

The North Korea
Instability
Project

Instability and Regime Change: Why and How Are Regimes Ruined?

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December 2016

US·KOREA
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Instability and Regime Change: Why and How Are Regimes Ruined?

I. Introduction

“Regime change,” by the dictionary definition, can be simply interpreted as “the replacement of one regime with another.” In reality, however, the phrase covers a diverse array of situations. On the one hand, regime change—especially mere leadership change by democratic and legitimate processes such as election or impeachment—takes place without turmoil. On the other hand, in certain contexts, as we observe in the case of the current Libyan crisis, regime change might result in great chaos and even system or state collapse. In assessing the correlation between instability and regime change, many analyses have referred to nondemocratic states because they seem to have more sociopolitical vulnerabilities—poor legitimacy, political oppression, social frustration, ruling class privilege and the like—than democratic states.

Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that even in such failed states, regime change has not always been accompanied by serious crisis. For example, while the deaths of Kim Il Sung in 1994 and his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, in 2011, were both significant occasions marking the demise of long-term dictators, neither instance precipitated a crisis in North Korea. Neither instance precipitated a crisis in North Korea, suggesting that regime change itself is less useful for predicting a crisis than the level of instability in a country. In the case of North Korea, this implies that a more deliberate approach toward potential regime change—an approach that considers the various factors of instability, possible pathways to transformation or restoration, and the ultimate outcome—is the most prudent.

In this regard, this research focuses on the following questions in dealing with regime change and system or state instability:

- What are the roots of latent instability in a regime?
- How do these factors develop to create a specific political or social crisis?
- Is there any restraining variable in a crisis?
- What is the end state of certain regime change?
- What we should keep in mind in applying these answers in North Korea?

II. Factors of Regime Change: What Makes a Regime Unstable?

Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser, used to employ a tool he called

the index of crisis level in Communist countries to assess the political, psychological and social factors affecting the instability of 15 Communist countries.¹ Many other analysts have since contributed a variety of assessments on the level of latent crisis in certain states to help enhance the validity of the index.² But it is also worth remembering that Brzezinski's index reflected the context of its period and thus inevitably overlooked the new emerging factors of the age of information including widespread information sharing among people. His index also emphasized the vulnerabilities of the Communist system, given the fact that most factors in the index also have been found in non-Communist states, especially authoritarian and totalitarian states. We also take account of the fact that focusing the analysis on only one or two influential factors, such as economic and political systems, has limited the ability of some analyses. So this paper reorganizes and reidentifies factors that can affect regime instability not only in Communist states, but also in non-Communist ones. In some cases, powerful factors may on their own exert overwhelming influence. In many cases of regime change, however, it is the collective application of various closely intertwined factors that has proved to be influential.

1. Regimes' Poor Performances

As most analyses have pointed out, poor performances of a regime can be one of the most influential factors of instability. A regime's economic incompetence—such as chronic low economic growth, poor economic productivity, lack of distribution capacity, paralysis of market management and unrealistic economic plans—has been the starting point of regime crisis as in the cases of Eastern European states and the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s. More recently, for the regime change of North African states including Egypt in the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, the decline of economic growth was regarded as one of the main reasons. Incompetence that can cause domestic instability is not confined to a regime's economic side. Widespread corruption of bureaucrats distorts the national resource distribution system, and in many cases may have a negative effect on the state's economy and the satisfaction of the people. An oppressive social and political system also can be associated with a regime's incompetence. Rigid political and social control measures—including a severe jailing system, violent suppression on political protest, and limitation of free vote—may contribute to regime's stability. But excessive suppression—especially when it is chronic or on the rise—would result in massive resistance against a regime or a dictator.

We also should keep in mind that poor regime performance is not always a necessary condition for crisis or regime change—in fact, even a regime suffering from serious economic or political incompetence could survive in certain contexts. Consider: if all failed regimes should face the same fate of downfall, we can never explain the incredible vitality of North Korean regimes since the 1990s, especially during the famine known as the Arduous March from 1996 to 1998.

