



Reunifying Korea: Challenges, Uncertainties, and an Agenda for US–ROK Cooperation*

Evans Revere

(Nonresident Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution)

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- I. The Unification Imperative
 - II. The Challenging Path to National Reunification
 - III. North Korea After Jang: A Firm Foundation Or Feet of Clay?
 - IV. Regime Strengths and Vulnerabilities
 - V. Recommendations: A U.S.–ROK Agenda for Dealing with Pyongyang
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Abstract

The peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula is a major strategic goal of the Republic of Korea -- one that is shared by the United States. Realizing Korea's reunification under Seoul's lead would eliminate the greatest threat to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Appealing though that prospect may be, it is difficult today to envision a near-term path to Korea's national reunification.

The greatest obstacle to reunification is North Korea itself, particularly the regime's determination to retain its militant, totalitarian system. The ROK has long viewed reunification as the end product of a process of

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reconciliation with a transformed, moderate North Korea. However, North Korea should not be expected to transform itself into an entity to be absorbed by the Republic of Korea. Nor will it give up its own vision of unification, which involves the eradication of the South's political, social, and economic systems.

Forcing reunification on the North is not an option, and would only invite chaos and conflict. And we must not underestimate the North Korean regime's capacity for survival, driven in large part by its ideological fervor, military capabilities, and the support of China.

But North Korea is not without its vulnerabilities. The purge and execution of Jang Song Taek exposed a major fissure inside the regime -- a challenge so great that the leadership had to use extraordinary measures to remove it. Those measures could prove the regime's undoing, as they have destroyed the North Korean leadership's aura of infallibility. The Jang affair may have revealed how little we know about Pyongyang's internal dynamics, but it has also taught us that we cannot rule out the possibility of major change in North Korea.

North Korea's greatest vulnerabilities may lie in the rising international indignation over its human rights record and growing concern over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. International opprobrium has the potential to further isolate and weaken the regime, including by applying new sanctions targeting Pyongyang's banking and financial links with the outside world.

Creating the conditions for broad reconciliation with the North and the eventual reunification of Korea will be extremely difficult, if not

impossible, for the foreseeable future. Faced with this situation, the ROK should seek to influence North Korean behavior on the margins, guard against provocation, adhere to its democratic principles, build its strength, and exercise patience. At the same time, the ROK and the United States should cooperate to erode the DPRK's strengths, take advantage of its vulnerabilities, and use diplomacy and pressure to press Pyongyang to follow a more cooperative path.

Such an approach should seek to shape North Korea's strategic environment and choices in a way that maximizes prospects for a future transformation of the DPRK regime. That new policy approach, described in detail in this paper, includes a reinvigorated sanctions regime, a U.S.–ROK–PRC dialogue on the future of the Korean Peninsula, and ROK diplomacy designed to increase international support for Korea's reunification. The approach would test Pyongyang's willingness to pursue reconciliation and hold the door open to dialogue with the North if it is prepared to forego provocations and deal with the international community's concerns about its WMD and missile programs.

Change, whether the result of external pressure, instability, or the need to avoid internal chaos, is coming to North Korea. However it comes, it should hasten the day when Korea's long-hoped-for national reunification becomes a reality.

I . The Unification Imperative

The peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula is a major strategic goal of the Republic of Korea, reflecting the long–held aspiration of the Korean people to end the lingering tragedy of a divided nation. Almost 69 years after the end of World War II and more than 60 years after the guns of the Korean War fell silent, the Korean nation remains divided into two hostile entities; two societies different from each other in many ways, except for their common origins and shared history.

Today, the Korean people’s aspiration for reunification seems no closer to fulfillment than before, even though the benefits that unification would bring to the Korean Peninsula, to Northeast Asia, and to the broader Asia–Pacific region seem more obvious than ever.

A peacefully reunified Korea under Seoul’s aegis would remove in a stroke the major challenge to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. No longer would a state with an ideology steeped in threat and provocation undermine efforts to achieve a more harmonious and cooperative regional environment.

No more would the peninsula’s neighbors need to be concerned about threats to use weapons of mass destruction, to proliferate nuclear weapons and missile technology, or to turn their cities into “seas of fire.”

A united Korea under Seoul’s leadership would be committed to respecting the human rights and needs of its people. Concentration camps would be closed and a system that has kept 24 million Koreans impoverished, brutalized, isolated, and malnourished for decades would come to an end.

