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**Selig S. Harrison: Korean Endgame**

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## The Paralysis of American Policy

The question is not will this country disintegrate, but rather how it will disintegrate, by implosion or explosion, and when.

—Gen. Gary Luck, commander of U.S. forces in Korea, in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, March 16, 1996

When you hear about starvation in North Korea, a lot of very level-headed people think, “There is no way a country like that can survive.” Well, I can guarantee you this: I’m here to tell you with absolute certainty those guys will tough it out for centuries just the way they are. Neither the United States nor any other country is going to be able to force a collapse of that government in North Korea.

—Eason Jordan, president, CNN International Networks, in a lecture at Harvard University, March 10, 1999, reporting on nine visits to North Korea

THE DEBATE over whether North Korea will collapse—and whether the United States should promote its collapse—has paralyzed American policymaking relating to Korea. Unable to resolve this debate, the United States has been marking time, watching to see what develops in Pyongyang and keeping its options open with a policy of “limited engagement.” In the absence of coherent, long-term goals, successive administrations have improvised ad hoc responses to a series of crises precipitated by Pyongyang in pursuit of its own objectives.

The debate has been framed simplistically in terms of a stark choice: on the one hand, implosion or explosion, leading to the collapse of the North Korean state; on the other, the survival of the Kim Jong Il regime unaltered. Yet a realistic assessment conducted without ideological blinders suggests that the most likely outcome is an intermediate one in which the North Korean state survives, but only after major changes in the character of the Workers Party regime and its leadership. In the chapters that follow I explain the four key factors underlying this assessment.

Against this background, it will then be possible to define the policy choices confronting the United States with respect to the unification of Korea, the future of the American military presence, and the prevention of a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia.

Expectations of a collapse increased steadily during the eight years of the Clinton administration, stimulated first by the death of Kim Il Sung and thereafter by famine and industrial stagnation in the North. When the United States concluded its nuclear freeze agreement with Pyongyang in October 1994, the White House and State Department openly defended the accord against Republican attacks by predicting a collapse. To critics who objected to building civilian nuclear power reactors for Pyongyang in return for the freeze, one official responded that it would take a decade to build the reactors “and that is almost certainly a sufficient period of time for their regime to have collapsed. The country simply won’t exist then because it will have been absorbed by South Korea.”<sup>1</sup> Ten months later, *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland wrote that “although they don’t say so publicly, Clinton foreign policy aides assume that the isolated, destitute regime of North Korea will collapse before the promised reactors are built, taking the United States off the hook.”<sup>2</sup>

On January 21, 1996, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake invited six nongovernment specialists to a discussion in the White House Situation Room. Lake was preparing for a trip to South Korea. Eight U.S. officials dealing with Korea participated, and all of them, including Lake, rejected my view that North Korea would survive as a separate state for the indefinite future. Most of them scoffed at my warning that the U.S. failure to honor the freeze agreement by lifting economic sanctions might lead North Korea to resume its nuclear weapons program, arguing that its economic plight and fear of a collapse make it dependent on the United States.

One of those present at the White House meeting, Stanley Roth, who served as director for East Asian affairs in the National Security Council during 1994 and 1995, told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter soon after leaving this post that U.S. policy was being formulated “in the context of an imminent collapse.”<sup>3</sup> Roth bet a former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, Richard Solomon, that the collapse would come within a year.<sup>4</sup> In March 1997, Vice President Albert Gore exemplified the thinking then prevailing in Washington when he pointed northward during a photo-op at Panmunjom, declaring that “the cold war survives here, but not for long because their system is collapsing.”<sup>5</sup>

Well before the death of Kim Il Sung and the famine, anticipation of a collapse had increasingly dominated thinking about Korea in the United States, South Korea, and Japan following the demise of the Soviet Union and the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Facile comparisons with East Germany led to the widespread belief that sooner or later North Korea, too, would crumble and be absorbed by the South in a repetition of the German unification process. But such comparisons ignored the central historical reality that the two Koreas had fought a fratricidal war. West German chancellor Willy Brandt did not have to overcome the bitter legacy of such a conflict when he initiated his Ostpolitik. It was the network of contacts and economic linkages between East and West Germany made possible by Ostpolitik over a twenty-five-year period that set the stage for the upheaval triggered in the East by Gorbachev's relaxation of the Soviet grip. By the same token, it is the paucity of North-South interchange that freezes the situation on the Korean peninsula.

