
North Korea: All Roads Lead to Collapse— All the More Reason to Engage Pyongyang

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Introduction and Outline

Exercising a citizen's inalienable right to *juche*, I have presumed to alter the title—but not the brief—given to me. As commissioned, this chapter, which was to be called “The Positive and Normative Case for Integration through Collapse,” discusses what has come to be known as the collapse scenario for North Korea, and why I still think it is the likeliest outcome on the peninsula. So far, so positive. But I jib at “normative.” Others may argue that a North Korean collapse is not only likely but also to be desired. That is not my view, for reasons argued below. At any rate we should seek to control the collapse so as to minimize risk (Foster-Carter 1994b).

I begin this chapter with comments on the “three basic scenarios,” suggesting in particular that they form a normative hierarchy. Next come some remarks on method and bias, including praise of sociology and reflexivity. After a section presenting the core argument for why all roads in my view lead to collapse, I consider further the issues of legitimation and power. Finally, implications for policy are suggested.

Inevitably a short chapter can only summarize briefly arguments made at greater length elsewhere, necessarily omitting some aspects altogether.

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So I have focused mainly on the logic of where North Korea goes from here, and on how to handle Pyongyang, rather than (say) longer-run aspects of Korean integration (see Foster-Carter 1994a). Likewise, there is little space here to debate directly with those who hold different views—but that will no doubt follow.

Mr. Deutch's Unholy Trinity: A Normative Hierarchy

Let me start by endorsing, but also extending, the Deutchian framework around which this first session is implicitly organized. The outgoing head of the CIA did us all a favor with his crisp summary, last December, of the options facing North Korea. In essence, these were and are to make war, to make peace, or to collapse (he used “implode,” a slightly different metaphor). While agreeing that this covers all the bases, I would gloss it by drawing out three corollaries.

1. *No null hypothesis: it can't go on the way it is.* These three scenarios are exhaustive. There is no fourth way, either new or old. The null hypothesis is thus that the status quo is not viable indefinitely, or indeed for much longer. In fact not everyone shares this view. There are those who reckon that Pyongyang can keep on keeping on pretty much as it is for quite a while yet.

For those of us skeptical that even North Korea's remarkable survival skills can keep it going forever, Mr. Deutch suggested a time frame of two to three years within which Pyongyang must either fatefully choose or fall apart. I have learned to be cautious about time frames, which in any case are less important than the logic of the overall process. Above all, we need to know *what* will happen, and *why*. By contrast, the *when* and *how* are at once secondary and intrinsically less predictable (because of the role played by sheer contingency and happenstance).

2. *Three into one: all routes lead to no more North Korea.* Crucially, the Deutchian trinity describes not the totality of a process but only its beginning. If you think through the logic of each possibility, this trinity is indeed a case of three in one—because at the end of the road, whichever is traveled, there is no more North Korea. Briefly:

- Collapse is collapse, by definition (more on which below).
- For the North to choose war would be, as President Clinton pithily put it at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1993, the end of their country. Unlike the 1953 stalemate (or the case of Iraq), Pyongyang would wind up defeated, occupied, and dead as a regime.
- More controversially, gradualism too will lead to collapse, by unleashing political conflicts that will be impossible to contain.

3. *A normative hierarchy: avoid war at all costs, try for peace.* We are asked to consider the normative dimension, and rightly so. John Deutch's three routes form a very clear moral hierarchy, which should hardly need spelling out.

War would be catastrophic. North Korea would lose, but not before wreaking appalling human and material damage throughout the peninsula. Even if the ultimate armageddon of nuclear weapons or chemical and biological warfare is avoided, Korea would face the huge burden of a double reconstruction: rebuilding not just the North, which is inevitable, but the South as well. Though I am optimistic that Korean talent and sweat plus the world's money would accomplish even this Herculean task—as in Europe after 1945, the human capital is there to replace the physical—it surely is obvious that the supreme goal of policy must be to minimize the risk of a second Korean war.

