

North Korea Heading for the Abyss

For some Asian experts, Kim Jong-un's December 2013 purge of his uncle and *éminence grise*, Jang Song-taek, changed everything. Hopes that the young, Western-educated North Korean leader would initiate long-predicted reform were dashed, replaced by rising fears of instability in the nuclear-armed nation. For other analysts, the purge merely affirmed everything that had seemed so obvious since the coronation of Kim *petit-fils*, namely that he would maintain the policies of his predecessors, though in a more erratic and riskier manner. Regardless of who was right, what are the policy implications going forward?

There is now consensus among experts that the Korean Peninsula, always one of the world's most volatile locales, has become even more dangerous since the December 2011 ascension of Kim Jong-un. Moreover, this perilous situation is occurring amidst rising skepticism of the Obama administration's commitment to its "Asia pivot" strategy. Despite strong rhetoric, regional allies see declining resources devoted to fulfilling U.S. pledges for their security. South Korean and Japanese officials privately question U.S. resolve after President Obama failed to uphold his August 2012 redline pledge to strike Syria if the regime used chemical weapons against its populace and was unable to prevent Russian annexation of the Crimea. Even prior to sequestration-mandated defense reductions, U.S. military forces were already straining under \$480 billion cuts to the defense budget. The Pentagon reports that one in three U.S. Air Force

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planes worldwide are grounded and several naval ships in the Pacific remain in port due to budget cuts.¹

Diplomatic efforts to denuclearize North Korea have been stalled since 2008 when Pyongyang walked out of the Six-Party Talks negotiations. Even a minimalist bilateral U.S.–North Korean agreement in 2012 collapsed two weeks after its inception when Pyongyang announced it would launch another long-range rocket, in violation of the accord and UN resolutions. The Obama administration remains reluctant to impose the same level of sanctions on North Korea that it has already implemented on Burma, Iran, and Syria.² Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un continues to augment and refine his nuclear and missile arsenals, increasing the threat to the United States and its allies.

The Purge

Before his December 2011 death, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il appointed his brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek, as Kim Jong-un's guardian to ensure a smooth transition of power. Jang's place in the inner leadership circle provided him tremendous political power to beat back any potential usurpers to Kim Jong-un's anointed role as successor. As North Korea's principal interlocutor with China, Jang also wielded significant economic influence. Yet Jang's power was also seen as a potential challenge: despite being credited as the "second most powerful man in North Korea," in December 2013 Jang Song-taek was purged from the leadership elite for the fourth time. He had been removed in the late 1970s and assigned as the manager of the Chollima Iron Works, arrested in 1997, and placed under house arrest from 2003–06.³

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Jang's final ouster was highly unusual, even by North Korean standards. Photos of his arrest during a meeting of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Political Bureau—and a lengthy list of his crimes—were promulgated to the public in an unprecedented admission by the regime of a traitor within the inner circle of power. Jang's announced execution by firing squad was also rare; typically, when members of the senior leadership were

purged in the past, they simply stopped appearing in official media or were announced as retiring due to health problems.

Pyongyang accused Jang—the "despicable human scum who was worse than a dog"—of plotting a coup to "overthrow the state [and] grab the supreme power of our party and state."⁴ Perhaps this is true. But if Jang had wanted to grab the ring of power, he would have had more success immediately after Kim Jong-il's

death in December 2011, when Kim Jong-un was weakest. Even then, however, taking on nephew Jong-un would have proven to be a formidable challenge.

After his father's death, Kim Jong-un was immediately declared the sole ruler—he was not, for example, made merely a member of a ruling council or part of a troika with Jang Song-taek and Kim Kyong-hui (Kim Jong-il's sister), as some had speculated due to his youth and inexperience. Kim Jong-il had been involved in the government for decades by the time he assumed power. After Kim Jong-un acquired each of his father's six titles during the first half-year of his reign—conveying control over the government, military, and party⁵—it would have been increasingly difficult to oust him. Jang's execution shows that no one is safe.