1 For more details, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Collier Books, 1990).

2 Especially for assessing latent instability in North Korea, see Robert Collins, "Patterns of Collapse in North Korea," The Combined Forces Command C5 Civil Affairs Newsletter, Seoul, Korea (January 1996). The North Korean collapse scenario that Robert Kaplan presented in "When North Korea Fails" in *The Atlantic* in October 2006 was based on Collins's "seven phases of collapse"; Paul Stares and Joel Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea* (Washington DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009); Michael O'Hanlon, "North Korea Collapse Scenarios," *Brookings East Asia Commentary Series* no. 30 (June 2009); and Ken E. Gause, "Future North Korean Crises: Scenarios and Signpost," paper presented at 1st KIDA-Brookings Joint Seminar in July 2009.

In this regard, we need to scrutinize the context in which economic misery could induce regime crisis. According to prospect theory, people usually make decisions based on the potential value of losses and gains rather than the final outcome. They tend to respond more sensitively to expected losses than gains and to choose the alternative of fewer losses.³ Applying this economic model to a sociopolitical perspective, people facing an uncertain future in which a new political system could be crueler may restrain their anger rather than resist against the existing regime.

2. People's Frustration

People's discontent and frustration—frequently combined with a regime's incompetence—have been major dynamics of political insubordination and protest that caused political crisis and regime changes in many cases. But in many other cases, they did not rise in the surface. Given the cases of the regime transformation in Eastern Europe states (in the 1980s), Egypt (2011) and Libya (2011), long-lasting and accumulated frustration may induce more destructive protest against a regime than temporary anger does.

James Davies has presented a J-curve theory for explaining the origins of revolution in many states, by which revolutions do not usually take place in impoverished societies because people are preoccupied with their physical survival. The possibility of revolution, by his explanation, would increase in a state that falls into an economic slump following a period of development. In this state, people's expectation continuously increases, while the regime's achievement reaches its limit. A revolution can occur when this gap become intolerable to the people.⁴ This implies that people's frustration may be better activated—even in authoritarian or totalitarian states as well as Communist regimes—in a stagnated condition than in absolute poverty.

3. Heterogeneity Among People

Even if there are some heterogeneous factors among people in a certain state, it doesn't necessarily mean that the state is divided. In the age of globalization, a multicultural society has greater potential from the viewpoint of collaboration with other states. But some kind of heterogeneities, such as religious division or ethnic cleavage may cause a serious state-level crisis in certain situations. For example, a deep-rooted religious heterogeneity within a state that has never been harmonized could touch off great conflict among religious groups in a social turning point—especially when separate independence movements take place at the same time. Discriminatory policies by a regime that assure political, economic and social privileges for certain tribes also may be followed by violent resistance from other tribes. We have seen these cases in Bosnia (1992), Mali (1989~1990, 2012) and several African states.

4. Obsolete Political Ideology

As an ethical set of ideals, principles and doctrines of how a state or society should work, political ideology plays a core role in establishing the stability and integration of a state. But this does not last forever, and it needs to evolve with the course of time. It also should not be

3 For details of the prospect theory, see Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 297–323.

4 James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 1 (1962), 5–19.

discrepant from economic-political reality—in other words, the more the gap between the ideal goal and people’s real lives expands, the less people’s belief in certain political ideology is sustained. One of the main reasons that induced the dissolution of the Communist bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Brzezinski pointed out in his research, was obsolete political ideology.

5. *Certain Groups’ Corporate Interests and Self-awareness of Their Role*

Corporate interests such as the defense budget for a military or funding for a social group can be an important political asset of a regime, one that guarantees that group’s support and loyalty. On the contrary, a policy that jeopardizes those corporate interests might cause strong resistance from the beneficiary groups. The possibility of negative political reactions may increase when those groups have unique self-awareness of their social-political role. For example, as *Finer and Stepan* pointed out, the “new professionalism” of militaries in some Latin American states that legitimated political intervention in the name of social stability turned out to be the main motivation of military coups in the 1960s to the 1980s.⁵

6. *Disasters*

Disasters and accidents that cause massive damage and require huge national resources for restoration also can become an origin of a regime’s crisis—especially when that regime can’t manage a disaster appropriately or its incompetence has become more noticeable. If that disaster could affect neighboring states’ safety, it could prompt regional or even international involvement or intervention, which might weaken the legitimacy of the regime. Even if the regime were changed by democratic process, internal turmoil and political instability may continue as we have seen in the case of Haiti after the great earthquake in 2010.

7. *Generational Change and Demography*

Generational change may induce a new perception on political issues, altered expectation on the role of a regime and weakened loyalty toward an established political system—especially where a long-lasting dictatorship or oligarchy exists. In some aspects, generational change may be followed by a shift in the political socialization mechanism, and that also could affect people’s loyalty toward a certain regime. Generational change also may alter the demography of a society, shifting the proportion of young turks versus the old guard.