Collapse, too, carries risks—including that of war, for example, between different factions in the North. Even if conflict is avoided or contained, collapse would place huge economic burdens on Seoul. Like Germany, it would have to take on full and immediate responsibility for the ex-communist half of the country. Hence this is normatively second-best. If it can be avoided, so much the better.

Gradualism is therefore greatly to be preferred, and it should be pursued so that the eventual crash landing is no harder than it has to be. Pyongyang must be given every incentive to plump for peace and reform, for the obvious reason that doing so would minimize both the political risks and the economic costs of the inevitable transition. If perchance it were to work, that would be wonderful.

Rearranging the Deutchian trinity as a normative hierarchy is salutary. It challenges the tendency to look at North Korea as one might contemplate Mars: a strange planet, beyond our ken or control. True, in the final analysis no one outside Pyongyang has the power to dictate what whoever is in charge there may choose to do. But Kim Jung Il, or anyone else, does not make his choices in a vacuum. Like the rest of us, North Korea's leaders must weigh the pros and cons of various options. If we want them (as we do) to choose one path and eschew another, then we can use sticks and carrots to prod them in the desired direction. This is all very elementary, and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) surely proves the point. And yet one looks in vain at Seoul's current *Nordpolitik* (unlike Washington's, even if the United States may have stumbled into pursuing engagement semiaccidentally) for any sign of such a consistent, thought-out, and proactive strategy.

Of Methodology, and Other Baggage

Before getting into the meat of the chapter, I shall say a word on methodology and the like. No one comes innocent to North Korea. All of us

have our biases (conscious or not), and too many also bring agendas. While much of this baggage would be better left at the door, it behooves us at least to declare it and submit it for scrutiny. Reflecting on why we each work and think the way we do may allow us to identify and remedy prejudices and gaps, so helping us to move forward.

First, I approach North Korea as a sociologist, even a sociological imperialist. By this I mean two possibly contentious things, addressed respectively to other disciplines and to the ghost of Kim Il Sung. Ironically, both points are quite Marxist. The first echoes Lukacs's insistence on the totality. It will not do to look at either politics or economics in isolation, nor to prioritize or separate either internal dynamics or external linkages. We have to see the whole picture, not least because most of the key issues arise at the interfaces. In this case, we face the following questions: What are the likely political effects of various economic developments, whether present famine (will it spark rebellion?) or future reform (will it enhance legitimacy, or erode it through wider knowledge and rising expectations?). And what kinds of outside policies—a South Korean defense budget as big as the North's entire GDP, or encouraging the *chaebol* to start investing right now, or even both—are most likely to steer North Korea's evolution in the desired direction?

The second point is that sociology is *social science*. The shrill voluntarism of *juche*, whereby Pyongyang boasts it can do exactly as it pleases, is of course baloney. Marx may have been excised from North Korea's constitution, but he has the last laugh. It is not being reductionist to insist that you really do need an economic base, or at least an economy. In this spirit, much of my recent thinking on North Korea has been about "Kim Il Sung versus social science" (Foster-Carter 1995a). For while oversimplification is to be avoided (e.g., the mechanistic assumption that North Korea must collapse because, and in the same way as, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union did), we do Kim Il Sung too much honor if we credit him with having made possible some unique escape from the laws and constraints of social science. Janos Kornai (1992) told us how and why centrally planned economies always foul up in the end, and North Korea is an absolute textbook case. So much for *juche*.

Second, I am also an *outsider* in several ways, some good and some bad. It is bad not to have usable knowledge of the Korean language, and not to go to North Korea very often. One thus ends up working rather like yesteryear's Kremlinologists, from the outside looking in. (Then again, the lesson of the Soviet Union is that the Conquests conquered: the Right was right to keep insisting that such systems were both vile and mortal, whereas travelers—especially to Maoist China—risked fellow traveling.) In practice, there are ways to keep in touch with those on the inside—not least the nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and international bodies whose famine relief work has, in an uncomfortable irony, done so much to slake the analyst's hunger for data.