Similarly, the “Gang of Seven,” those officials accompanying Kim Jong-un when he escorted his father's hearse in December 2011, were once seen as the new ruling cadre. Yet, five of the seven have since been removed.⁶ Kim removed the mentors and guardians, many within months of assuming power, designated by his father to protect him during the leadership transition. He has even purged officials that he previously promoted, replacing the minister of defense and chief of the general staff four times each during his two-year reign. In total, Kim has purged hundreds of North Korean officials since assuming power in 2011, replacing 97 of 218 (44 percent) senior-most party officials, government ministers, and military officers.⁷ He has also removed hundreds of lower ranking officials, executing some of them.

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Korea watchers are debating whether Jang's purge reflects a weak or strong North Korean leader. Some experts perceive an embattled Kim Jong-un desperately fending off real or imagined challengers. But it is more likely that the purge of Jang and others shows that Kim is firmly in control and confident enough to remove even the most senior officials.

Predictions and Reality

Both rosy predictions of North Korean reform and dire speculations of North Korean collapse have characterized the discourse on the country's future. After the death of leader Kim Il-sung in 1994, for example, many experts predicted that his successor, Kim Jong-il, was actually a bold reformer on the cusp of implementing massive economic reform. On the other side of the coin, North Korea's great famine of the 1990s generated numerous predictions of imminent collapse.

These contrasting expectations continue today. Shortly after Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, many analysts predicted Kim Jong-un's youth and inexperience would lead to his imminent fall. Instead, he has proven quite adept at wielding the scepter of power. Many analysts subsequently heralded Kim Jong-un's transition to power as a harbinger of reform and diplomatic outreach. Throughout 2012, the media and punditry were replete with articles foretelling imminent economic reform. He was perceived as heading in a new, creative direction "nudging the national compass away from a fixation on his father's 'military-first politics' toward a Deng [Xiaoping]-like pragmatic emphasis on economic development." Kim's "creative and enterprising spirit" and rumored economic policy showed "signs of increasing pragmatism, experimentalism and transparency—hallmarks of China's epic shift from Mao to Deng."⁸ Some proclaimed, "North Korea has virtually abandoned the planned economy,"⁹ while others reported that Kim was "determined to implement long-overdue reforms to save the economy and prevent the regime from imploding."¹⁰ Some also cited Kim's attendance at a pop music show featuring U.S. icons Mickey Mouse and Rocky Balboa as a signal that he would "reform North Korea, preparing its people for engagement with the rest of the world."¹¹ The BBC interpreted the show as "an easing of North Korea's paranoia about what it calls spiritual pollution from the West."¹²

Yet from the beginning of Kim Jong-un's reign, unmistakable signals suggested that North Korea would not deviate from existing policies. Kim's 2012 New Year's editorial—an annual government-issued authoritative document defining regime policy for the upcoming year—emphasized that the regime would "make no slightest vacillation and concession in implementing the instructions and policies [of Kim Jong-il]... We will allow no change." The missive declared that Kim Jong-il's military-first leadership, or *songun* policy, would "continue without interruption."¹³ Similarly, a year later, Kim Jong-un's 2013 New Year's Day speech dashed hopes for new market-based reforms. Instead, the speech employed Soviet-style exhortations of trying to build a "thriving socialist country" and fulfilling production quotas "fixed in the national economic plan" set by the party. Kim proclaimed that North Korea should maintain "socialist economic principles."¹⁴ Frustrated by foreign speculation of reform, Pyongyang denounced such suggestions as "the height of ignorance. To expect policy change and reform and opening from [North Korea] is nothing but a foolish and silly dream... There cannot be any slightest change in all policies."¹⁵

Continuing the dueling predictions about North Korea's future, Kim Jong-un's purge of Jang Song-taek triggered a new wave of articles predicting the country's instability and imminent collapse.¹⁶ Some experts argued that the execution would unleash the wrath of Jang's minions, fearful of their own potential fate and now willing to rebel against Kim. But it is more likely that the wolves will instead turn on each other for the scraps of power, rather than risk

going against the omnipotent ruler. Kim has taken to heart French King Louis XIV's adage, "*L'etat cest moi*," or "I am the state."