8. *Widespread Information Sharing Among People*

Before the age of information, the ruling elites, even in democratic states, enjoyed overwhelming superiority in controlling the flow of information, both in quality and quantity. That very crucial political resource helped them hide disadvantageous facts or manipulate public opinions. The development of channels and measures for information sharing among people—such as mobile or internet-based social network services, portal sites, new media and the like—made it more and more difficult for the ruling elites to maintain these privileges. In the new information age, with

5 Samuel E. *Finer, The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988); Alfred *Stepan, ed., Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

its widespread, accessible information, people can express collective anger, organize political protests and even engage in an uprising that would not have been possible without it. We already have seen good examples of this in some African states since the early 2010s.

9. Withdrawal of Aid and Support From Patron

Some states may be confronted with serious instability or crisis if their patron withdraws its aid and support. The level of instability will be influenced by the amount of political, economic and military dependence on the patron. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the regime transformation of Eastern European states and German reunification in the late 1980s and 1990 was owed to the Soviet Union's situation, which forced it to focus on managing its own domestic politics and economics, as well as Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's leading role in system reform (perestroika).

10. Isolation, International Sanction or Conflict With Neighboring States

If a state locks horns with neighboring states, or faces international sanction or isolation, the possibility of regime instability may rise because of political and economic—and sometimes, military—burdens. In some cases, the state could endure serious military conflict with a hostile neighbor. We have observed this kind of situation in the case of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime in 1978.

III. Triggers Toward Downfall

Even if the instability of a state has been amplified, that is not always followed by extreme crisis or regime change. In some cases, regimes may manage the situation successfully through various measures—compromise with people, enhancement of an oppressive state apparatus, establishment of a political coalition and so on. But in other cases, a high level of instability could result in regime change or system or state collapse through various triggering events as follows:

1. Supreme Leader's Death or Incapacitation

The political vacuum caused by a supreme leader's death, whether from natural causes or assassination, or a condition leaving the leader in a vegetative state has been a triggering event toward regime change. Death or incapacitation, however, may not necessarily induce a crisis or leadership vacuum, as mentioned in the examples of North Korea, especially when the ruling elites have anticipated and prepared for those situations. A well-institutionalized political succession system is also helpful for preventing political turmoil in this kind of setting as we can easily observe in an orderly democratic political system. So the death or impending death of a supreme leader can be meaningful as the trigger toward the downfall of a regime under limited conditions, such as a time limitation for preparation, discord among power elites on a successor and the absence of a well-qualified candidate to become the next supreme leader. The case of Albania after the 1985 death of Enver Hoxha, who had ruled that state for more than 40 years (though he had never fully recovered from a heart attack in 1973), can be a good example of this context.

2. *Coup d'État*

A coup d'état can be a typical triggering event concerning regime change because it literally means “blow of state” or “hit of state.” In other words, except in the cases of a palace coup or failed coup, coups are inevitably followed by regime change. Even a failed coup, however, can be a triggering event in a certain context as we have seen in the Soviet Union in 1991 when new ruling elites including Boris Yeltsin emerged after disaffected hard-line members of the Communist Party attempted a coup. The military of a totalitarian or authoritarian state—regardless of whether it is a main player or a cooperative partner—may play a crucial role in most coup attempts because in addition to being an organized armed force the military has political influence. If the military has a unique perception on its role—such as new professionalism, which goes beyond the purely military function to include a more comprehensive role in a variety of fields affecting national development—and the civilian regime became seriously weakened, motivation for a coup will grow. But in the Communist states, there has been no case of a successful military coup because of the Communist Party's rigid control and monitoring of the military. Even in the Soviet Union's case of 1991, coup leaders failed to completely seize the military. A successful coup also needs the existence of political factions as a precondition, given the fact that most coups take place during a power struggle among contending power elite groups. This implies that under a cruel dictatorship that maximizes a reign of terror, the possibility of coup is still relatively low.