At the same time, the outsider is spared the need to be diplomatic. In Yorkshire we call a spade a bloody shovel. If North Korea is (inter alia) a mad and risible tyranny and a rogue state par excellence (drugs/debts/dollars, never mind bombs), I have no *raison d'état* to encourage rosy glasses or self-censorship. "Stalinist" is for me a precise term of social science (even if the mass media use this label lazily), apt both etiologically and morphologically as applied to North Korea. (To be sure, Kimilsungism is Stalinism with Korean characteristics; and pragmatically I am all in favor of engagement with this rogue state—but without any illusions.)

Being a European working on North Korea is also a good form of outsiderhood. Seen from the opposite end of the Eurasian landmass, Korea (and a fortiori the North) is the proverbial faraway country. As a Briton, I have no ax whatever to grind about Korea, because I have no involvement or responsibility. By contrast, my sense is that in the United States you have all kinds of homegrown undergrowth to battle through: whether noises off from domestic politics (Congress cutting KEDO's budget, or hawks demanding "surgical strikes" against Yongbyon) or inter-agency turf wars—for example, between the Pentagon (worry about war) and the State Department (push for peace) in the fascinating but febrile hothouse world of Washington. Having just run across Leon Sigal's (1997) sharp and no doubt highly contentious critique of how all this cackle nearly unleashed a second Korean war in 1994 before Jimmy Carter saved the day, frankly I am as glad not to be embroiled daily in your world as I am honored to be invited briefly into it. In all that ruckus and din, it must be hard to hear yourselves think.

Space forbids any more in this sociology-of-knowledge vein. In Foster-Carter (1997d), I explore six ways in which who and what and where we are affects how we view North Korea (or anything else): function, agendas, diplomacy, ideology/values, debate and its dialectics, and day-to-day work. These are not irrelevancies, but the grounds of a plea for analysis that is hermeneutic and reflexive. We shall see North Korea more clearly and in more depth if we widen our gaze to include both how we look at them and (no less crucially) how they see us—which is another story.

Why All Roads Lead to Collapse

But to return to my brief. In a series of works published in the 1990s (see reference list), I have argued that North Korea will eventually collapse. Here I can only summarize the bare bones of arguments that are fleshed out more fully elsewhere. One place to start would be Foster-Carter (1993a), written in 1992, which is a critique of what I unkindly dubbed "the gradualist pipe dream" that was so widespread in Seoul at the start of the 1990s: that fond era of inter-Korean talks and agreements, before

the shadow of Yongbyon froze everything in late 1992. I wrote then that the gradualist view has four linked weaknesses (Foster-Carter 1993a, 160):

1. It is too optimistic regarding the *will* for change in the North Korean leadership.
2. Even if that were to alter, gradualists exaggerate the *capacity* of the North Korean system to survive whether or not Pyongyang embarks on any serious process of reform.
3. It fails to address key issues of *legitimation* and *power*.
4. It assigns an unwarrantedly passive role to the *people* of North Korea: assuming (in true Korean style) that whatever the governments cook up between them and decree will automatically come to pass.

Five years on, Pyongyang still lacks the will to change. Neither its growing political isolation nor an economy whose factories are idle and fields are barren apparently suffices for the “dear leader” (or anyone else) to start exercising any real leadership, in substance or in form. On domestic economic reform and external dialogue alike, we have been stuck at the toe-in-the-water stage for well over a decade (with the single, important exception of KEDO). The usual suspects keep telling us things are changing, but Godot never shows up. North Korea in late 1997 remains a political dinosaur and an economic disaster.

Quite possibly this refusal of peace and reform will continue. The military may not let Kim Jung Il make peace, even if he wanted to. Or the elite may not dare to embrace reform, either because they fear the fate of the Soviet Union (a moral endlessly drawn in the Pyongyang media) or because they are ideologically trapped by their claim to infallibility (meaning there is no way to reform without admitting that Kim Il Sung was wrong). But without serious moves toward peace there will be no large-scale aid or investment; and without market reforms any aid or investment will largely go to waste. (I nonetheless support aid and investment for North Korea even “as is”: it would create useful leverage, counteract Pyongyang’s tendency to paint itself into a corner, and strengthen the reformers’ hands by showing that there really is a better way than “becoming guns and bombs.”)