For a reality check, some investigation into Kim's personhood is useful here. Former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell stated that, based on interviews with Kim's classmates in Switzerland, Kim Jong-un was "dangerous, unpredictable, prone to violence, and with delusions of grandeur" as a teenager.¹⁷ Kenji Fujimoto, Kim Jong-il's former cook who spent many years with him, wrote that Kim Jong-un is "spoiled and a poor loser."¹⁸

We can see these traits in his rule. During his two years in power, Kim Jong-un has unleashed the security services to eliminate enemies within the government and escalated the subjugation of the populace. He increased public executions, expanded the gulags for political prisoners, and increased government punishment for people caught with information from the outside world in order to intimidate the populace. Kim also warned his citizens of "strict legal censure" resulting from any unapproved contact with foreigners, even something as simple as providing directions to tourists. The regime executed 80 people—and sent their families to prison camps—for simply watching foreign films.¹⁹

Of course, coups and assassinations are possible, just as they were during every day of Kim Jong-il's long reign. Nevertheless, regime change in the foreseeable future is unlikely due to the pervasiveness of North Korean security services, the lack of a viable opposition party or movement, and the state's absolute control over information sources. Moreover, China and South Korea—fearful of the consequences of a collapsing regime—have often increased aid and developmental assistance when economic collapse appeared imminent.²⁰

Guns and Butter

Hopes for Kim Jong-un to deviate from the policies of his predecessors are misguided. Over the years, Pyongyang has repeatedly demonstrated far greater policy continuity than change. Indeed, the clearest signal of North Korea's continued trajectory comes from official government pronouncements: in 2012, Pyongyang declared that "Kim Jong-un is identical to general secretary Kim Jong-il in ideology, leadership, personality, and courage."²¹ Kim Jong-un peppered 2014's New Year's Day speech with incitements to maintain his predecessors' policies of *juche* (self-reliance) and *songun* (military first)...all while defending socialism, ensuring the absolute loyalty and purity of the Party ranks, and vigorously eliminating any alien ideology from abroad.²²

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Kim Jong-un introduced a new policy line, called *byungjin*, during the April 2013 plenary session of the Party Central Committee. *Byungjin* means “progress in tandem” and refers to the simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and improving the economy. But this policy is actually not new; it is merely a fresh take on a similar *byungjin* line that Kim Il-sung introduced at the December 1962 Central Committee meeting, when he pushed for the simultaneous development of the economy and national defense. In practice, however, Kim Il-sung’s *byungjin* policy heavily leaned toward defense at the expense of economic development, and as a result the country did not meet its development goals. Kim Jong-un’s *byungjin* policy, superficially, appears to give more weight to economics by declaring that North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons reduces its reliance on conventional weapons, thus freeing up resources to broaden economic prosperity.²³ However, Pyongyang continues to devote the same level of resources to its conventional military and has augmented its missile development and training efforts.

Indeed, a simultaneous North Korean pursuit of guns and butter, and highlighting its intent to improve the civilian economy in its policy speeches, is nothing new; the difference over the years has merely been one of emphasis or nuance. Of course, how the regime decides to help its people leaves much to be desired. The April 2013 plenum of the Central Committee and Supreme People’s Assembly reported that 44.8 percent of the national budget for the economic development and *improvement of people’s living standard* (emphasis added) was devoted to building monuments for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung.²⁴

Moreover, the purge and execution of Jang Song-taek will have a chilling effect on any advocacy for economic reform within North Korea. Jang was executed in part because of his economic crimes, including implementing economic reforms “to drive the economy of the country and people’s living into an uncontrollable catastrophe” that would enable Jang to conduct a coup against Kim Jong-un.²⁵ Whether Jang or any other official actually proposed significant economic reform—and there is considerable doubt that they did—such reforms are now equated with anti-party, counterrevolutionary threats punishable by death.