Reunification would lead to one of the most dramatic transformations of a nation's prospects in history. The record of the Republic of Korea in lifting its own citizens out of poverty, in establishing itself as a global leader in industry and commerce, and in creating a nation with a deep commitment to democracy and human rights demonstrates the potential for a Seoul-led nation to transform a reunified Korea.

The humanitarian, human rights, economic, regional security, and non-proliferation arguments for a Seoul-led reunification of the Korean Peninsula resonate well in the United States, which strongly supports reunification, and in the international community at large. American recognition that a South Korean-led process represents the best option for Korea's reunification was reflected in the language of the 2009 U.S.–ROK "Joint Vision Statement," which included the objective of achieving Korea's "peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy."¹⁾

The ROK can take considerable comfort in the fact that there is also a broad international audience that is receptive to reunification under Seoul's aegis. A key task for the ROK going forward will be to increase international support for that goal and for South Korea's efforts to lay the conditions for its realization.

* Evans J.R. Revere is a Nonresident Senior Fellow with the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at Brookings. He is also Senior Director at the Albright Stonebridge Group, a leading strategic advisory and commercial diplomacy firm. In 2007, Revere retired after a long and distinguished career as an American diplomat and one of the U.S. State Department's leading Asia specialists. In addition to serving as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, he served as the deputy head of the U.S. negotiating team with North Korea from 1998 to 2000.

1) "Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," The White House, June 16, 2009, available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea

II . The Challenging Path to National Reunification

Despite the benefits that would flow to Northeast Asia and to the Korean people from reunification, prospects for achieving it are hardly bright. Indeed, it is difficult today to see a near-term path that leads to reunification. Numerous challenges and obstacles loom as the ROK seeks to achieve this goal.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) itself. North Korea harbors its own idea of reunification – one that is fundamentally at odds with that of the ROK and to which Pyongyang is deeply committed. For Pyongyang, reunification will be achieved on its terms, with the North in the lead, the North's political and social system imposed on the South, and the ROK's political, social, and economic systems eradicated.

Pyongyang's approach to unification is backed by a rigid ideology and militant authoritarian system. Pyongyang's intent to impose its unique brand of socialism on the South is also supported by a large standing military, which Pyongyang has frequently threatened to use against the ROK.²⁾ The DPRK today represents the antithesis of what the ROK has become. It is hard to conceive how two systems so different could become reconciled.

The message conveyed by the DPRK's hostility towards the ROK is that

2) Kim Eun-jung, "N. Korea threatens to strike South 'without notice'" Yonhap, December 20, 2013, available at:
<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2013/12/20/56/0301000000AEN20131220001251315F.html>

the North has no intention of being changed by, or absorbed into, the Republic of Korea. This is a particularly important point, since at the heart of policies pursued by several successive South Korean governments is the idea that the North can be transformed, reconciliation can bring about a fundamental change in South–North relations, the zone of cooperation between North and South can be expanded, real North–South trust can be established, and the new environment created by these developments can lay the foundation for reunification.

The “Sunshine Policy” of Kim Dae–jung, the “Peace and Prosperity” approach of Roh Moo–hyun, and Lee Myung–bak’s “Vision 3000” were different from each other in important ways. But each represented a serious effort to change the dynamics of South–North relations, bridge differences, and build trust in the hope that this would pave the way to reconciliation and eventual reunification.

Despite these efforts, North–South relations continue to be marked by tension, profound distrust, and major military provocations by the North. The most notable of these were the sinking of the ROK warship *Cheonan* and the shelling of the South’s *Yeonpyeong Island* in 2010.

Cognizant of these failures, President Park Geun–hye has sought to reinvigorate and renew North–South relations. Keeping in mind the experience of her three predecessors, she has made “trustpolitik” the centerpiece of a pragmatic approach designed to cautiously reopen cooperation with Pyongyang in return for better behavior by the North.

While ten months of this policy may not be sufficient to draw a definitive

conclusion, there are signs that the DPRK has no intention of reciprocating President Park's hope for better ties. North Korea conducted its third nuclear weapons test only days before President Park's inauguration in February 2013, signaling its intention to deal with the new ROK president from a position of strength.

