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The United States and South Korea: Who Does What if the North Fails?

After several years of uncertainty about Kim Jong-un and his grip on power, analysis of North Korea has settled back into well-worn patterns. In Washington, Seoul, and elsewhere, mainstream commentary seems to have shelved concerns about the North's stability, returning instead to questions that represent hearty perennials for Pyongyang watchers: Is Kim prepared to open the North's moribund economy to Chinese-style reform, or is the latest dynastic offspring simply intent on the survival of his draconian family regime? Do the North's rhetoric and intermittent provocations threaten conflict, or are they simply more of the same theatrics out of an isolated elite? Notwithstanding its long history of broken pledges, is a nuclear deal possible—or are the North's weapons permanently in its arsenal? Add to all this the focus on North Korea's recent offer to Tokyo to investigate the fate of scores of Japanese citizens kidnapped by its agents since the 1960s, as well as the warming relations with Moscow as President Putin reaches out to burnish Russia's Asian role, and attention to Pyongyang's new normalcy appears to have supplanted anxiety about the regime's potential to fall.

For U.S. as well as Asian policymakers, the reversion of Korea analysis to its default settings should give pause. The uncertainties surrounding Kim Jong-un's leadership need sustained attention, as does their potential impact on the peninsula. For one thing, the Obama administration's pivot to Asia makes clear

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the more prominent posture intended for U.S. forces there, including in Korea, where U.S. military capabilities still represent the tip of the deterrent spear. The responsibilities that will fall on U.S. shoulders if the North collapses will add immeasurably to that position. Indeed, after a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have consumed thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, the need for Americans to understand their role, including its risks and potential costs, has never been greater.

For more than a half-century, the U.S. alliance with South Korea has carried a broad commitment. As things now stand, contingency plans to deal with the aftermath of a failed North Korea—including the vast humanitarian, economic, and security needs that would arise—make U.S. leadership and resources the backbone of the allied response. As our experience and the price for Iraq and Afghanistan make clear, that bill will be daunting, as will the challenge of stabilizing the North. Notwithstanding the complexities of the task, in 2014 the fundamental underlying question for U.S. policymakers as well as taxpayers is straightforward: is this Washington's job? Despite the U.S. military commitment to come to Seoul's aid if the North attacks, if Pyongyang collapses, should the United States lead and pick up the tab? The importance of this question demands public debate.

If the answer is yes, building a consensus at home and a coalition abroad willing to play its part must not wait for the current North Korean regime's demise. Nor should Seoul and Washington wait to examine the potential of a far greater South Korean role. South Korea's economic, technological, and political achievements—including its democratic transition from postwar authoritarianism—rank it among the leading success stories of the 20th century. Its relationships in Asia, including a growing tie with China, position Seoul to lead the international effort on the peninsula if the North fails. The time is right to examine this publicly, and if needed to debate whether the United States should remain the centerpiece (in terms of resources as well as role) in dealing with North Korea's potential collapse.

What If…

For U.S. and South Korean policymakers and commanders, thinking through "what if" scenarios has been a preoccupation since the 1990s, including how to secure the North's nuclear as well as military facilities and handle the humanitarian crisis certain to result if the regime fails. Since Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, stories in South Korean newspapers and a variety of U.S. journals have intermittently described the effort to clarify these scenarios, more recently reporting on joint war planning addressing contingencies to deal with the North's collapse.[1] While the planning itself remains highly classified, publicly

available analysis by think tank specialists, academic studies, and journalistic assessments have examined various options. Given the uncertainties in Pyongyang, it's a safe bet that military planners are focused on the same possibilities—a coup, civil war, or local uprisings, among others—as leading concerns. Any one of them could upset the peninsula's uneasy balance, as well as spawn other crises ranging from massive refugee flow to the use of the North's nuclear arsenal.