Real economic reform requires a willingness to incorporate foreign capitalist precepts into North Korea’s socialist system. But doing so would entail opening North Korea to the outside world. Kim Jong-un instead affirmed the continued isolation of the Hermit Kingdom. He directed the nation’s security services and prosecutors to “expose and foil moves of enemies, internal and external, for undermining the socialist system [and to] mercilessly crush them.”²⁶

In foreign policy as well, Kim Jong-un has not moderated Pyongyang’s belligerent behavior. Instead, he raised tensions to dangerously high levels in

early 2013 with strategic and tactical threats against the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Pyongyang revoked the armistice ending the Korean War and declared a state of war existed between the Koreas, threatened annihilation of South Korean Marine Corps units in the Yellow Sea, threatened merciless, all-out nuclear war with the United States and South Korea, threatened to turn Seoul and Washington into “seas of fire” with nuclear weapons, warned Tokyo it would target U.S. bases in Japan, and put its military on the highest state of alert.

Pyongyang also made clear that it has no intention to comply with UN Security Council resolutions or fulfill its Six-Party Talks pledges to abandon its nuclear weapons. For instance, in 2012 it revised its constitution to declare itself a “nuclear-armed state.”²⁷ It also made a series of provocative statements regarding nuclear weapons, including, “The DPRK’s possession of nuclear weapons shall be fixed by law”; “Only fools will entertain the delusion that we will trade our nuclear deterrent for petty economic aid”; and, “It has become an absolutely impossible option for the DPRK to even think about giving up its nuclear weapons.”²⁸ These statements all illustrate the continuing belligerence of Kim Jong-un and North Korea. Unfortunately, the way this plays out in international circles suggests something beyond continued belligerence—Kim’s foreign policy is actually more unpredictable and extreme, and thus more dangerous.

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Less Adept at Foreign Policy

Staying in power is not the same as leading the country. Kim may be the undisputed captain of the North Korean ship, but that ship may be the *Titanic*. Kim Jong-un has maintained Kim Jong-il’s foreign policy, but appears to be implementing it in a more volatile, reckless, and unpredictable manner. When compared with his father, Kim Jong-un seems amateurish and lacking his father’s calculating, incremental approach toward achieving objectives. Indeed, it appears Jong-un may not have a game plan at all.

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Under Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang combined threats and assurances in a comprehensive strategy. “The Dear Leader” raised brinkmanship to an art form in order to gain multiple policy goals, including defining the parameters of issues to be included in negotiations; slowing down the negotiating process until

opponents were more willing to meet North Korean terms; using “bait and switch,” or the creation of a parallel crisis to divert attention from a negotiating impasse brought on by North Korean intransigence; countering foreign perceptions of North Korean weakness—the “barking of a wounded dog,” according to a Korean adage; and raising the price of an eventual deal. Other characteristics of Kim’s strategy included two-track diplomacy, or the use of a combination of threats and assurances to garner diplomatic and economic benefits by raising the specter of a deteriorating security situation. For example, North Korea combined its October 2006 nuclear test announcement with a concurrent commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and no first-use of nuclear weapons pledge.

Despite its belligerent rhetoric and actions, North Korea under Kim Jong-il always calibrated its position to avoid crossing the Rubicon. Occasionally, he even made a tactical retreat in order to protect strategic gains. The regime’s February 2005 declaration of itself as a nuclear weapons state and its October 2006 nuclear test undermined key supporters in Beijing and Seoul, so Kim lowered tensions and offered new calls for negotiations to counter an international consensus for new sanctions on Pyongyang. He also engaged in high-risk behavior while remaining risk-averse. Kim Jong-il played his cards deftly, incrementally moving up the escalatory ladder to retain the initiative and control the pace of the game, forcing the United States and others to respond. He used years of negotiating foot-dragging and delays to augment North Korea’s stockpile of nuclear weapons. By maintaining strategic ambiguity, Kim was able to inch across international red lines and avoid significant sanctions.

By contrast, Kim Jong-un’s foreign policy is disjointed, apparently bereft of a grand strategy. His one international achievement was the February 2012 Leap Day Agreement with the United States, which collapsed within two weeks. In this agreement, North Korean and U.S. negotiators achieved an interim deal that could have laid the groundwork for more extensive follow-on talks; instead, Pyongyang announced two weeks later that it would launch a long-range missile—a clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions—thus dooming the bilateral accord. The diplomatic fiasco undermined any chance of drawing the Obama administration into serious discussions for some time. It is unknown whether Kim Jong-un thought he could simultaneously maintain two irreconcilable objectives—a missile launch and diplomatic agreement promising a launch moratorium—or whether he seriously underestimated the inevitable international response. In any case, it was a foreign policy debacle for young Kim.