President Park nevertheless reached out to the DPRK in her inaugural address, calling for the North to work with her to achieve "harmonious unification" and reiterating her call for a trust-building process with Pyongyang.³⁾

The DPRK's response was not long in coming. Only weeks into her term, North Korea began to attack Park personally.⁴⁾ Subsequently, the spring and summer of 2013 saw the North engage in an almost unprecedented outburst of threats against the ROK, the United States, and Japan. In April 2013, the North also shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex - the hallmark of South-North economic cooperation. Kaesong was only reopened in September after difficult negotiations with Pyongyang. And in a severe blow to supporters of South-North reconciliation, North Korea suddenly cancelled plans for reunions of families separated by the Korean War in September 2013.⁵⁾

3) "The Full Text of the 18th Presidential Inaugural Speech," Korea.net, February 25, 2013, available at: <http://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=105853>

4) Hyung-jin Kim and Foster Klug, "North Korea 'Venomous Swish of Skirt' Comment: South Korean President Criticized in Sexist Remark," Huffington Post/AP, March 13, 2013, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/13/north-korea-venomous-swish-of-skirt-comment_n_2866672.html

5) Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Postpones Family Reunion Program," New York Times, September 21, 2013, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/21/world/asia/north-korea-postpones-family-reunion-program.html?_r=0

The North's dismissive, often hostile approach to relations with the ROK was accompanied during the past year by the strengthening of its nuclear "deterrent" and ballistic missile forces. Pyongyang also put its nuclear weapons program on a par with economic modernization as one of the twin pillars of its so-called "byungjin" policy, and during the course of the year threatened to use its nuclear weapons against the United States and others.⁶⁾

None of the DPRK's actions in 2013 suggested it was interested in "trustpolitik." In fact, Pyongyang's attacks on President Park intensified in October.⁷⁾ In the aftermath of these personal attacks, which were followed by threats to attack the Blue House, the ROK's deep skepticism about Pyongyang's sincerity has grown. Such misgivings were behind Seoul's decision to deflect Kim Jong Un's proposal for improved North–South relations made in his annual New Year's address. The ROK called for deeds, not just words, from the North.⁸⁾

Developments during 2013 suggest that prospects for wide-ranging North–South cooperation and dialogue are dim. If so, then equally dim is the hope that the nature of the North Korean regime might be fundamentally changed and that suspicion and distrust could be reduced any time soon. This bodes ill for future efforts to build a broad framework of North–South cooperation, or to establish the conditions for coexistence,

6) See, for example, Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Threatens to Attack U.S. With 'Lighter and Smaller Nukes,'" *New York Times*, March 5, 2013, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/world/asia/north-korea-threatens-to-attack-us-with-lighter-and-smaller-nukes.html>

7) "North Korea warns 'imbecile' Park Geun-hye of confrontation," *Agence France-Presse/South China Morning Post*, October 4, 2013, available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1324406/north-korea-warns-imbecile-park-geun-hye-confrontation>

8) "S. Korea doubts sincerity of North's peace offensive," *Yonhap*, January 3, 2014, available at: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/full/2014/01/03/38/1200000000AEN20140103002651315F.html>

reconciliation, and eventual reunification.

While seeking reunification through the gradual transformation of North Korea seems unlikely to succeed soon, other avenues offer no appeal. Forcing the DPRK towards reunification is not a serious option. Aggressive methods aimed at creating instability or inducing the collapse of the North Korea regime would risk chaos and conflict – a risk the South Korean people are probably unwilling to accept.

Arguments favoring aggressive regime change in the North often overlook the risk of collateral damage in the South. They also underestimate the resilience and capacity for survival of the DPRK. North Korea may be economically weak, but it has a formidable military force. Barring unanticipated developments inside the DPRK, North Korea would vigorously and violently resist any efforts to subvert or destabilize it.

Nevertheless, we cannot rule out that changes in internal political dynamics, a severe economic downturn, or social unrest might threaten the stability of North Korea. Such developments might even offer an opportunity to bring the DPRK regime to an end. But it would be wise to consider carefully the danger posed by intervening in a North Korean domestic crisis, especially one in which elements of the regime are determined to preserve the system.

In this connection, the purge and execution of Jang Song Taek briefly gave rise to speculation that North Korea was on the verge of major internal change, even collapse. In retrospect, such speculation was greatly overblown. Nonetheless, the Jang affair is worth examining for what it

tells us about our understanding of the internal dynamics of the regime. It is also worth exploring for what it says about the North Korean leadership's ability to deal with internal crisis and, most tellingly, about potential weaknesses in the regime's ability to sustain itself.

