



# How Should the ROK and US Prepare for Various North Korean Contingencies to Promote and Shape the Satisfactory Unification of the Korean Peninsula?

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## Abstract

The situation in North Korea underwent an enormous qualitative change over the past two months. This qualitative change heightens the urgency of a potential crisis for the North and could increase the consequent pressures for unification of the peninsula.

Kim Jung Un's decision to purge and execute Jang Song Thaek, and, more significantly, the manner in which he chose to do so, have driven dangerous cracks throughout the edifice of North Korean power. The power structure is itself now more dangerous to its occupants than before, and their behavior is likely to be more threatening to outsiders than previously.

As South Korea and the United States enter into the 2014 round of military exercises in the coming spring, I will be surprised if we do not witness a replay of the North's (fourth) nuclear weapons test, more long range missile launches, and tough posturing toward South Korea, with a heightened potential for retaliation by the South. But this time, who will

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deliver the cautious warnings from China? Will Kim Jung Un play out the ritualistic springtime elevation of threats in order to be rewarded by the South and the West, or will he miscalculate?

Moreover, as stresses are building in North Korea and the means to manage them decreasing, the Obama administration has nonetheless demonstrated a greater focus on its own domestic politics than on the potential of the region for a crisis.

But diplomatic drift cannot be an option at this stage in North Korea's succession process, given the heightened risks outlined above. If Kim decides to fly a missile over Japan again, will Tokyo and Seoul be able to coordinate their response and countermeasures?

The key will be patient reconstruction of channels of communications among Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, and Washington, perhaps with Washington serving to catalyze the talks so the other parties will not be forced to "make the first move." As a first step, the Government of Japan needs to be asked to consider how it will compensate for Abe's recent provocative behavior and work to improve the atmosphere for dialogue. The White House was contemplating a visit by President Obama to Japan in April, but plainly the prospects for this have been placed in doubt by Abe's visit to Yasukuni. Japan needs now to contemplate and plan for initiatives to redress the concerns of Japan's neighbors and the US.

It is therefore imperative for responsible officials to take the initiative to rebuild normal channels of communication, develop mutual reassurance mechanisms, and find ways to climb down from sensitive territorial disputes in the months ahead. Redlines need to be established and made clear to Pyongyang. Goalposts need to be identified, such as the absolute requirement for the North to take the "pre-steps" necessary to resuming multi-party nuclear talks (ceasing nuclear activities including reprocessing,

returning to its 2005 commitments, readmitting the International Atomic Energy Administration [IAEA] inspectors, a moratorium on rocket and nuclear tests), responsible officials deputized, and time tables established to stabilize and ultimately normalize the region's diplomacy.

If four-party cooperation on North Korea among Japan, China, the US and the ROK are not presently possible, and if trilateral talks including China, the US, and the ROK are to take time, then Seoul and Washington should not hesitate to begin bilateral diplomatic and military planning for possible contingencies.

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President Obama should find time for a stop in the Republic of Korea in April, whether or not terms can be reached for a successful visit to Japan. The imperative for such a visit was always present, but now it has been magnified by the qualitative change in the North and the renewed political tensions between Japan and its neighbors.

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## Full Text

By prearrangement, Professor Lee Geun Wook and I have agreed to focus on different aspects of the question posed for this session, with Professor Lee focusing on the military challenges and the issue of managing weapons of mass destruction. My intention is to examine the political and diplomatic challenges.

First, I believe it is important to note that the situation in North Korea underwent an enormous qualitative change over the past two months. This qualitative change heightens the urgency of a potential crisis for the North and could increase the consequent pressures for unification of the peninsula.

Kim Jung Un's decision to purge and execute Jang Song Thaek, and, more significantly, the manner in which he chose to do so, have driven dangerous cracks throughout the edifice of North Korean power. The power structure is itself now more dangerous to its occupants than before, and their behavior is likely to be more threatening to outsiders than previously. This is because the supreme leader has chosen to demonstrate to his own people the shortcomings of his rule and its system, diminishing his and his regime's prestige and authority in the vain pursuit of consolidated power.

