



A Long View Forecast

Justin D. Long, ed.

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|----|---------|----|---|
| rest | 1 West | Bafoussar | 13,892 | | | 163 | 1,198,214 | 83 | 160.3 | | 0 |
| | 0 China | Beijing | 9,576,208 | | | 737 | 105,936,530 | 99 | 140. | 72 | 0 |
| nhu | 1 Anhui | Hefei | 139,900 | 52,290,000 | | 510 | 9,639,083 | 99 | 425.3 | 72 | 0 |
| ej | 1 Beijing | Beijing | 16,808 | 10,870,000 | | 368 | 882,557 | 99 | 1,166.8 | 72 | 0 |
| hon | 1 Chongqing | Chongqing | 82,400 | -00 | 30,512,763 | 28,846,170 | 2,826,925 | 99 | 350.1 | 72 | 0 |
| ji | 1 Fujian | Fuzhou | 17,400 | 30,610,000 | 8,854,419 | 36,894,700 | 5,460,344 | 99 | 299.7 | 72 | 0 |
| ans | 1 Gansu | Lanzhou | 174,000 | 2,730,000 | 2,730,000 | 2,730,000 | 2,730,000 | 99 | 69.8 | 72 | 0 |
| uan | 1 Guangdong | Guangzhou | 197,100 | 63,210,000 | 85,225,007 | 104,303,132 | 4,693,641 | 99 | 529.2 | 76 | 0 |
| xi | 1 Guangxi | Nanning | 220,400 | 42,530,000 | 42,530,000 | 42,530,000 | 920,533 | 99 | 208.8 | 72 | 0 |
| uiz | 1 Guizhou | Guiyang | 174,000 | 32,730,000 | 32,730,000 | 32,730,000 | 2,015,295 | 99 | 199.7 | 72 | 0 |
| ain | 1 Hainan Island | Haikou | 34,300 | 6,420,000 | 7,559,035 | 8,671,518 | 554,977 | 99 | 252.8 | 72 | 0 |
| ebe | 1 Hebei | Shijiazhu | 202,700 | 60,280,000 | 66,684,419 | 71,854,202 | 6,323,170 | 99 | 354.5 | 72 | 0 |

Estimate of the future of the North Korean government

Many are waiting for the “fall” of the DPRK government and reunification of the two Koreas to open the area to the Gospel. How likely is this event to happen in the short-term future?

“Sudden change is always possible and it is impossible to predict exactly when the North Korean state could collapse. Within the next five-to-ten years, a cascading series of events could conceivably end with regime collapse in the north, leading to the unification of the two Koreas,” writes Sue Mi Terry in CFR.

Unfortunately, Terry and others who obviously passionately desire to see the government of the DPRK fall usually only envision a wildcard event. As she notes, wildcards are impossible to predict, so such forecasts are couched in “could conceivably.”

How realistic is such a wildcard, given the efforts of the government to prevent it—and are there other alternatives which might open North Korea to the Gospel?

Forces, Factors, Drivers

1. In the past 100 years, the nature of the North Korean government has changed very few times.

North Korea has never known anything except absolute rule. Before 1910, Koreans lived under a monarchy. In 1910 Japan annexed Korea and Koreans were ruled by the emperor. Japan dominated Korea, suppressing its culture and traditions and forcing Japanese culture on them; this worsened during World War II.

After 1945, Korea was divided between the USSR and the US along the 38th parallel. Reunification hopes were dashed: in the North, Kim Il-Sung was appointed chairman. The Korean War of 1950-53 killed more than 1 million and destroyed nearly every building in the North, but did not bring about any change of government or the status quo.

Since 1946, the government of North Korea has remained largely the same, with power transferred to Kim Jong-il in 1994 and to his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, in 2011.

Thus full change of government has happened twice in the past 100 years, both times in the context of war with outside powers. It has been successfully and largely peacefully trans-

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ferred three times (though obviously not in any kind of free and fair election process).

The DPRK government has clearly established the processes required to maintain the status quo over long periods of time.

2. The precise power structures controlling North Korea are unclear but centralized

Depending on which analysis one reads, the DPRK is controlled either (a) entirely by Kim Jong-un in the fashion of an ancient oriental despot, or (b) by a larger network of bureaucrats, generals and family members of whom Kim Jong-un happens to be the manager, leader, facilitator, and/or central hub. Most likely, some combination of the two is the truth. Whatever is the case, power is clearly and firmly concentrated in the hands of a few, who are capable of maintaining it.