For all of its repression, East Germany did not achieve the Orwellian thoroughness of North Korea, where children begin to spend six days a week away from their parents at the age of three and often earlier. Well-equipped and well-staffed, the lavish child-care centers that one sees even in rural areas teach children above all else that Kim Jong Il personifies the patriotic virtue exemplified by his father. Unlike Eastern Europe, where television, short-wave radios, and cassettes have leapfrogged national frontiers, North Korea is tightly insulated from outside influences. All television and radio sets must be registered and have fixed channels. Only the top echelon of the Workers Party has more than an inkling of what the rest of the world is like. To be sure, as foreign contacts increase, the system is gradually becoming more penetrable. This is precisely why the Kim Jong Il regime continues to restrict contact with the outside world, permitting only the minimum necessary to meet specific economic needs.

The fact that North Korea has a repressive totalitarian system and is insulated from outside influences does not in itself support the conclusion that it will survive for an indefinite period. In the absence of other reasons for predicting its survival, it could be plausibly argued that the North Korean system will inevitably come apart sooner or later as outside influences creep in. But there are, in fact, other equally important factors that also make its collapse unlikely, and it is these critical but little-recognized factors that I will discuss in detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 focuses on the siege mentality and intense nationalism that have resulted from the distinctive historical experience of North Korea, especially from the devastating impact of U.S. bombing during the Ko-

rean War and from the cold war alliance between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, which Pyongyang has perceived as aggressive in character. The quasi-religious nationalist mystique associated with the memory of Kim Il Sung explains, at bottom, why the Workers Party is able to command such a broad popular acceptance of its totalitarian discipline.

This discipline is reinforced by a second factor discussed in chapter 3: the powerful Confucian traditions of political centralization and obedience to authority that date back more than six centuries in Korea and were consciously appropriated by Kim Il Sung.

Many observers acknowledge that nationalism and Confucian traditions give the regime in Pyongyang durability. But they ask, understandably, how long the regime will be able to keep control if it fails to deal effectively with profound economic problems resulting from built-in systemic weaknesses that were aggravated by the end of the cold war and the demise of the Soviet Union. In this view, it is assumed that the regime will be unable, or unwilling, to introduce the incentive-based economic reforms that would be necessary for its economic survival.

In contrast to the conventional wisdom, my analysis of North Korea's economic prospects in chapters 4 and 5 emphasizes the steady liberalization of economic life that has already occurred there, especially the growth of private farm markets in response to the famine with the blessing of the regime. At the same time, it does not prejudge whether Kim Jong Il will be able to move the process of reform forward fast enough to forestall growing economic discontent and challenges to his authority. The early years of his regime have been marked by bitter internecine divisions over economic policy. Lacking the unchallenged control exercised by his father, Kim Jong Il has settled for carefully calibrated liberalization measures that have gone just far enough to produce large-scale corruption and destabilizing disparities of wealth, but not far enough to bring broad-based economic benefits.

In the sixth and final chapter in part I I assess the durability of Kim Jong Il and the possibility of a stable transition to a new leadership committed to more meaningful economic reform. It does not rule out the possibility that he will gradually lose effective authority to a collective leadership of generals, secret police barons, technocrats, and Workers Party warlords. However, my conclusion is that with or without Kim Jong Il, North Korea is likely to make the changes in economic policy necessary for the survival of the state and the present ruling elite. Predictions of a collapse underrate the determination of this elite to preserve its

privileges and vested interests. It is often taken for granted that a collective leadership would inevitably succumb to self-destructive factionalism. But an equally cold-blooded view of human nature suggests that it would decide to hang together rather than hang separately.

The North's proposal for a loose confederation as the first step toward unification is motivated primarily by a desire to keep the present power structure in Pyongyang intact within a controlled process of North-South interchange. Far from collapsing, North Korea is likely to survive until the differences between the economic systems in the North and South are narrowed through such interchange and until the emergence of a unification formula that minimizes the damage to vested interests in the North and South alike.