If North Korea does continue as is, then my core prediction is simply this: at some point, economic disaster will have political effects. This could happen in one of two main ways: from above, or from below. Long before we ever dreamed it would come to famine, I used to put this rhetorically: Would people actually starve for the not noticeably underfed Kim Jung Il? Today, they are starving—but I still don’t believe the land of Tonghak will stay quiescent forever. For now, they may buy

the regimen's excuse that this is all the fault of lousy weather and lousy foreigners; but will they buy it indefinitely? (More on this below.)

But given that it is hard for people so tightly controlled—and now weakened by hunger—to rebel, the first move may come from the top. Hwang Jang-yop is not unique: he represents the tip of an iceberg whose invisibility should not fool anyone. No society can abolish politics. A priori, Pyongyang must be riven with conflict, even if so far most of it is in back rooms or in people's heads. Over and above all the social and institutional bases for strife—state versus party versus army; generations, cronies, cliques, and family (uncle? step-brothers?)—looms the policy question, which increasingly is one of life or death. For every hawk who insists that the slightest slackening spells doom à la Soviet Union, there has to be a dove who knows the contrary: that only Chinese-style reforms can avoid such a fate. And with a seemingly rudderless ship of state drifting toward whichever of these rocks seems most worrying, it defies reason to imagine that fear of shipwreck will not eventually drive one or other faction to grab the wheel and exercise some sort of helmsmanship—which in practice means actively choosing either war or peace. If they choose war, there is no more North Korea.

But what if they do choose peace and reform? Maybe Godot really will arrive. I devoutly hope so, for the obvious reason that any move to peace and reform will both reduce risk and improve welfare. Nonetheless, the second prong of my argument for collapse is an irony. Pyongyang's hawks are right. The road to reform does indeed lead to collapse, albeit by a different route. Hence North Korea's leaders face a Catch-22: damned if they do, and equally damned if they don't.

Here, too, I postulate a link between economics and politics. Any reform process must entail ordinary North Koreans discovering more about the outside world in general, and about South Korea in particular. However haltingly, they will thus learn that there was another way to be a modern Korean all along, in a country where for the past 20 years even the poor ate their fill of rice. What will they make of this new knowledge? I do not see how it could fail to undermine the legitimacy of North Korea, in both retrospect and prospect. It will be crystal clear to all that they have suffered not only terribly but quite needlessly—and whose fault this was. Given the power of *han* (grudge) in South Korean political life, I wager that below the surface the cultural soil north of the DMZ will prove not dissimilar.

I also envisage a domino effect. In theory, one can distinguish degrees of collapse: a still communist (meaning what?) Democratic People's Republic of Korea, shorn of Kim Jung Il but still ruled by the Korean Workers' Party; or a noncommunist North Korea, sans leader and party but still a separate state. But in practice, I predict, the logic of collapse will be unstoppable. *L'état, c'était lui*. In the 1990s or 2000s, I do not see how or why the project of either a non-Kimist or a noncommunist North

Korea could be sustained in the face of what are bound to be growing demands, as in East Germany, to join the capitalist gravy train at once and in full. And as in the German case, the economically correct response—that no such instant leveling up is feasible—will be swept aside by an irresistible tidal wave of politics.

To suppose different requires believing any or all of the following (Foster-Carter 1993a, 168):

- South Korea will not seem as attractive to North Koreans as West Germany did to East Germans.
- The North Korean regime, presumably with Seoul's connivance, will find a way to effect economic reform without seriously puncturing its information quarantine (i.e., the just-suggested scenario will not arise).
- Despite either or both these possibilities, the Kim regime will keep its grip through blind faith or blind fear—or some combination of the two.
- Alternatively, the prosperity and easing up produced by economic reform in the North will cause people to give thanks to Kim Jung Il.