The analysis also suggests that the national security communities in Seoul and Washington assume that the United States will lead in dealing with North Korea's collapse. A recent assessment by David Gompert, the Deputy Director of National Intelligence in the first Obama administration, made that point explicitly, laying out what U.S. leaders and especially the Pentagon should plan for and why. While the author allowed that the Kim regime could persist for years or even collapse without major turmoil, he put it this way:

> The stakes for the United States include the security of South Korea and of U.S. forces there; the control of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; Japan's security; U.S. standing in East Asia; the intervention of China in Korea; the future of Sino-U.S. relations and prospects for a unified and democratic Korea. In the event of collapse, U.S. interests and obligations would require action by the United States—quite possibly, major use of its armed forces.[2]

An extensive 2013 Rand Corporation study also examined in detail the problems that the North's fall could pose. It similarly assumed the imperative need for a major U.S. military deployment, complementing South Korea's effort to deal with the aftermath. Quoting a 2006 South Korean Ministry of Defense White Paper, the study stated that defense planners in Seoul expect U.S. forces in Korea could grow by as much as 700,000 troops in the event of a conflict producing the regime's demise.[3] This year, a new RAND study for the U.S. Army called for as many as 270,000 U.S. troops to secure North Korea's nuclear weapons program alone.[4] With a mutual defense treaty backed by 30,000 U.S. forces in South Korea, logic would argue that the U.S. commitment ought to cover the full spectrum of risks facing its ally, including the dangers inherent in North Korea falling apart. But that interpretation of the sixty-year-old defense pact begs a number of increasingly critical questions that have become more prominent as North Korea's failing economy, isolation, and internal political tensions point to a regime that could one day simply unravel.

To be sure, defending South Korea against conventional attack remains job one for its U.S. ally. And a North Korea that struck out against the South clearly would provide the *casus belli* for a U.S. and South Korean response, even if the regime was in its death throes. But if the Kim dynasty disappears without that threat materializing—in other words, if Pyongyang simply collapses—what

role should U.S. forces play? Is it Washington's task to manage the aftermath? If there are compelling reasons to take the lead, in light of the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, do we understand the resources we will need—likely to include hundreds of billions of dollars and extensive manpower—to deal with the North's internal problems? In domestic political terms, are Americans willing to bear the costs if the plan assumes the United States will take command in the event of North Korea's demise?

Then and Now

The mutual defense treaty with South Korea provides one unambiguous answer. In 1954, when the Senate amended and then ratified the pact that the Eisenhower administration negotiated the year before, the treaty declared the parties will "come to the aid of the other" but only in event "of an external attack."[5] In other words, nothing in the language obligates the United States to put its forces in harm's way or use its resources to deal with disarray in the North, a collapse of the regime, or other internal dysfunctions. A U.S. commitment to lead the response to a North Korea that falls into chaos, sends thousands of refugees fleeing south, or slips into civil war is not covered. Reports over the years from Seoul and Washington suggest, however, that U.S. and South Korean commanders are basing their plans on just that.

In 2010, General Walter Sharp, then the commander of U.S. Forces Korea, said as much in explaining that Washington had put in place preparations to deal with instability in the North.[6] While he did not go into classified details, others since then appear to have shed some light on what Sharp may have meant. In 2012, for example, *Chosun Ilbo*, a leading conservative paper in Seoul, reported on joint U.S.–South Korean military exercises that simulated the deployment of 100,000 South Korean troops in the North to cope with a collapsing regime.[7] This year, *Special Warfare*, an Army journal, discussed a U.S. and South Korean training exercise in 2013 involving the clandestine insertion of special operations forces.[8] Covert warfare, of course, would be part of any response to a North Korean attack. But given events in Pyongyang, the stories point to post-collapse scenarios in the North where conventional U.S. forces as well as special operators would play a major on-the-ground role.

To be sure, internal turmoil in North Korea or a toppling regime that became the catalyst for conflict should be high in the minds of military planners. The North's military posture is the most obvious reason why: Pyongyang's offensive deployment of ground forces just above the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), as well as its periodic provocations, provide ample grounds for concern. With hundreds of thousands of forces, massed artillery, and surface-to-surface missiles only a few dozen miles from Seoul, the time for warning and the margin for error are slim,

conditions that more than justify worry about instability triggering an attack by mistake or design.

But what if the Pyongyang regime falls apart and that attack doesn't happen? What if Kim Jong-un disappears, leaving a country that resembles, say, post-Gaddafi Libya—political disarray, disorganized violence, a government collapse, unsecured weapons, a humanitarian crisis—or even worse, the war in Syria or Iraq today, but the mayhem remains confined inside the North's borders? If the Kim family dynasty topples but its fall doesn't start Korean War II, is it a given that U.S. forces must go north?