3. *People's Uprising or Revolt*

A public uprising or revolt also can result in regime change being intensified to revolution or total chaos. But for an uprising or revolt to succeed in fomenting regime change, civil groups that organize and lead people's resistance are necessary, along the lines of Neues (New) Forum in East Germany, Solidarity in Poland or the Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia, all of which rose to the fore in the late 1980s. Without such organization, even a massive protest of people becomes sporadic as well as temporary and cannot sustain the meaningful dynamics required for regime change. Preventing the emergence of admired civic groups is one of the reasons that dictators usually have retained tight political and social control over people for as long as possible. People's historical experiences with certain political and economic systems, such as political democracy and a market economy, may affect the potential for an uprising and the establishment of civic groups. For example, if a state had enjoyed political freedom and vigorous market activity in the past, there is a greater possibility of an uprising against an incompetent totalitarian or authoritarian regime. But in the inverse case, it becomes difficult to organize a meaningful people's protest. And even if serious political protest and regime change occur, the people's leading role in establishing the new regime will not be assured.

4. *Civil War*

Civil war also can become a trigger of regime change in certain states as a subsequent event of political turmoil, a coup or the seizure of power by one faction (or tribe) among contending groups. We should keep in mind that civil war usually takes place under the background of a high level of heterogeneity among people and social segmentation, as we have observed in the cases of African states and some states in Eastern Europe. This means that the possibility of civil war is relatively low in a state that has cultural, ethnic or religious homogeneity.

5. *Invasion from Other States or Defeat in War*

If a state has a serious conflict with neighbors or certain dominant regional or international actors, or if it seriously violates universal values, a foreign invasion will naturally result in regime change. A defeat in a war between states may bring about the same situation to the loser. We can find a typical example of this kind of situation in the case of Cambodia in 1978. The ruling faction (Khmer Rouge) had suppressed pro-Vietnamese political leaders, which induced a military invasion from Saigon. What followed was a long civil war—lasting more than 10 years—among four political factions. Although a multilateral peace treaty was signed and a new regime was established after transitional management by the United Nations (UN), the Khmer Rouge never recovered its political power. More recently, the 2011 downfall of Moammar Gadhafi in Libya also can be referred to, though the scope of international intervention and the role of multinational forces were limited.

IV. Outcomes of Regime Change: Regime, System and State Collapse

Once serious instability or crisis of a state occurs and results in regime change through triggering events, the fate of the state depends on the end-state of change. In some cases only the supreme leader may be replaced, or a more comprehensive leadership change can take place. In other cases, the system that has ruled the state could collapse or the state itself might become broken. That is to say, the outcomes of regime change can vary from leadership change, to regime collapse, system collapse or state collapse. Given the preceding analyses, the concepts of each outcome can be defined as follows:

- Leadership change: Mere substitution of the supreme leader. Regime's core value and policies—including political ideology—are maintained. The established power elites survive. The level of restoration of stability depends on the ability of the new supreme leader
- Regime collapse: There is widespread replacement of established power elites because in many cases, the achievements of the former supreme leader are degraded or denied. A regime's core value and policies—such as the Juche ideology (self-reliance) and rule by *Sooryung* (the great leader) in North Korea crumble. The level of restoration of stability depends on the ability of the new regime and people's support of its vision.
- System collapse: There is widespread replacement of established power elites or a power vacuum caused by the comprehensive absence of a system-controlling mechanism. Some functions of society and the state are still maintained because of alternative civic society. There will, however, be serious paralysis of government's role.⁶
- State collapse: No regime or government can manage the state. The civil society is also immature. So the state will fall into total anarchy and social anomie. This is a rare version of a failed state. A collapsed state reveals a vacuum of authority as we

⁶ Referring to Rotberg's analysis, it means a status of "failed state." Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators," in *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg, ed. (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003), 5–9.

have seen in Somalia (since the late 1980s), Nigeria and Sierra Leone (1990s).⁷

Now, let's evaluate the cases of regime change in authoritarian and totalitarian states as well as socialist states. Historically, many states experienced the following pathways in the process of political change and regime transformation.⁸

1. *German Reunification (the Collapse of East Germany)*

- Pathway: building dissatisfaction among the people in East Germany regarding the lack of progress in reform and openness → public protests → suppression by the government → proliferation of public protests → people leave the system en masse → protests intensify into people's uprisings → leadership resigns, new leadership established → continuation of public protests with demands for overall reform, openness and liberalization → right-wing government established in East Germany → reunification
- Factors of regime instability: regime's poor performances, people's frustration, obsolete political ideology, de facto withdrawal of aid from patron
- Triggers: people's uprising and massive escape
- Outcome: state collapse (from the viewpoint of East Germany)⁹