We could argue the toss on all these, but in a short chapter suffice it to say I find none of them convincing. While it would be great for minimizing political risk and economic transition costs alike if a North Korean reform regime (whoever its leader might be) could sustain itself, the whole logic of the process is that the very success of this economic project cannot help but undermine its own political underpinnings sooner or later. But there could be a good few years before that happens, and I reiterate that this is the way to go—contradictions and all.

Economics into Politics: Of Legitimation and Power

The preceding section has already strayed into my third and fourth criticisms of gradualism, which perhaps are not ultimately distinct. Here I want to come at it from another angle. What might be called the Marley thesis—"a hungry man is an angry man"—is criticized by those who deny a mechanical link or any link?—between economic deprivation and political action. Thus Noland writes, "There is really no reliable theory linking economic distress or deprivation to political change" (1997, 106); or Rhodes warns against teleologies that "curiously mirror the cod-Marxist argument that capitalism will inevitably give way to communism and that economic crises will provide the occasion" (1996, 135).

My retort is that there is also no theory which plausibly avers that economics and politics live in watertight compartments, with zero osmosis. And we can fry fish of subtler flavor than cod: how about

Habermas? In an unpublished paper that was my first stab at these matters (Foster-Carter 1991; summarized in 1997c, 130ff.), I tried to apply the German social theorist's typology of crises to North Korea. Habermas's theorem is that an *economic* crisis is only one of four kinds. There is also the *rationality* crisis, when the political system fails to deal with the economy, and *motivation* crisis, when hearts and minds cease to respond to state pressures. Put all three together, and you risk a full-blown *legitimation* crisis for the regime in question.

Even in 1991 there was ample evidence of crisis under all four headings. In 1997 it is needless to dwell on the economy as such; what is interesting is the link to government. I cited seven kinds of cases: refusal of reform, meddling from on high (e.g., Kim Il Sung overriding the plan), the manic reshuffles of the late 1980s (six chief planners between 1986 and 1988: what is this, Seoul?), the debt disaster, intensification of labor (speed battles), unproductive expenditure (grand monuments), and the infallibility problem mentioned above. One could now add Kim Jung Il's astonishing disavowal last December of responsibility for the economy as such—not to mention the famine. While some of these may be more remote or opaque than others to the person on the Pyongyang omnibus, the point is that it strains credulity to suppose that most North Koreans will accept indefinitely blaming all their problems on the weather and foreigners. They can see in their daily lives that it is the system that is at fault.

What of motivational crisis? In 1991 I cited five factors and one countervailing one. Visible lack of effort in the workplace; worries about youth; wavering elites; the growing gap (much wider now) between image and reality, as bribery and hypocrisy become endemic; and above all, the regime's own classification of *more than half its own citizens* into ascriptive categories of "wavering" or "hostile," which by severely curtailing their options in life must boomerang into a self-fulfilling prophecy. And yet the citizens obey, for now. The countervailing factor here is a very specific overdetermination of obedience, rooted in three traditions overlaid in succession: traditional Confucianism, Japanese imperialism, and Stalinism. But to show that these three variants of authoritarianism are all that North Koreans have ever known is not to demonstrate that they will never aspire to more.

To be sure, in 1997 as in 1991 there is still no open legitimation crisis. But one can see where it may arise. For a start, unlike in diffuse modern capitalism, the government has such a busy and visible hand that backfire is inevitable. Their agencies are in charge of everything; ergo, everything is their fault. Second, Kim Jung Il's charisma is not a patch on his father's and never will be. Third, even before the famine, living standards, which rose in the 1960s and 1970s, began going downhill in the 1980s: the very period of Kim Jung Il's rise. Who is to blame? Fourth, once people start grumbling, can you arrest them all?

None of this is a recipe for stability in the medium term, let alone the long run. So it is vital not to misread North Korea's short-term survival so far (remarkable though this is) as implying that Kim Il Sung really has pulled off some globally unique feat of social engineering, creating an everlasting cult of loyalty to his son and a system that will survive no matter what happens in the economy, in people's everyday lives (or deaths), and in the wider world. In the name of anthropological humanism (North Koreans are not androids or robots) and social science alike, I wager it has not been done, because it cannot be done. It just looks that way: a fine facade, like many others in North Korea. But like the Sampoong store in Seoul, the foundations have grown perilously weak.