III. North Korea After Jang: A Firm Foundation Or Feet of Clay?

If we have learned nothing else about the North Korean regime from the arrest, purge, and execution of Jang Song Taek, it is how little we know about the regime's internal dynamics and its political fissures and factions.

The elimination of this senior member of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's inner circle shocked longtime analysts of the regime. At some point in the future, Kim might have been expected to ease Jang aside, especially as the young leader gained experience and had no further need for Jang's mentoring. Jang might also have been expected to leave as part of Kim's ongoing effort to replace his father's advisors with a new generation of officials. However, the sudden and brutal way in which Jang was disposed of was unexpected and unprecedented in contemporary North Korea.

The charges against Jang presented at an expanded meeting of the Korean Workers Party Political Bureau on December 8, 2013 were a powerful indictment, accusing him of "anti-party, counterrevolutionary factional acts."⁹⁾ Despite the vivid list of accusations against Jang, we many never know which one of his purported offenses constituted the tipping point that prompted Kim Jong Un to have Jang executed.

9) Although the text of the Political Bureau report has been removed from the KCNA website, it is available at: <http://www.nknews.org/kcna-watch/kcna-article/?0038461>

While the real motives behind the purge are not certain, some things are clear from the events surrounding Jang's removal. Jang's misdeeds were such that the North Korean leader was compelled to purge and execute his de facto number two -- a family member and a mentor appointed by his own father. Jang's offenses required that his removal be done publicly and that the Party formally approve the act. This was followed by a quick trial and execution that had no precedent in recent DPRK history. Not since the factional infighting of the 1950s and 1960s had the DPRK experienced anything so dramatic.

The manner in which this drama unfolded suggests that North Korea's leader felt deeply threatened by Jang and the network he had established throughout the North Korean system. The swift elimination of Jang has been accompanied by a purge of his associates and the recall of overseas envoys known to be close to him. Those not subject to arrest or execution have either been removed from their posts or, if allowed to continue to serve, they have been cowed into submission by the regime's decisive move.

For now, thanks to the brutal swiftness of this purge, Kim Jong Un's power has probably been enhanced. And for now, Kim's "monolithic leadership" has been reasserted and the regime has made clear that there is only a single source of power, legitimacy, and command in North Korea. But Kim Jong Un's success in reinforcing this message may come at a price.

The propaganda and publicity attached to Jang's removal amounts to an unprecedented admission that opposition both to Kim's leadership and to the primacy of the Korean Workers Party exists at the highest levels. The North Korean people have learned that a member of the innermost circle of

power was engaged in an anti-party conspiracy.

For decades, the North Korean regime has touted its reputation for unity, infallibility, and invincibility. In a stroke, the regime's handling of the Jang affair has raised questions about this.

The Jang purge has also damaged the prestige of the ruling family and raised serious questions about the leadership and decision making of both Kim Jong Un and his father. If Jang Song Taek was put in power by the elder Kim and kept there by Kim Jong Un; if a ruling family member was able to survive and thrive for so long at the center of power while hatching anti-party conspiracies; then North Koreans may be justified in doubting their leadership's judgment. The much-vaunted aura of infallibility that the North Korean system has spent decades creating has been damaged – by the regime itself.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that this development will degrade the North Korean leader's control or undermine the stability of the regime in the near term. The recent quick and thorough demonstration of power seems likely to keep Kim Jong Un's rule on track for now.

But the events surrounding the Jang case tell us that the course of events in the DPRK is far from predictable and that there are forces at work inside the North that we do not fully understand. Importantly, however, we now know that there are fissures beneath the facade of the regime's solidarity and swagger, and there is fragility behind its curtain of rock-solid unity.

ROK and U.S. contingency planning should be recalibrated to ensure it takes these factors into account. And U.S. and ROK authorities should also keep in mind that major, unanticipated change, perhaps with major consequences for regime stability, cannot be ruled out in North Korea.

IV. Regime Strengths and Vulnerabilities

This paper has argued that one of the main barriers to peninsular reunification is the regime's determination to retain its system, and its reliance on military power (including its nuclear arsenal) and provocation as the tools for doing so. We should also keep in mind the regime's capacity for survival.

Over the decades, many experts have predicted the demise of the regime. But the DPRK has survived the Korean War, the collapse of the USSR and the loss of Soviet aid, natural disasters, famine, international sanctions, and isolation. Survival is what the regime does well.