The most powerful component of the Powerful is the Military. The government is based on a 'military-first' ideology built around the virtual worship of a 'Supreme Leader.' By giving all emphasis to the military, Kim Jong-un has a monopoly of force supporting him; but this system also means that should anything happen to Kim Jong-un, there are others within the power structure who could step forward to be the 'Supreme Leader' (public face) of North Korea.

Certainly, it appears the Kim family has gotten very good at maintaining power over the powerful. They appear to have the full backing of the political and military infrastructure, to the extent of being able to purge elements within that oppose him (including, most specifically, his uncle). Further, they appear to have the (admittedly forced) consent of the populace: most act as if they believe (and probably many have come to believe) "the Kims are gods."

While it is possible to imagine a scenario in which Jong-un is assassinated, any such scenarios are improbable (he has already eliminated many threats, showing the capacity to do so); and if this were to happen, it is more likely that the new government would be a hardened version of the current (as the most likely successful assassins are those who are near power now, and would want to maintain power).

2. The economy is slowly but steadily improving

North Korea is a poor nation. In 2011, UNICEF estimated 25% of the people were malnourished. Food is rationed; those judged to be 'more loyal' to the regime receive more than those who are not. The "most loyal" few (mostly concentrated in Pyongyang) live well; the rest outside the capital live poorly.

Yet, life expectancy rates, sanitation, clean water, and medical care (although of questionable quality) is almost universally available. The population is alleged to be completely literate.

There is a "booming" if unofficial market economy, "driven by private trade that has flourished since the devastating famine of the 1990s" (Reuters). Several reports say Kim Jong-un has initiated many economic reforms: whereas before "the only path to prosperity was ideological purity," now "increasingly North Koreans can better their lot by earning more money." Private business has become more common and is often quietly encouraged.

There is also a thriving black market which has "eclipsed the official one." North Korea has wealthy traders ("donju" or "masters of money"). North Korean citizens have been involved in illegal trades for years, including arms and drug trafficking. While illegal economies are not necessarily good things, they do mean that some in the general population have access to economic systems that will improve their general well-being in life.

Reforms may also be improving the food sector. Reportedly, workers now receive a share of the harvest, usually a

third. In 2013, North Korea harvested "almost enough" food to feed its population.

These data points may or may not indicate a moderating government; but they do seem to be stabilizing the country, lightening the burdens of the poor while still benefiting the elites the most. A large percentage of the population were reportedly disgruntled with Kim Jong-il (manifested in a reverence for Kim Il-Sung), but many appear to be relatively happier with Kim Jong-un.

What little data can be found reports an economy which is trudgingly improving bit by bit over the years rather than getting progressively worse. Trade with China has increased, North Korean elites are using cell phones, and cars are far more common.

3. Strong control over the populace through surveillance, detention, fear

North Korea has one of the worst human rights records in the world. Through a combination of the Worker's Party, the security apparatus, the military, and a pervasive network of informants ("everyone spied on everyone else") the administration of North Korea has significant power to monitor its population, identify threats, and crush them while they are still small.

The government uses detention in labor camps to ensure fear of opposing it. Collective punishment, including sending three generations of an offender's family to prison camps, is common. There are estimated to be over 100,000 in prison camps.

The government has likewise made it increasingly difficult to defect to China, closing the border between the two nations. DPRK would prefer its people not think that defection is a desirable option.

Public executions are frequent. Kim Jong-un has reportedly executed more than 70 high-ranking officials, including his own uncle, for plotting against the government; while this demonstrates there are those with the desire and capacity to plot, it also demonstrates the government's ability to uncover and squash plotters.

3. Severe repression has not led to widespread rebellious motives.

Yet so far all of this has not led to widespread rebellion. It is a "system which, despite its cruelty and well-documented failings, happens to function acceptably for a sizable portion of North Korea's population" (the elites, as described in what appears to be a thoughtful, fair, and well-researched Vanity Fair profile). The government has apparently been fairly capable of indoctrinating the population with a point of view ("the Kims are gods," "the rest of the world is against us," "Koreans are the superior race") that inspires loyalty.