Yet, some experts persist in predicting that Kim Jong-un, like his father before him, will lower tension and seek improved relations with the United States and South Korea. Kim Jong-un’s 2014 New Year’s Day speech provided

the latest opportunity to grasp at such straws. A U.S. analyst perceived the speech as signaling that “Pyongyang continues to hold open the door to engaging [South Korean President] Park [with] more concrete North Korean proposals forthcoming.”²⁹ Kim’s calls to end inter-Korea slander were perceived as “relatively positive remarks [that] “indicate [Pyongyang] was prepared to deal with the ROK authorities.”³⁰

But context is critical in interpreting North Korean rhetoric. In 2009, under Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang’s New Year remarks were far less critical of the United States, generating expectations of a breakthrough with the incoming Obama administration. Instead, Pyongyang unleashed a series of provocations, including missile and nuclear tests, abandoning the Korean War armistice, and threatening war against Washington and its allies. Similarly, more muted criticism of South Korea in the 2010 New Year’s message was interpreted as portending a thaw in inter-Korean relations. Instead, Pyongyang twice attacked South Korea, killing 50 by sinking a naval vessel in South Korean waters and shelling a civilian island.

In 2013, Kim Jong-un’s calls to “end the division of the country” and “remove confrontation between the north and the south” were also held aloft as evidence of a less belligerent policy. Instead, within three months, Pyongyang revoked “all agreements on nonaggression reached between the North and the South,” declared inter-Korean relations had “entered the state of war,” put its artillery and rocket forces on “highest alert against enemy targets in South Korea,” and threatened to reduce South Korea’s presidential residence to “ashes.”³¹

Raising hope for a less belligerent foreign policy from Kim Jong-un is a futile endeavour. His father used established tactics to slowly build toward an escalatory act, thereby allowing the United States and its allies sufficient time to offer new diplomatic or economic inducements. On those occasions when North Korea carried out the act, it followed with several months of calm to allow all countries to become accustomed to the new, elevated status quo prior to initiating the next lengthy provocation process. Kim Jong-un has no such process. His era of foreign policy is fraught with provocations and high tension—his rapid-fire actions do not allow time for his opponents to respond diplomatically, exacerbating concerns over North Korean intentions. Thus, the danger of North Korean miscalculation has increased under the new leader.

He is also far more isolated internationally than his father. He has not travelled to China or Russia, nor met with any foreign leader. He refused to meet with visiting Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj and Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt in March and January 2013, respectively. (But, in a bizarre reflection of his father’s priorities, he has met with former basketball player Dennis Rodman several times.)

Having consolidated his power at home, Kim may misinterpret unbridled domestic adulation as infallibility in striking out against South Korea. After the purge of Jang Song-taek and most of the senior leadership, no one is going to risk questioning Kim's policies. He could be emboldened by North Korea's recent nuclear and missile test successes and the knowledge that Seoul and Washington have never struck back in any significant way after previous deadly attacks, dating back to the 1968 attack on the South Korean presidential residence and the seizure of the unarmed U.S. naval ship *Pueblo*.

The response next time, however, might actually be different. South Korean President Park Geun-hye has unequivocally vowed to respond forcefully to the next North Korean attack. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that it would respond exponentially to a North Korean attack by "forcefully and decisively striking not only the point of origin of provocation and its supporting forces but also its command leadership."³² Even prior to Park's inauguration, South Korea had, in response to the November 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, loosened the rules of engagement, delegated the decision to retaliate to a lower command echelon, and augmented forces in the region—all of which make a South Korean military response more certain next time.³³

After raising tensions on the Korean Peninsula to dangerously high levels in early 2013, Kim is now engaged in a charm offensive of sorts by refraining from his more egregious military threats and calling for a resumption of inter-Korean dialogue. But his charm offensive is far less charming than his father's. There are no proffered reassurances or serious outreach to North Korea's neighbors that might generate economic benefits for Pyongyang. Instead, Kim's execution of Jang Song-taek—often seen as China's man in Pyongyang—may have further alienated North Korea's main sugar daddy.