South Korea's 21st-Century Leadership Role

In 2014, the answer arguably is "no." The reason why lies south, not north of the 38th Parallel. When it comes to a North Korean collapse without a military clash, in 2014 the buck should stop in Seoul's Blue House—not Washington's White House. With a $1.1 trillion GDP; world-class technology and infrastructure; a dynamic, democratic, well-educated society; and armed forces 500,000-strong, there's no reason it shouldn't carry the main responsibility of such circumstances.

> If North Korea collapses without a military clash, the buck should stop in Seoul's Blue House.

Despite the potential dangers on a divided peninsula, South Koreans have built an economy and democracy at least as capable of providing the foundation for one Korea as the West German resources that underpinned that historic East–West union a quarter century ago. Along with its national and fraternal responsibilities, South Korea's capabilities should position it to lead in planning, manning, and paying for what happens after a North Korean collapse. So, too, should the recognition among Seoul's political leaders that the problem will not go away. The North's economic decline, humanitarian disasters, and dynastic dictatorship have done nothing to ameliorate the risks of systemic failure, much less offer hope of a leadership willing to reform.

South Korea's long-standing difficulty in coming to grips with the reunification issue argues for clarifying its leadership responsibilities sooner rather than later. Since the 1980s, a series of administrations in Seoul have made only limited investments in the resources needed to prepare the South to manage a failed North Korea. Their decisions have reflected both a reluctance to deal with the high costs of reunification and uncertain public support for major expenditures to ready for the event. That South Korean leaders have finessed their responsibilities should be a concern sixty years after the end of the

Korean War, but by no means one that should impede Washington and its ally from facing the issue today: how can South Korea take the initiative and extend the allies' well-developed joint military planning across a much broader front—from civil affairs, public health, education, and internal security to the multitude of other governance tasks that will face a successor administration in the North?

It will not be an easy political task. For Seoul, any public discussion of the North's collapse and what happens next is problematic. In diplomatic terms, the North has consistently backhanded even modest proposals to broaden intra-Korean relations, and as it has in the past, public attention to Seoul's leadership in managing the aftermath of Pyongyang's collapse is certain to bring a virulent North Korean response. But Seoul also has a history of kicking that can down the road. As a case in point, in August 2014 following a meeting of U.S. and South Korean defense officials, newspapers in Seoul reported agreement to delay transfer of military authority to the South until the "early 2020s."[9]

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For President Park Guen-hye, who has laid out a roadmap to expand economic, investment, and humanitarian ties with the North, creating the plans and resources to lead the response to North Korea's collapse is politically tricky at home. South Koreans are conflicted about reunification. It is far less compelling for the people of the younger generation than for their parents and grandparents. And popular apprehensions about its costs—including the social and political uncertainties surrounding the integration of the North's 25 million people—have also grown, leading Park, like her predecessors, to talk about gradual steps, rather than grand plans.[10]

Unfortunately, deferring the discussion will not make the task easier. Seoul's reluctance to define its role is already having an impact on resources that will be needed after the Kim regime's demise. For example, South Korea's plans to downsize its armed forces to 12 divisions by 2022 ignore the military's critical role—from public security to logistics—in every post-collapse scenario. If it occurs, North Korean resistance (from the military or the intelligence services) or other security problems spawned by post-collapse chaos, such as organized crime, will only add to that burden. How South Korean leaders handle consensus-building at home about reunification must be their call. But such "issues management" shouldn't act as the excuse to avoid defining Seoul's responsibilities and the capabilities needed to support them.

U.S. Political Realities

For the United States, establishing Seoul's leadership is important for another reason. In an era of growing constraints on defense spending, the U.S. role in a post-collapse North Korea presents a major budget issue as well as a potentially open-ended burden. Estimating the price tag is not beyond calculation: the cost of post-invasion governance and nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan is the place to start. The tally for Iraq alone indicates that, to date, the United States has spent some $2 trillion and counting. A 2013 Harvard study estimated that the total for Iraq and Afghanistan together, including veterans' care and the post-war cost of rebuilding U.S. military forces and equipment, could hit $4-6 trillion before we're through.[11]

Establishing Seoul's leadership is important for the United States.

All analyses suggest the Kim dynasty's demise would require even deeper pockets from day one. The initial price of stabilizing and securing the North, including meeting the needs of its long-deprived population, would be massive. With 1950s infrastructure, stunted technology, dated industry, an antique power grid, a public health crisis, and an agricultural and environmental mess, the North's longer-term requirements will also prove gargantuan. At the high end, some calculations point to costs for rebuilding and integrating the North that could run as much as $5 trillion over 30 years.[12] Obviously estimates vary, but even the most modest ones are impressive and, notwithstanding South Korea's resources, understandably concern leaders in Seoul. Given the assumptions about the U.S. share of the burden, they should similarly capture attention in Washington.