What Is to Be Done?

In sum, North Korea is mired in fatal contradictions. It would take another chapter to explain their origins, but I blame the hubris of *juche* (Foster-Carter 1997c). I cannot think through in my mind, still less see presently on the ground, any way out of these contradictions that will not, sooner or later, lead to the demise of North Korea as a regime and as a state. It is in that sense that I am a collapsist.

In policy terms, however, the last thing we should do is be bystanders. North Korea's disappearance from the historical stage may be protracted (though I doubt it), and it will certainly be risky. As already argued, the best way to minimize that risk is to offer all possible inducements (bribes, if you will) to Pyongyang to choose peace and reform. The whole KEDO process seems to me an exemplary object lesson here, turning what had been the peninsula's worst risk into its best hope. Surely similar creative thought and structures can be copied more widely. For instance, if North Korea is ready to work with the South in the framework of an international consortium, then let a hundred such consortia bloom—starting, urgently, with food.

That brings us to the South Korea problem. One lesson of KEDO is that, to use Simmel's classic analysis of dyads and triads, a third party can move things along where a twosome had gotten bogged down in quarreling. I wish Seoul could see it that way; but alas, Kim Young Sam's *Nordpolitik* (or lack of one) has proved as empty and disappointing as most other aspects of his presidency. There seems to be no vision in Seoul any more—come back Roh Tae Woo, all is forgiven. . .—and no recognition of how utterly the world has changed. Almost without exception the South Korean political class appears trapped in the past and its crabby oldthink, unable or unwilling to envision new and better forms of encounter. This is both puzzling and depressing. Why is tiny Taipei, with so much more at risk, so much braver than mighty Seoul?

Maybe South Korea's next president, particularly if he was born in Hwanghae-do, will recover the vision thing. I would presume to counsel him as follows. In general: Take the longer view, as befits a winner and Confucian elder brother. Be consistent, indeed imaginative: what if Kim Young Sam had invited himself to Kim Il Sung's funeral? Accentuate and learn from the positive: for example, KEDO is a big success, so why not more consortia (e.g., for food)? Avoid being merely reactive—let alone overreacting, as to submarines—as this blocks progress and hands Pyongyang the initiative. Of course maintain military vigilance and beef up defense, but recognize that true security will only come from political progress. Reach out to North Korea in every possible way, shrugging off the slights and snubs (and sub). Take a leaf from Taiwan vis-à-vis China, and stop stopping businesses from going north: in fact encourage them, as this can create leverage as well as mutual interests. End all bans on civilian contacts with the North, which are unenforceable and undemocratic: let Pyongyang, not Seoul, be the one that tries to stop visits, telephones, letters, contacts. If the radical students of Hanchongryon want to make asses of themselves, let them. Forswear McCarthyite gutter politics once and for all: let us hear no more of a Hwang Jang-yop list or other irrelevancies (this critique is developed more fully in Foster-Carter 1997b, 25-27).

But for as long as Seoul holds back, Washington must continue to take the lead in pursuing engagement with Pyongyang. Another, more positive partner these days is of course Beijing. Even if the four-way talks accomplish nothing else, the new Sino-US cooperation over matters Korean—which China pointedly refused in 1994, in my view quite rightly (sanctions would have been stupid and dangerous), and as recently as last year was still reluctant to engage in overtly—is a very important gain. I just hope that both sides can refrain from picking fights on any of the other issues that divide them, for as long as it takes to conclude the four-way process—or to conclude that it is not going to come off. (Meanwhile it might be tactful to try not to make it look like three against one, even though it manifestly is. Sensibles of all countries, unite. . . .)

In sum, determining how to handle North Korea's final years will be a major challenge. The best hope of minimizing the inevitable risk is for all concerned to unite behind a proactive policy of engagement, so as to maximize the incentives for Pyongyang to plump for peace and reform rather than go down fighting. The stakes could hardly be higher.

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