2. *Dissolution of the Soviet Union*

- Pathway: reform and open door policy pursued on principles of glasnost and perestroika → buildup of resentment and apprehension among conservatives → coup d'état led by conservatives → resistance by reformists and the people → coup d'état fails → establishment of new government led by radical reformists → expanded reform and openness → governmental revolution → dissolution of the Soviet Union, succeeded by Federation of Russia
- Factors of regime instability: regime's poor performances, people's frustration, obsolete political ideology, heterogeneity among people, corporate interests of Soviet army
- Triggers: people's uprising and failed military coup
- Outcome: regime transformation through regime collapse (from the viewpoint of Russia) or state collapse (from the viewpoint of the Soviet Union)

3. *Long, Thorny March of Albania*

- Pathway: death of longtime leader → attempt at reform with restrictions → continued public resentment → rise of competitive opposition party in favor of reform → coalition government formed → unstable political situation gives reformists a chance to seize power → eruption of public resentment over failed policies and corruption → prolonged state of instability
- Factors of regime instability: regime's extremely poor performances, people's frustration, obsolete political ideology, international isolation

7 Ibid., 9.

8 For the cases of regime transformation in socialist states, see National Intelligence Service, *Case Studies of Unification and Regime Transition* (Seoul: NIS, 2003) (in Korean).

9 Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary should be seen generally as the Germany type of transitions. They, however, are the cases of system collapse instead of state collapse as they experienced gradual transition rather than a sudden collapse.

- Triggers: supreme leader's death
- Outcome: regime transformation through recurrent regime collapses

4. Romania

- Pathway: buildup of public resentment against long-term dictatorship and delay of reform and open door policy → public protests → bloody suppression by government and armed state apparatus → people's uprising → refusal by military to suppress → formation of anti-government faction within the established power elites → leadership overthrown → formation of new government → pursuit of reform and openness → fall of communism
- Factors of regime instability: regime's poor performances, people's frustration, obsolete political ideology, de facto withdrawal of aid from patron
- Triggers: people's uprising, de facto coup by power elites
- Outcome: regime collapse and system transformation by new regime

5. Cambodia

- Pathway: conflict with neighboring state → armed conflict → invasion of the neighboring state and armed struggle with antigovernment factions → collapse of the established government → dummy government established by the neighboring state → enter into long-term civil war → involvement by regional/international society and the UN → more moderate government established
- Factors of regime instability: regime's poor performances including divided power elites, conflict with neighboring state
- Triggers: invasion from Vietnam, subsequent civil war among four factions
- Outcome: regime collapse and state collapse

6. Somalia

- Pathway: prolonged dictatorship of Siad Barre and discriminatory policies favoring his own tribe → increasing discontent of other tribes and formation of United Somali Congress (USC) → coup by USC → power struggle among leaders of influential tribes (Mohamed Farrah Aidid, Mohamed Ali Mahdi, Osman Ato) → civil war advantageous to Aidid → involvement by UN (UNSOM), dispatch of peacekeeping forces, and operations by multinational forces led by the United States (1991~1993) → failure of political mediation by UN and inefficient military operations → withdrawal of peacekeeping forces and US forces → Aidid's establishment of new government → death of Aidid → continuation of internal turmoil and civil war → de facto anarchy despite compromise among big warlords
- Factors of regime instability: regime's poor performances, people's frustration, heterogeneity among people (tribes), corporate interests of military cliques
- Triggers: coup, death of the strongest warlord, civil war
- Outcome: state collapse (but functions of system are partially maintained by warlords)

7. Mali

- Pathway: unbalanced development among regions and chronic conflicts → continuous internal instability → military coup and discriminative policy by junta (2012) → civil war → attempt at mediation by Economic Community of West

- African States → UN resolution and establishment of a peacekeeping operation → delayed dispatch of peacekeeping operation and military involvement by France → continuous turmoil despite the end of civil war
- Factors of regime instability: regime's poor performances, people's frustration, heterogeneity among people (tribes)
 - Triggers: coup, civil war
 - Outcome: regime collapse and high risk of state collapse¹⁰

V. Implications on North Korea's Future

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s, scholars of international politics and East Asian experts have considered North Korea's collapse as a realistically viable scenario. North Korea's continued economic struggles, coupled with its anachronistic dictatorship system and international isolationism, have made the possibility of a collapse difficult to ignore. Experts who studied North Korea and the Communist bloc believed in the 1990s that the collapse of the North Korean regime was simply a matter of time. They argued that the inevitable changes brought on by the collapse of the Communist bloc and North Korea's political system will force it to reform and open up to the world. In the 2000s, they continued to identify the collapse scenario as one of the possible paths for North Korea.¹¹ With rumors of Kim Jong Il's deteriorating health in 2008, they began to approach the collapse scenario in a more realistic manner. When Kim Jong Un succeeded his father in late 2011, many analysts cautiously suggested the possibility of his political failure.