For Americans, after a decade of wars that have testified to both the costs of and limits on U.S. power, it is also high time to talk candidly and specifically about the role the United States expects to play in Korea. Such discussion does not necessarily need to mean that Washington is signaling second thoughts about its responsibilities on the peninsula or the importance of Asia's security. Indeed, bringing key allies to the table to look realistically at their contributions can serve other longstanding U.S. goals. Since the 1970s, a series of U.S. administrations have tried to forge our alliances with Seoul and Tokyo into a pragmatic, politically well-grounded trilateral entente. That task has not been easy given Japan's colonial legacy on the peninsula, as well as its neuralgic issues that still fester today. Since their normalization of relations in the mid-1960s, Seoul and Tokyo have only slowly built their relationship as security and economic partners. Still, for Washington, the current fractiousness between the two allies is the latest example of why the whole remains less than the sum of its

parts. For President Obama and his successor, the possibility of a North Korean collapse and its aftermath should only underscore the importance of pushing its allies harder.

For one thing, a Japan that develops a more durable, less politically fraught relationship with South Korea can play a significant supporting role if the North falls apart. Given the domestic political agendas in both Seoul and Tokyo, which have often fueled their antagonisms, Korean and Japanese cooperation on the ground in Korea in the wake of the North's fall would be unlikely. But Tokyo's ability to help underwrite costs, provide humanitarian and technical support, and serve as a source of long-term development assistance offers opportunities for Japan to contribute in ways that can sidestep a politically sensitive presence, as well as forge bilateral links over the longer term between two critical U.S. allies. President Xi Jinping's June 2014 visit to Seoul, when he took pains to fuel rather than dampen Korean animosities toward Japan, should only raise the priority assigned in Washington to mending the fabric of Seoul–Tokyo ties.[13]

The China Conundrum

Among the international audiences important to the United States—and important to what happens next on the peninsula—China occupies the front row. As Pyongyang's only ally and its primary source of external support, Beijing needs to know what Washington and Seoul intend to do if the North falls. Reports earlier this year that Chinese military planners are examining how to cope with that very scenario make clear that worries about the Kim dynasty are not confined to Washington and Seoul. A recent story in the Japanese press about leaked Chinese plans for a North Korean collapse raises more questions than it answers, including whether the documents are authentic or an artful provocation.[14] That said, Beijing's reported "to do" list if Kim falls—from corralling the North Korean army to quelling civil unrest—appears highly plausible, as does the likelihood of high-level Chinese concern.

Bringing China in to officially discuss how to divide responsibilities if the North collapses will be far from easy. U.S. and Chinese interests in the stability of the peninsula may run parallel, but by no means do they coincide. Beijing has long given priority to propping up the North, rather than pushing for change, preferring the buffer created by the divided peninsula even at the price of sustaining an unpredictable, nuclear-armed regime. As in the past, China continues to treat its North Korean relationship carefully, diluting external political pressures on Pyongyang and refusing to use its substantial economic leverage, whatever the North's transgressions. Notwithstanding President Xi's visit to Seoul rather than Pyongyang as his first to the peninsula, there are no

signs the Chinese intend to shift away from underwriting North Korea anytime soon. In addition to a record 10.4 percent jump in two-way trade in 2013—to more than $6 billion—over the preceding year, major Chinese investments along the shared border—in economic development zones, rail links, highways, and power grids—make clear that Beijing expects economic ties to bind for the long run.[15]

In strategic terms, China's military leaders also have evinced no interest in talking officially with U.S. or South Korean counterparts about risks to the status quo. One high-ranking PLA officer reportedly described such conversations as "an unnecessary provocation" that would make the situation "more complex."[16] As the military and security establishment evidently sees it, the North's collapse not only would produce turmoil—from refugees to economic disruption—but also new vulnerabilities. With Washington's Asia "pivot" advertising more U.S. military attention to the region and leaders in Tokyo touting a greater Japanese military role, the prospect of a united peninsula that brought a U.S. ally to its border hardly represents good news for the Chinese military.