Today, reports of everyday life in Pyongyang describe a modernizing city where cellphones, taxis, construction cranes, and consumer goods are in plentiful supply. However, visitors to North Korea's countryside and hinterlands paint a different, somber, and sometimes desperate picture.

The regime's focus on the quality of life in the capital suggests it is doing its utmost to improve the lives of the denizens of Pyongyang who, in an important sense of the word, represent the regime's political "base." While the regime can use ideological exhortation, political campaigns, or even intimidation to keep the elites on side, these tools are inadequate to the

task. Accordingly, the regime under Kim Jong Un has focused to an unusual degree on improving the quality of life of Pyongyang's citizens and creating the hope, if not the reality, of a better life for the population at large.

But it is doubtful that the DPRK can indefinitely improve the lives of its citizens in the face of tough international sanctions and a weak economic foundation. There are even reports that the regime is drawing down its gold and hard currency reserves in order to sustain itself.¹⁰⁾ And the purge of the reform-minded Jang Song Taek has raised questions about the regime's ability to fulfill its economic modernization goals, although Pyongyang has sought to assure investors that its economic policy is unchanged.¹¹⁾

To an important degree, the DPRK's economic viability depends on its ability to skirt international sanctions. Accordingly, despite the regime's survival skills, the ability of the international community to increase the burden of sanctions on Pyongyang remains a major point of vulnerability for North Korea.

As the DPRK contends with international sanctions and isolation, China and the lifeline traditionally extended by Beijing play an increasingly important role. The PRC remains the DPRK's largest trading partner and primary conduit through which goods flow into and out of the North. Although China has strengthened its enforcement of UN-mandated sanctions, the food, fuel, and investment that China provides are critical

10) Ruediger Frank, "Exhausting Its Reserves? Sources of Finance for North Korea's Improvement of People's Living," 38 North, December 12, 2013, available at: <http://38north.org/2013/12/rfrank121213/>

11) Eric Talmadge, "N. Korean Official: Purge Won't Hurt Economic Policy," AP/The Big Story, December 15, 2013, available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/nkorean-official-purge-wont-hurt-economic-policy>

components of the DPRK's survival mechanism. For North Korea, China remains a vital asset.

China continues to hope that its efforts to convince North Korea to adopt Chinese-style “reform and opening” will succeed, leading to a moderation of North Korean behavior, the abandonment of its nuclear weapons program, and a reduction of tensions on the peninsula. Towards that end, the PRC has maintained its support for the DPRK regime, despite its misgivings about the North's external behavior.

But China's approach on North Korea does not spring solely from altruism, or from hopes, however guarded, for an eventual improvement in DPRK behavior. The North is an asset for a China that has difficult relations with many of its neighbors, several of which have territorial disputes with the PRC.

China also mistrusts the United States, which Beijing sees as opposed to China's rise and to its intention to play a major leadership role in Asia. In this context, many Chinese believe the United States uses tensions with North Korea as a pretext to strengthen the U.S. military presence in and around the Korean Peninsula as part of a broader U.S. effort to surround China. The result of this perception is a degree of sympathy for North Korea and a tendency by PRC authorities to blame the U.S. for peninsular tensions.

North Korea also serves China's interests as a “buffer” against the U.S.–allied ROK, helping to insulate China's northeast border and prevent the possibility that a democratic, united Korea tied via military alliance to

the United States will occupy this important border. Accordingly, while China nominally supports the principle of Korean reunification, the actual unification of the Korean peninsula under Seoul's aegis would be a problematic development for Beijing, especially if it involved violence or instability in this sensitive border area. For all these reasons, Beijing appears likely to prefer the status quo, a divided-but-stable Korean Peninsula, for the foreseeable future.¹²⁾

The DPRK understands the complexity of China's views on Korea and why, despite North Korea's risky behavior, the PRC continues to support Pyongyang. For this reason, North Korea has been able to exploit China's tolerance, safe in the belief that the PRC "needs" North Korea at least as much as the North needs China.