To look at the internal risks first, it is difficult for me to overestimate the shock value of the revelations and allegations made concerning Jang Song Thaek. As a trusted intimate of the leading family, how could his and his cohort's factionalism, theft of national assets, sexual misadventures, and the long list of "blame and shame" offenses have gone unnoticed for so much time? What happened to the Kim family's brilliance, insight, and

infallibility? Were they duped or excessively indulgent? What happened to the virtues of the men of Mt. Paektu?

It is one thing to demonstrate one's command and a desire to have one's own close advisors, as when General Ri Yong Ho was purged last year, by having him quietly slip from view. It is quite another to fill the media with dramatic accounts of misbehavior and betrayal at the court of the ruling family, followed by a dramatic execution. As Nicolo Macchiavelli wrote in *The Prince*, it is better to be feared than to be loved, but it is necessary never to be hated.

This episode's diminishment of the Kim family's claim to enlightened foresight and racial purity may not produce immediate signs of popular or intra-regime disaffection, but it must certainly have eroded the prestige of the young leader. At the very least, it underscored his evident impulsiveness and potential for instability, reminding observers of the price the North Korean people may have to pay to suffer his rule.

Turning to the external implications of the Jang affair, I expect that Jang's departure will reduce constraints on Kim Jung Un's already unruly management of military and diplomatic activity. Jang's evident role as the most welcome intermediary with Beijing most likely also made him the frequent messenger for Beijing's hard-to-hear admonitions against nuclear weapons tests, missile and satellite launches, and provocations toward the South.

After Kim indulged in extraordinary public displays of martial bravado in the spring of 2013, Chinese officials sought to gain credit for having intervened to calm the situation. Jang Song Thaek appeared to be the messenger as the sole senior North Korean official with access to Chinese counterparts. When Vice Marshal Choe Ryong Hae, who is now known to have grown closer to Kim Jung Un after Jang's execution, was received by

Chinese leader Xi Jinping last year, Choe did not return with an invitation from Xi Jinping for Kim to visit China and be blessed as the successor. He more likely returned with additional and unwelcome Chinese warnings about improving Kim's conduct if he is to receive Beijing's blessing.

Admittedly, these observations combine the two highly interpretive and indirect art forms of what might be called Pyongyang-ology and Beijing-ology in order to draw some conclusions. This can be unreliable. But from private conversations, I know Beijing was deeply upset with Kim's allowing himself to be viewed last year in a mock-up of a control room displaying a screen portraying a missile sending a nuclear weapon to the United States. There was a quality about it that reminded me of the Marx Brothers' movie *Duck Soup*, in which the comic actors pretended to be military commanders. In the near future, similar, less restrained behavior by Kim may not be so funny.

As South Korea and the United States enter into the 2014 round of military exercises in the coming spring, I will be surprised if we do not witness a replay of the North's (fourth) nuclear weapons test, more long range missile launches, and tough posturing toward South Korea, with a heightened potential for retaliation by the South. But this time, who will deliver the cautious warnings from China? Will Kim Jung Un play out the ritualistic springtime elevation of threats in order to be rewarded by the South and the West, or will he miscalculate?

Since Jang's fall, Beijing has been quite visibly nervous in its public pronouncements, urging stability and calm reactions all around even as it privately interprets Kim as threatening the North's stability. China seems to be struggling to retain its posture of propping up the North's regime economically and politically while it is implicitly denounced in official pronouncements for deals linking Beijing to Jang's misbehavior in selling

out to foreign interests. I suspect Chinese officials are carefully, even desperately trying to find which doors in Pyongyang are still open to them. Pyongyang's ambassador in Beijing had links to Jang and may be in an awkward position to help at this point.

What does the increased likelihood of provocations and instability from the North mean in practical policy terms? If Beijing's influence is at least temporarily reduced, and the internal and external restraints on Kim Jung Un's behavior are accordingly less, then the ROK, US, Japan, China, and Russia need to prepare for the rising probability of increased tensions. But looking at the current Northeast Asian political situation offers us anything but reassurance.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni shrine on December 26 is but the most recent example of a regional leadership that is ill-prepared to concert its efforts for common security objectives. China's awkward announcement of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on November 23 was another example. The region's leaders from the top down to working policy level officials are shunning each other just as the risk of trouble is increasing.