Even with the dim prospects for dialogue, however, there are practical reasons to push China to discuss what happens if the North falls. For one thing, Beijing needs to understand how Washington and Seoul intend to exercise their roles. Against the backdrop of the history of conflicting objectives on the peninsula, post-collapse tensions with China are certain to grow. Refugee and security problems along the shared border, clashes between North Korean factions or simply civil collapse, and China's own concerns about the North's military assets all could bring Chinese intervention. Indeed, as a recent news report on military planning in Beijing suggests, Chinese forces may well intend to have boots on the ground following the Kim dynasty's fall.[17] With U.S. and South Korean forces operating on the same territory, misperceptions or mistakes which could risk unwanted clashes are by no means unlikely.

Misperceptions which could risk unwanted clashes with China are by no means unlikely.

Chinese forces also could have a crucial role in stabilizing the peninsula after the demise of the Kim regime. Their relations with the North Korean military are an example. Like the Soviet Union's military forces and chain of command as the USSR fell apart, the North Korean Army may well hold together despite the civilian regime's collapse. Under the circumstances, China's historic ties to the military leadership could offer a unique means of communicating to avoid conflict; or if turmoil brings civil war, then to curb its violence. Similarly, Beijing almost certainly sees the importance of securing other parts of the

North's military arsenal, such as chemical and biological weapons in addition to nuclear elements; here, too, Chinese connections could prove invaluable in curbing the chance of these weapons' proliferation or even local use.

In any case, with the new warming in relations between Seoul, Beijing, and Washington, to open a dialogue on North Korean contingencies offers multiple possibilities for give-and-take. Chinese think tank and foreign affairs experts also are discussing possible instability in Pyongyang more openly, presenting the opportunity to push for a wider conversation. A dialogue that laid out the division of labor between Seoul and Washington, at a minimum, would communicate allied intentions more clearly; it also could provide the basis for talks to avoid conflict if and when intervention occurred. And when it comes to the panoply of risks created by unconventional weapons, China's military-to-military connections could prove to be a major asset in winding down the most dangerous legacies of the Kim regime—if, of course, preliminary discussions allow.

China's military-to-military connections with North Korea could prove to be a major asset.

The Nuclear Issue: Why Seoul's Leadership Matters

Clarifying responsibilities—what Beijing, Seoul, and Washington should do—also will enable U.S. planners to focus sharply on Pyongyang's nuclear threat. This is unquestionably the top U.S. priority in any post-collapse scenario. What happens to North Korea's nuclear program is an issue whose importance extends well beyond the peninsula. Whether Pyongyang collapses with a bang or a whimper, its nuclear weapons will prove both an immediate danger and a broader proliferation threat. Analysis by both proliferation and Korea experts makes clear that U.S. and South Korean officials are concerned about the migration of bombs and materials out of the country.[18] Given the decades-long attention to the North's program, planners undoubtedly have identified a far fuller range of risks: locating and securing the North's weapons and materials, gaining control of launch systems, and rounding up the program's management, among others, are all presumably high on their list.

Even with the best intelligence—and North Korea remains among the hardest intelligence targets—these tasks are daunting. The difficulties of operating on the North's terrain amidst a presumably hostile population and of ferreting out clandestine sites offer only a few challenges cited last year by Army war gamers who sought to secure loose nukes in a notional country remarkably like North Korea following its collapse. In the game, commanders discovered that it took two months and 100,000 U.S. troops to find and control

the nuclear arsenal. The lessons learned not only underscore the challenges of thinking through the uncertainties of a North Korean collapse, but also the importance of a sharply focused U.S. role.[19]

Clarifying Seoul's responsibilities and enlisting others' contributions will help U.S. planners concentrate on what matters most—ensuring that the North's nuclear weapons and materials are not used, moved, or exported. But experience in Korea and elsewhere also points to other risks and possibilities that deserve attention. First, we must imagine the unimaginable. Recent events in the Middle East send the clear message that contingency planning must stretch the mind, including preparing for developments which could well look quite different from the "worst case." For instance, if the Kim dynasty collapses like some Arab Spring countries, its nuclear assets may simply be abandoned. If so, Washington and Seoul should be ready not only to secure them, but also consider drawing in international resources by engaging other allies as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the disposal and cleanup.