Going forward, an important task for the Republic of Korea and the United States will be to convince China that North Korea is a liability for Beijing. Pyongyang's behavior in 2013 probably helped make this case. The DPRK's actions in the past year unnerved China, as Pyongyang used warlike rhetoric to threaten its neighbors, talked about conducting nuclear strikes on the United States and others, carried out its third nuclear weapons test, and continued to develop its strategic rocket forces. Reflecting Chinese nervousness, Pyongyang's actions occasionally elicited high-level criticism from Beijing.¹³⁾

12) For a superb analysis of China–North Korea relations and the PRC's stake in North Korea, see "Fire on the City Gate: Why China Keeps North Korea Close," International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 254, December 9, 2013, available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/china/254-fire-on-the-city-gate-why-china-keeps-north-korea-close.aspx>

13) See, for example, Kim Deok-hyun, "China FM warns of 'chaos,' flagging veiled criticism of N. Korea," Yonhap, September 18, 2013, available at: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2013/09/18/55/0301000000AEN20130918003500315F.html>

China is no doubt displeased that, despite its efforts to restart Six-Party Talks for the denuclearization of North Korea, the DPRK seems as determined as ever to retain its nuclear weapons capabilities. The PRC also understands that North Korea's belligerence leads to increased military preparedness by the United States and the ROK, complicating China's security posture in Northeast Asia.

It remains to be seen whether the execution of Jang Song Taek, known for his closeness to Beijing, will affect PRC-DPRK relations. China's reaction to the purge has been cautious, suggesting that China is adopting a wait-and-see approach.

If history is any guide, however, there is reason to believe that China-North Korea relations will weather this development and China's consideration of its strategic stake in North Korea will outweigh any concerns it may have about internal political developments there. Nevertheless, the ROK and the United States should be attentive to any signs that Beijing might be recalibrating its relationship with Pyongyang.

Barring a change in China's approach, however, the DPRK's greatest vulnerabilities are likely to lie in the rising international indignation over its human right record and the international community's growing concern over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

The United Nations' establishment of a Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 2013 was a major development in response to growing international concern over the plight of the North Korean people.¹⁴⁾

In March 2014, the Commission is scheduled to announce the results of its investigation, a report that is expected to include a finding of whether any of the DPRK's practices amount to crimes against humanity. Confirmation by this international body that the DPRK has engaged in systematic, widespread, and grave human rights violations and that some of these constituted crimes against humanity would likely give birth to a major international effort to make the DPRK and its leadership accountable for its actions.

Meanwhile, the DPRK is taking steps to expand and enhance its nuclear weapons program.¹⁵⁾ As this continues, and particularly if it is accompanied by additional nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missile tests, the United States, the ROK, Japan, and other members of the international community are likely to respond by pressing for strengthened sanctions and other steps designed to raise the price to the regime for its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the missiles with which to deliver them.

14) United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," March 21, 2013, available at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coidprk/pages/commissioninquiryonhrindprk.aspx>

15) Nick Hansen, "Major Development: Reactor Fuel Fabrication Facilities Identified at Yongbyon Nuclear Complex," 38 North, December 23, 2013, available at: <http://38north.org/2013/12/yongbyon122313/>

V. Recommendations: A U.S.–ROK Agenda for Dealing with Pyongyang

Prospects for a moderation of North Korean behavior appear slim. And Pyongyang seems unlikely to transform its political, economic, and social systems in ways that would further genuine North–South reconciliation. Thoroughgoing systemic reform in the North would put at risk the regime’s unitary leadership system and its absolute hold on power – two regime priorities that were strongly reaffirmed by the recent purge of Jang Song Taek. Accordingly, we should not expect the DPRK to be a willing partner in efforts that might bring about its own demise. Nor should we expect the regime to give up its hope to reunify the peninsula on its terms.

China continues to have a stake in the regime’s existence, even if Beijing is displeased with Pyongyang’s belligerent behavior, its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the regime’s disinclination to follow Chinese advice on reform and opening. We should therefore not expect China to support efforts to isolate, pressure, or transform North Korea as long as Beijing regards the DPRK as an asset rather than a liability.

Meanwhile, aggressive efforts to bring about the collapse of the North Korean regime are fraught with risk and are therefore unlikely to be acceptable to the people of South Korea. At the same time, the DPRK seems able to sustain itself, at least in the short term, and to maintain a formidable military increasingly equipped with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

All this suggests that creating the conditions for reconciliation and the eventual reunification of Korea will be extremely difficult, if not impossible,

for the foreseeable future. Faced with this situation, the ROK should look for opportunities to influence North Korean behavior on the margins, guard against provocation, adhere to its democratic principles, build its strength, and exercise patience.