Initiatives to reduce or deflect tendencies toward conflict are lacking. Japan will not admit a territorial dispute with China, and China will not relent until Japan admits the dispute. Both sides claim they will proceed with caution, but the mechanisms to produce a calm outcome are lacking, even the most basic communication is severely circumscribed.

The United States government made some efforts to encourage reduced regional tensions in Northeast Asia, fed by China's ADIZ declaration and the Abe administration's signals regarding history and revision of the Japanese constitution, during visits by the Secretaries of State and Defense and then by Vice President Joe Biden late in 2013. Biden also made a

special private appeal to President Park Geun Hye to construct a positive diplomatic path toward Japan. These efforts were unsuccessful.

Moreover, as stresses are building in North Korea and the means to manage them decreasing, the Obama administration has nonetheless demonstrated a greater focus on its own domestic politics than on the potential of the region for a crisis. It is otherwise hard to explain the transparent lack of diplomatic credentials of the recent ambassadorial appointments to Tokyo and Beijing. In other words, it is paying lip service to the need for crisis management, rather than fully engaging diplomacy to match the American and allied interests that are at stake. The Administration is signaling, perhaps unwittingly, that it does not view current trends as seriously as it should.

Washington's evident loss of focus on Asia is disappointing, given the exceptional start of Obama's second term, when he invited Xi Jinping for the unprecedented Sunnylands Summit. North Korea was a substantial agenda item for that meeting. The failed Leap Day Agreement of 2012 and China's premature efforts to restart the Six Party Talks in 2013 have depleted energies in both Washington and Beijing for direct diplomatic initiatives with Pyongyang.

But diplomatic drift cannot be an option at this stage in North Korea's succession process, given the heightened risks outlined above. If Kim decides to fly a missile over Japan again, will Tokyo and Seoul be able to coordinate their response and countermeasures?

If there is a fourth nuclear test, will Washington, Seoul and Tokyo be able to overcome their recent diplomatic chills to present a united front to Pyongyang and to entice Beijing to take stronger actions in the United Nations Security Council and bilaterally?

If Kim's elimination of Jang Song Thaek proves not to be a major step in



consolidating his power, but the beginning of his undoing, will there be competition for influence over a divided North, or cooperation?

If constructive answers are to be provided for these scenarios, meticulous groundwork will need to be laid. China, for example, has been reluctant to alienate the North by discussing contingencies for the peninsula with outsiders. Last year, there seemed to be greater willingness to be frank about the challenges, at least in academic circles in China. Now, when the Chinese sense instinctively that Kim is raising the risks to himself and substantially damaging ties with Beijing, it is all the more time for serious discussions about contingencies among responsible officials. China needs to be encouraged not to try to sweeten the bilateral atmosphere with North Korea with more aid and trade, but to consider more punitive sanctions targeted on the leadership(not the North Korean people). Freezing these potentially vital talks for non-germane reasons of nationalism and politics should not be acceptable; rather, an active agenda of consultations needs to begin now.

The key, it seems to me, will be patient reconstruction of channels of communications among Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, and Washington, perhaps with Washington serving to catalyze the talks so the other parties will not be forced to “make the first move.” As a first step, the Government of Japan needs to be asked to consider how it will compensate for Abe’s recent provocative behavior and work to improve the atmosphere for dialogue. The White House was contemplating a visit by President Obama to Japan in April, but plainly the prospects for this have been placed in doubt by Abe’s visit to Yasukuni. Japan needs now to contemplate and plan for initiatives to redress the concerns of Japan’s neighbors and the US.

The US and South Korea should offer constructive ideas on how to settle the atmosphere around sensitive historical issues, such as that of “comfort

women.” Japan should reevaluate its diplomatic approach to the Senkaku islands issue, seeking to preserve its legitimate claims while demonstrating reasonableness in its management. A number of ideas have been surfaced, such as Kishore Mahbubani’s recommendation that Japan transfer the islands’ ownership to a nature conservancy. Another is to acknowledge that China asserts the territory is disputed, while asserting nonetheless that Japan’s claims and actual administration give it legitimate rights to the islands. Insisting that there is no dispute at all, when even the US is formally agnostic, is counter–productively rigid.