Raising the Temperature

Kim Jong-un's antics have poisoned the well for North Korea to receive the resources and benefits necessary to improve the national economy. The regime's resistance to economic reforms condemns its industrial and agricultural sectors to abysmal performance.

Despite North Korea's continuing food crisis, non-government organizations tend to look elsewhere when responding to humanitarian crises. Donor fatigue has set in after decades of North Korean refusal to change the socialist agricultural system that creates annual famine conditions. Kim Jong-il was able to secure "ample humanitarian aid from the outside...but in Kim Jong-un's case there has been markedly less external aid. Resources are essential to maintain the Kim Jong-un system, but there have been few opportunities to secure those resources."³⁴

North Korea's attempts at enclave capitalism—isolated, walled-off complexes with foreign companies—have been an utter failure. The regime refused to allow sufficient deregulation or follow basic international business standards, which might have allowed these limited pockets of capitalism to generate sufficient profits to keep the country's socialist economy afloat. Pyongyang's repeated use of the inter-Korean industrial complex at Kaesong as a political football will continue to drive away serious South Korean or foreign investors. To garner additional concessions from the South Korean government and companies, the regime unilaterally rewrote existing contracts, demanded retroactive payments of new tax laws, and threatened closure of the joint business venture. In 2013, North Korea announced it would open thirteen more enclaves, but they will prove as disastrous as their predecessors.

U.S. and international sanctions against North Korea have significantly reduced the willingness of foreign banks and companies to engage with Pyongyang. South Korea is not willing to provide massive unconditional economic benefits as it did during the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Nor is the Obama administration inclined to engage North Korea since the utter failure of its earlier attempts at outreach.

Kim's risky foreign policy actions and execution of Jang Song-taek have further strained North Korean relations with China. Kim has not courted China, his chief benefactor, as his father did. Whether Chinese angst is great enough to lead Beijing to curtail its economic engagement or cease acting as North Korea's lawyer in the UN remains to be seen. In the past, Pyongyang's rejections of Chinese entreaties to implement economic reform and refrain from provocations did not deter Beijing from maintaining a relationship with its irksome ally.

Other than imploring the populace to tighten their belts and achieve unrealistic economic miracles, Kim Jong-un has no economic remedies open to him. As a result of its self-imposed isolation, North Korea's options are dwindling. An inability to achieve its diplomatic objectives will eventually force it to perpetuate more high-risk confrontational measures.

These measures could come in a variety of ways. The range of potential escalatory actions include: additional nuclear and missile tests; resumed construction of two larger nuclear reactors to provide additional weapons-grade plutonium; unveiling additional facilities to produce uranium-based nuclear weapons; provocative actions along the DMZ or maritime demarcation line; shadowing or intercepting U.S. reconnaissance aircraft; initiating division- or corps-level military exercises outside of normal training cycles; and announcing wartime preparations by the military and populace.

While the fuse is burning toward another Korean conflagration, Pyongyang continues to refine its nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. South

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Korean defense officials commented that North Korea can build a nuclear weapon using uranium, has achieved the ability to load nuclear warheads onto

ballistic missiles, and that the long-range missile tested in December 2012 could have reached the continental United States.³⁵

The United States and its allies should have no illusions about Kim Jong-un. He is just as dangerous as his father, and less predictable. The North Korean threat, always high, has gotten worse under the young leader. Kim Jong-un continues to defy the world by refusing to abandon his nuclear

arsenal and long-range missile program as required under UN Security Council resolutions.

North Korea is now a runaway train careening down the tracks with a volatile, unpredictable engineer pushing firmly forward on the throttle. What awaits the world around the corner is unknown. The North Korean train could conceivably slow down (due to unforeseen factors) or it could derail, causing enormous damage to itself and its surroundings. We can debate how best to address the situation—but we should not misunderstand the seriousness of just how dangerous the situation could become.

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