4. North Korea possesses one of the largest military forces in the world.

It has over 9 million soldiers: one in every 25 North Koreans (other estimates suggest as high as 40%). It further possesses both nuclear and chemical weapons of mass destruction, and has recently alleged it had hydrogen bombs (though most analysts at this point agree the recent test was not a hydrogen bomb).

The military might of North Korea is a source of pride for the nation. It is also used to reinforce the idea North Korea is at war with the world, and needs both its military and its Supreme Leader to protect the people. Finally, the military, with its monopoly of force, enables the government to keep firm control over the nation, and to make any outside intervention very costly.

It seems clear the DPRK could not survive continued hostilities with any (or worse, all) of the US, China and/or Russia, but it is less clear how Kim Jong-un and his advisers realizes this. Nonetheless, the significant military

might of the DPRK (particularly in artillery, and potentially in nuclear weapons) would make any military exchange very costly for South Korea (and potentially any other nation involved in conflict).

5. The government has the capacity to survive famines.

Some thought the severe famine of 1995-98 would be enough to cause the government to fail through popular revolt. Aid agencies have estimated up to 2 million have died due to recurring famines. But it endured and the situation gradually improved. Food production at the moment appears to be, or be nearly, what is required although malnutrition is still found frequently among children.

While the government has frequently undertaken initiatives apparently designed to acquire food aid, it doesn't appear that sanctions or the lack of food is enough to cause the government to fall.

7. China/Russia vs. North Korea.

North Korea has traditionally enjoyed the support of China (and historically Russia). After the fall of the Soviet Union, economic subsidies from Russia dried up. China has continued its relationship with the DPRK, but more recently China appears to have been frustrated and embarrassed by Kim regime.

Nevertheless, it seems improbable that China will do anything to force Kim Jong-un out; they likely "prefer the devil they know to the one they don't." Regime change would be costly: a collapsing North Korea would result in millions of refugees flooding into Jilin province, joining the Korean minority there, and possibly military conflict as well.

8. Impact of trade & information connections with the outside.

Virtually all of North Korea's trade is with China (about two-thirds) and South Korea (about 20%). Trade benefits the government and the 'upper' class of North Koreans. While some glimpses of the wider world undoubtedly accompany this trade, it appears to mostly be in the hands of those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in North Korea.

North Korea reportedly has some kind of internal "Internet," but it is isolated from the rest of the world, monitored by the government, and unavailable to the general population. Little to no information about the outside world is easily obtainable by the majority of the population; they seem to know little more than what the government tells them.

Future Scenarios and Potential Actors: Means, Motives, Opportunity

When considering the future, one method for identifying possible scenarios is to consider those actors with the means, motives and opportunity to change the status quo.

Actors with the potential means would include Kim Jong-un, the bureaucrats and leaders of the government (the Powerful), the Elites (the top third of the population), the growing Consumer Class (a sort of upper-portion of the middle-third), the Military, the General Population, China, Russia, and the United States/Korea.

Kim Jong-un opens the country. Kim Jong-un potentially has the means to effect change, but likely little opportunity or motive. He has shown no indication of caring about the well-being of the lower classes. Any kind of "revolutionary" change (e.g. ranging from wide openness to regime change) would doubtless be opposed by the Powerful. While some analysts have suggested Kim Jong-un is presently on a "moderating" course, it's likely the political forces at play will keep him from opening the country too much. (In fact, an attempt by Jong-un to

substantially change the Status Quo could in fact be the spark for a coup effort that would prevent such a change; in that case, Regime Change is likely, but Wide Openness or Reunification is far less likely—except on a scenario in which Regime Change led to War and Downfall, which would be a very dangerous and costly path.)

Kim Jong-un "reaches for glory," is unseated. At least one analyst believes the latest nuclear explosion (allegedly a hydrogen bomb, actually failed) was intended as a "sensational achievement" in order to justify having himself named President of North Korea and General Secretary of the Party—names reserved for his grandfather. This would likely require a sustained propaganda campaign aimed at the general population. For Koreans, this may seem "profoundly unfilial and disrespectful" and could stress his control of the government and the population. This scenario path is a better seedbed for potential plotters or isolated actors.