President Obama should find time for a stop in the Republic of Korea in April, whether or not terms can be reached for a successful visit to Japan. The imperative for such a visit was always present, but now it has been magnified by the qualitative change in the North and the renewed political tensions between Japan and its neighbors.

While waiting for Japan to repair its reputation in the region, it is time for a direct proposal for three way official talks among Seoul, Washington, and Beijing about how to handle North Korean contingencies, perhaps with Washington offering to catalyze the talks so the other parties will not be forced to “make the first move.” This should be managed by politically accountable officials, and not just trusted intelligence officers, although the latter have a role to play as well.

It will be necessary to compartmentalize areas for diplomacy and ultimate cooperation, to give freedom to the officials to begin to exchange assurances about their behavior and performance than can be trusted. Issues involving humanitarian relief and disaster assistance will need to stand on their own merits and insulated from political emotions. Necessary bilateral and trilateral military exercises will need to be separated from high profile political agendas, so as to immunize them from start–and–stop

impulses. Japan's legitimate needs to upgrade its limited military capabilities and their legal authorities in the face of the power shift produced recently by China should not be admixed with allegations of renewed militarism, which ignore the realities of modern Japan.

Restraint will be required with respect to provocative issues such as territorial claims and historical sensitivities. Prime Minister Abe's visit to the Yasukuni shrine may have been the result of a calculation that things are already so bad he could not make them worse. If that was the case, then it could prove to be a terrible miscalculation, in light of North Korean developments. History is replete with examples of leaders failing to see how things could get much worse; in the hundredth anniversary year of the outbreak of World War I, that things might get worse should be obvious.

The leaders of all three regional capitals seem to have a risk tolerance that is higher than we have seen in some time. Xi Jinping seems to believe that the cost of not responding toughly to perceived Japanese offenses would be greater than keeping pressure on Tokyo through patrolling its ADIZ and waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Shinzo Abe seems to believe that the political costs of admitting a dispute exists over the islands would be greater than the wear and tear on Japan's coast guard and other enforcement arms, and moreover that tension with China serves his broader objectives of constitutional revision and defense modernization. President Park Geun Hye appears to believe that any warming of diplomacy with Japan will undermine her support at home.

These considerations may all pale before potential North Korean contingencies that put at risk much greater interests in regional security and stability. So the imperative is to move to solidify the region's capacity to respond effectively to North Korean behavior before it is too late. The agenda needs to be both long term and short term.

Over the long term, China's steady modernization of its military and expansion of its capabilities are reshaping the security landscape of the region. Korean and Japanese national defense forces are responding individually and their alliances with the US will be reconfigured to meet new challenges, even as the US remains committed to its "rebalance" to Asia.

China and the US have reengaged their military diplomacy since the end of 2012, but there still is a great gap in understanding to fill between the two armed forces. Rules of the road, international norms of behavior, crisis communications, and interpersonal trust mechanisms among the three parties' armed forces have not really begun to function yet. Avoiding a wasting strategic competition between China and the US and its allies is the central challenge of the decade. This will entail considerable summitry and self-restraint, as well as bedrock alliance solidarity.

More near term, China will host the APEC leadership forum in October or November 2014. It is absurd to imagine that in a period of increasing friction over territorial claims and historical animosities, the leaders of Asia's two largest economies will not meet and discuss management of their differences. Yet that is the course we are on today.

It is therefore imperative for responsible officials to take the initiative to rebuild normal channels of communication, develop mutual reassurance mechanisms, and find ways to climb down from sensitive territorial disputes in the months ahead. Redlines need to be established and made clear to Pyongyang. Goalposts need to be identified, such as the absolute requirement for the North to take the "pre-steps" necessary to resuming multi-party nuclear talks (ceasing nuclear activities including reprocessing, returning to its 2005 commitments, readmitting the International Atomic Energy Administration [IAEA] inspectors, a moratorium on rocket and

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