The ROK and the United States should cooperate to erode the DPRK's strengths, take advantage of its vulnerabilities, narrow the regime's choices, and seek to compel Pyongyang to move down a more cooperative path. Such an approach should try to shape North Korea's strategic environment and its choices in a way that maximizes the prospects for an eventual transformation of the DPRK regime. This approach could usefully consist of the following nine elements:

Countering the WMD Threat. As the DPRK improves its nuclear and missile capabilities, which will necessarily include additional nuclear weapons and long-range missile tests, the ROK and the United States should work with the international community to expand the scope and intensity of sanctions and increase their own military cooperation, including ballistic missile defense cooperation, to counter the DPRK.

New sanctions should be considered, including measures targeting additional North Korean industrial firms, trading companies, and financial institutions connected with the regime's WMD programs. Special attention should be given to the links between North Korean banks and their international partners, and to banking and other financial transactions between North Koreans firms and non-DPRK entities. Intensified scrutiny of DPRK-origin deposits in foreign banks should also take place, with an eye toward freezing or seizing assets connected with illicit activities or with weapons or WMD-related transactions.

Such steps would raise the cost to the DPRK of its continued development of WMD and impede its ability to fund its military. As foreign banks become wary of doing business with North Korea, this could also weaken the regime's financial foundation and complicate its efforts to fund projects aimed at improving the morale of regime elites. It would also compel the regime to choose between expanding its nuclear and missile programs and carrying out economic modernization.

Strengthened U.S.–ROK missile defense cooperation would counter the threat posed by Pyongyang's ballistic missiles. At the same time, additional and larger military exercises, would tax the North's resources, as Pyongyang would be compelled to respond with deployments and exercises of its own in the more constrained fiscal environment created by a tougher sanctions regime.

Focusing on Human Rights. The United States and the Republic of Korea should support the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry and other international efforts to investigate violations of human rights in the DPRK. If the Commission finds clear evidence that crimes against humanity have been committed, Washington and Seoul should support measures to bring to justice those responsible.

If the DPRK refuses to cooperate, the United States and the ROK should support the imposition of sanctions and other measures to bring about Pyongyang's cooperation. The prospect of additional sanctions, the opprobrium of the international community, further isolation, and seeing its officials subject to international justice could have a sobering effect on the DPRK regime.

Moving China. The Republic of Korea and the United States should seek to engage the PRC in a quiet dialogue to discuss the future of the Korean Peninsula, including the possibility of trilateral cooperation in the event of sudden change in the DPRK.

Because of China's special relationship with the North, past efforts to engage PRC officials in such dialogue have been unsuccessful. Nevertheless, productive discussions of collapse scenarios and alternate futures for the Korean Peninsula have taken place in Track II dialogues involving Chinese scholars and former diplomats and military officials. It is time to explore PRC willingness to move such dialogues to the official level.

Developments in 2013 suggest that Beijing is increasingly frustrated with North Korea. The purge of Jang Song Taek, and with it the setback to hopes to convince Pyongyang to implement Chinese-style reforms, could stimulate Beijing to recalibrate its North Korea policy. Some Chinese scholars have been arguing for such a reassessment and are making the case that the DPRK is increasingly a liability to China.

Accordingly, 2014 may offer an opportunity to engage Beijing in a highly confidential, official dialogue on the future of the Korean Peninsula. Such a dialogue should include a focus on whether and under what conditions China would support the peaceful reunification of Korea. A central goal of such a dialogue should be to convince China that a reunified Korean Peninsula, with Seoul at the helm, is in China's interest.

Chinese concerns about a reunified Korea include the military capabilities that it would possess and the nature of a unified Korea's alliance relationship

with the United States. These concerns require the United States and the ROK to address in advance of any dialogue with Beijing a number of fundamental questions, including the post–reunification status of the U.S.–ROK alliance and the presence of U.S. forces in a reunified Korea.

Seoul and Washington should be prepared eventually to describe to China a post–unification alliance relationship that both meets the ROK’s security needs and does not undermine Chinese interests. Unless and until they can do so, Chinese is likely to have no interest in a reunified Korean Peninsula.

Building International Support for Reunification. The Republic of Korea should build into its diplomatic dialogue with other countries its vision of what a post–reunification Korea would look like in terms of its commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, non–proliferation, and its status as a non–nuclear weapons state.

Seoul should reassure its neighbors and the international community at large that it is committed, when the time comes, to managing the smoothest possible assimilation of the people of the DPRK into the ROK in a way that assures their security, welfare, and human and citizenship rights and that guarantees Seoul will be open to working with the international community in this regard. It is not too soon to begin preparing the international community for the eventuality of Korea’s national reunification, and doing so will both reassure the ROK’s diplomatic partners of its intentions and help build support for eventual reunification under the aegis of Seoul.