The DPRK mounts an invasion of South Korea. Another form of "reaching for glory" would be to attempt forcible reunification with South Korea. The most likely scenario for regime change involving military force is a defensive war from North Korea aggression (unlikely) or somehow blundering into a conflict (North Korean brinkmanship that goes horribly wrong). It is possible that either for personal glory or due to pressure from the military, Kim Jong-un may miscalculate or undercalculate the potential military cost of invading the South, think it possible to succeed, and attempt it. If this should happen, it would almost certainly be catastrophic for all involved.

Coup by one or more of the Powerful. Some among the nation's ruling bureaucracy (the OGD) might have the means to effect regime change. This would be very risky, as Kim Jong-un and those backing him have already demonstrated the ability to identify and eliminate plotters. Should someone Powerful be able to remove Kim Jong-un, he might be able to open the country more; but it is far more likely that they would wish to preserve their personal power by preserving the status quo. If someone among the Powerful has the motive to open the country, that motive is likely very well hidden from view and would be an unpredictable Wildcard.

Coup by the Consumer Class + Military. The growing Consumer Class, if united with disaffected portions of the Military, might gain the Means to effect regime change, and then to open the country to the outside. This is among the more possible scenarios, but would more likely quashed than successful. (The military at present seems to have very little motive for any regime change which would reduce their power.) Such a coup, if attempted, and if successful in initiating regime change, would probably result in the Military being in charge, and a hardening of the government.

Coup by the Military. The Military would have the most Means to effect regime change, and with that Means could create the Opportunity, but it does not appear to have the Motive. Here again, disaffected units within the military could conceivably launch a coup (possibly coupled with some among the Elites or the Consumer Class). The most likely scenario for this is if actions by the DPRK government threatened the survival of the nation. But even this seems to be a very low-probability scenario, as Kim Jong-un and the government seem quite able at brinkmanship that irritates the world but never really brings it to the point of external action.

Popular Revolt. The General Population might have Motive for regime change, but have near-zero means or opportunity. The military and the elites having a monopoly on deadly force and a willingness to use it against threats. The government has demonstrated the ability to easily round up dissidents in large numbers and intern them in labor camps. With the deck so "stacked against them," without some kind of first initiative (possibly a coup or military action) it is highly unlikely a popular revolt would succeed.

External Action. Total regime change, as already noted, has only been effected by war. China and Russia are both pursuing isolationist policies; while either have the capacity to overturn the government, the cost of regime change (in terms of military expenditure and refugees) is so high that isolationism is far cheaper. (Neither China nor Russia want enormous numbers of North Korean refugees within their borders). The United States and Ko-

rea would be most interested in reunification but neither wish to launch the military action required to overthrow the government (again, cost).

Conclusion

For at least the immediate short-term future (2016, and through 2020), the current status quo is the most likely scenario. Strategies which depend on regime change for the broad multiplication of the Gospel may need to be rethought. A very long view with regard to North Korea seems in order.

| Key Judgments | Probability | Confidence |
|--|----------------|------------|
| Kim Jong-un opens the country to better his people | Very Unlikely | High |
| Seeking to replace Kim Jong-un, one of the Powerful initiate a coup | Very Unlikely | High |
| Seeking openness or afraid of external action, the Consumers and Military together initiate a coup | Very Unlikely | High |
| Seeking power from government, the Military initiates a coup | Very Unlikely | High |
| Tired of poverty, hunger and oppression, the populace revolts | Remote | High |
| Afraid of nukes or military action, China/Russia/USA invade, overturn *except in case of severe, imminent, massive military provocation | Very Unlikely* | High |
| DPRK decides to pursue reunification by invading the South | Unlikely | High |

Words of Estimative Probability

Remote Very Unlikely Unlikely Even Chance Probably/ Likely Very Likely Almost Certain

This analysis was prepared with the assistance of Concilium’s International Affairs Group (<http://www.conciliumonline.org/#!iag/c8k2>), which exists to help mission agencies, churches, and humanitarian organizations understand how global events affect their work.

See also

[8 days in North Korea](#)

Reuters: [North Korea overcomes poverty, sanction with cut-price nukes](#)

CFR: [Unified Korea & the future of the US-South Korea alliance](#)

HRW: [Kim Jong-Un deepens abusive rule](#)

Vice: [Meet the men and women who help rule North Korea from the shadows](#)

Vanity Fair: [Understanding Kim Jong Un](#)

Al Jazeera: [What we know about the North Korean leader](#)

BBC: [How does North Korea make its money?](#)

[North Korea Leadership Watch](#) (Michael Madden)

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