Given the above-mentioned cases, we can identify scenarios of regime change in North Korea as follows:

- Supreme leader's change: abrupt death of Kim Jong Un by natural causes or assassination → emergence of more moderate power elites → de facto collective leadership by Workers' Party of Korea (KWP) cadres under nominal *Sooryung* → more flexible approach on denuclearization → release of international sanctions →

10 The case of Libya since 2011 can be regarded as a mixture of what occurred in Somalia and Mali.

11 For details of these analyses, see Gye-Dong Kim and Kwang Sik Kim, *Predicting North Korean Crisis and ROK Contingency Plan* (Seoul: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 1995); Korean Political Science Association and Chung Cheong Province Association (co-publishers), *Crisis in the Korean Peninsula and Contingency Plan* (Seoul: Korean Political Science Association, 1997); Sung-chul Kim et al., *Evaluating North Korean Socialist System* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 1996); Nicholas Eberstadt, "Hastening Korean Reunification: The Writing on the 38th Parallel," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1997); Bob Collins, "Patterns of Collapse in North Korea," *The Combined Forces Command C5 Civil Affairs Newsletter*, Seoul, Korea (January 1996); Robert Manning, "The United States and the Endgame in Korea," *Asian Survey* 37, no. 7 (July 1997); US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Hearing on the Nomination of George Tenet for CIA Director" (May 6, 1997); Heather Smith, "The North Korean Economy: Collapse, Stasis or Reform?" *Brookings Discussion Papers in International Economics* 133, 1997; Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, "North Korea Between Collapse and Reform," *Asian Survey* 39, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 305–09; Deok-Min Yun, *Studies on ROK Contingency Plans for North Korean Crisis* (Seoul: Korea National Diplomatic Academy, 1999); Choong Nam Kim, "Pyongyang's Dilemma of Reform and Opening: How to Compromise Economic Benefits with Political Risks," *Korea and World Affairs* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 254–69; Marcus Noland, "The Future of North Korea's Economic Reform," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 123–24; Robert D. Kaplan, "When North Korea Falls," *Atlantic Monthly* (October 2006): 64–73; Kwan-yong Park et al., *Contingency Plan for North Korean Crises* (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2007); Bonnie Glaser and Wang Liang, "North Korea: The Beginning of China-US Partnership?" *Washington Quarterly* 31 (March 2008); Bong-Geun Jun, "Case Scenarios for North Korean Crisis," *Korea National Diplomatic Academy Analysis of Major International Issues* (May 2008).

- reform, opening and improvement of economic situation → restoration of stability
- Regime collapse: abrupt death of Kim Jong Un by natural causes or assassination → power vacuum and no reliable successor of *Sooryung* → increase of instability → collective leadership by KWP cadres → more flexible approach on denuclearization → release of international sanctions → hesitation on fundamental reform → continuation of chronic economic decline → accumulation of people's frustration and political protest → recurrent regime collapse → continuation of internal turmoil
 - System/state collapse:¹² continuous “My Way” of Kim Jong Un → growing international sanctions → increasing economic difficulties and frustration of people → Kim Jong Un's obsession over nuclear power → major change in China's policy toward Pyongyang → multiple and simultaneous—but disorganized—people's violent political protest → Kim Jong Un's death or coup → power vacuum → de facto anarchy

We should, however, keep in mind that Kim Jong Un is still alive while various factors of regime instability—economic difficulties, latent discontent of the people and growing international sanctions—are sustained. Paradoxically, Pyongyang has assumed the title of “strong nuclear state of the East” and has chanted the vision of “strong and prosperous socialist state” since the seventh Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea was held in May 2016. This means that we have to consider the factors of regime durability as well as instability in predicting North Korea's future and try to exclude unnecessary wishful thinking.

12 Given the attribute of North Korea that there is no civil society, system collapse may be accompanied by state collapse.

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