Testing Pyongyang. The ROK is wise to be deeply suspicious of Pyongyang’s willingness to take serious, substantive steps towards reconciliation. In 2013,

the North's actions said much about its intentions in this area, and the message conveyed was ominously negative. Nevertheless, the ROK should continue to test the North's seriousness about improving relations in the hope, if not the expectation, that the DPRK will show good will and reciprocate Seoul's desire to reduce tensions.

President Park's recent call for the North to resume family reunions is an excellent example of how to turn a suspect proposal by the North Korean leader into a challenge to him to demonstrate his seriousness about improving relations.¹⁶⁾ The ROK should look for other opportunities to gauge Pyongyang's claimed commitment to better South–North ties.

Signaling a Better life for the DPRK's People. It remains to be seen whether the purge of Jang Song Taek and the elimination of his associates will create major concerns among the North Korean elite about their future or undermine their support for the regime. Nevertheless, Seoul should find ways to signal these elites, and the North Korean people at large, that a better life awaits them in a unified Korea. One excellent way of doing so is to focus on the support it provides to North Koreans already in the South. The best message that Seoul could send the North Korean people about their prospects as future citizens of a united Korea is to ensure that defectors and refugees from the North are given every available support and opportunity in South Korean society today.

Preparing for Sudden Change. The unanticipated purge of Jang Song Taek highlights the need for the Republic of Korea and the United States to prepare

16) Choe Sang–Hun, "South Korea Proposes Resuming Reunions of War–Divided Families, New York Times, January 6, 2014, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/07/world/asia/south-korea-proposes-resuming-reunion-s-of-war-divided-families.html?_r=0

for sudden change in the DPRK. Washington and Seoul should intensify their planning to deal with a range of scenarios, including popular unrest, economic crisis, or even collapse.

Mindful of the limits of their understanding of internal political developments in the North, the United States and South Korea should intensify information and intelligence sharing and place a high priority on gaining access to high-quality defectors from the North. Bilateral planning for post-collapse and/or post-reunification North Korea should be emphasized in order to ensure that each side understands the other's priorities, needs, and redlines.

The two allies should develop a common assessment of the international resources that will be needed to assist in stabilization, refugee control, WMD removal, KPA demobilization, and the protection of the North's civilian population. The enormity of these tasks will require a large amount of international assistance, and the time to identify where that aid could be most usefully secured is now.

Talking with the DPRK. The United States and the Republic of Korea should keep the door open to productive dialogue with the DPRK. If Pyongyang is prepared to deal positively with U.S. and ROK concerns, including proliferation and the North's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and if the DPRK is willing to refrain from military provocations against the South, a basis for serious and constructive dialogue exists. If such a dialogue leads to concrete results, this, in turn, could enable Washington and Seoul to ease pressure on the regime.

A greater DPRK willingness to meet the concerns of the ROK, the United States, and the international community should be reciprocated by a willingness to engage positively with the DPRK and expand cooperation, particularly in the areas of humanitarian assistance, education, and training. While this would not change the shared U.S. and ROK opposition to the nature of the North Korean regime or their desire to transform it, it would create the possibility that a *modus vivendi* can be established in which reduced tensions, denuclearization, and expanded contacts with the North might bring about gradual change there.

Unanticipated Consequences. Finally, it is hoped that a more assertive approach to dealing with the DPRK's human rights situation, proliferation, WMD programs, and violations of international sanctions will encourage the DPRK to moderate its behavior and engage more positively with the ROK and the international community. However, the application of unprecedented pressure on the North could also undermine the regime's stability, even if that is not the goal of this approach. U.S. and ROK policymakers should be attentive to this possible outcome.

It is also possible that the regime, saddled with a dysfunctional economy, an anachronistic political and social system, and the rising expectations of its elites, might find it necessary to implement serious reforms to avoid precipitate collapse. That would be a major, welcome development with positive implications for future reconciliation.

But we cannot rule out that a regime that has developed rigidity, monolithic rule, and authoritarian control into an art form might someday find itself a prisoner of its system, incapable of taking the measures necessary for its own

preservation. If that happens, collapse will likely ensue.

However it comes, change is inevitable for North Korea. And however it comes, it should hasten the day when Korea's long-hoped-for national reunification becomes a reality.