage Point* 32, no. 8 (August 2009): 18-21.
2. This article is partly based on a research trip the author made in August 2009 to South Korea, where he interviewed several academics and diplomats on the future of North Korea. Because these interviews were held on a base of anonymity, no references to these interviews are made in this essay.
3. For example: Lee Kwang-Ho, "North Korea's three-generation power succession," *Vantage Point* 32, no. 7 (July 2009): 2-7.

4. Andrei Lankov, "Pyongyang Strikes Back: North Korean Policies of 2002-08 and Attempts to Reverse 'Destalinization from Below'," *Asia Policy*, July 2009: 47-71.
5. Robert D. Kaplan, "When North Korea Falls," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2006: 64-74.
6. See also: "China Doesn't Have Contingency Plan on NK," *The Korea Times*, July 14, 2009 and "Contingency Plans Needed for N.K. Upheaval," *The Korea Herald*, August 13, 2009.
7. For example: Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder & John S. Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea*, Working Paper, United State Institute of Peace, Washington, January 2008.
8. Stephen Blank, "Peace Mission 2009: A Military Scenario Beyond Central Asia," *China Brief* 9, no. 17 (August 20, 2009): 7-9.
9. See also: Paul B. Stares & Joel S. Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea*, Special Report No. 42, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, January 2009.