Second, we must prepare for the possibility that developments could work to our advantage. Soviet military commanders safeguarded their nuclear arsenal as their country disintegrated in the early 1990s. Whether the North Korean chain of command would do the same remains to be seen, but the Soviet case suggests we should try to find out. Given Kim Jong-un's purge of his uncle and other top-level officials, including his shake-ups in the military's chain of command, there is no more critical question than whose finger is on the nuclear trigger and what that person might do if the regime starts to fall.

We must also prepare for muddy outcomes. When Syria faced U.S. airstrikes in 2013, Moscow and Washington negotiated with Damascus to win the surrender of its chemical weapons at a moment when the Assad regime was vulnerable. The episode, including the Syrians' subsequent uncertain compliance, raises several questions: Would North Korea's nuclear custodians or others in the regime bargain over their arsenal, perhaps even before the regime fell? Could the people that mattered be reached at the eleventh hour, or influenced if they made a deal but then backslid or failed to comply?

The worst-case scenario—the possibility that a dying regime would use its weapons against its adversaries or threaten to do so—would require both a finely-tuned warning and a rapid military response. It also would call for an understanding between Washington and Seoul whether U.S. nuclear weapons would come into play. If North Korea's nuclear storage were heavily bunkered, would nuclear use by the United States be in or out of the question?

This necessitates preparing a nuclear quarantine contingency. Keeping North Korea's nuclear weapons on the peninsula would require cooperation from Beijing and Moscow. Their help will be critical with border security, maritime monitoring, and interdiction. The question is: will they play ball? Given current

bilateral relationships with Washington, the prospects don't look good. Neither has signed onto the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to identify and interdict nuclear materials transfers, or made notable efforts otherwise to constrain the North's program. While Washington and Seoul would still need to seek their cooperation, they should also prepare to deal with the consequences if Russia and China refuse to give it.

To be sure, planning that includes "better case" outcomes should not blur the U.S. priority on eliminating the nuclear dangers posed by a North Korean collapse. Only the United States has the capabilities—from real-time intelligence to track materials to special operations skills in order to secure them to the weapons know-how itself—to deal with the risks. But if and when the Kim dynasty falls, the likelihood of insights suddenly emerging to illuminate contending factions, what they might do, or whether a power struggle could bring them to threaten or even attempt to use nuclear weapons is small. For these reasons, the U.S. role must focus first and foremost on securing the North's nuclear program. If the United States should lead in any area, this should be it. In other areas, Seoul needs to lead so U.S. forces can concentrate on their most important task.

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Discussion Begins at Home

Even in the best of all possible worlds—a regime that falls with a minimum of internal violence and external threats—dealing with North Korea's demise will present unanticipated challenges including but not limited to its nuclear arsenal. The details of how Washington and Seoul plan to respond must be kept secret, although the policies that guide their preparations and the underlying assumptions need not. Indeed, if a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan teach any lesson about post-conflict burdens, it is the need to identify them, think through their costs, and ensure that we can and should bear them before declaring them our own.

Sixty years after the end of the Korean War, the U.S. alliance with South Korea stands as a testimony to the durability of the U.S. commitment to its ally. The South Korean success story is also part of its fruits, a political as well as economic transition that benefited from the U.S. role as a guarantor of stability on the peninsula and in the region. Like the changing command roles within the alliance, Seoul's capabilities to lead and underwrite the process of reunification need clearer recognition. In 2014, as in the past, the United States has a key part in supporting its Korean ally and unique responsibilities,

particularly on nuclear issues, if the North collapses. But the time has come to clarify historic assumptions as well as build political understanding and consensus on and off the peninsula about Seoul's leadership role going forward.

Because of the sensitive as well as classified nature of many of the issues, the task admittedly will not be easy. The Obama administration's pivot to Asia underscoring the region's critical importance to U.S. security, however, provides the right umbrella in the Pacific as well as at home. In North Asia, the current picture of the two leading U.S. allies at loggerheads must be redrawn. Against the backdrop of a failed North Korea, the implications of that dysfunctional byplay emerge starkly. To move toward substantive trilateral cooperation, a presidential priority which assembles senior policymakers to work through how Seoul will lead, what Tokyo can do, and where the United States will provide its support is the place to begin. Such an effort will have the added benefit of enabling the allies to put their cooperation on the table with China—the leadership needs to understand how Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington together will respond to the challenge of a North Korean collapse.

Building a consensus on the U.S. role and the allied division of labor is no less important in the United States. Congressional hearings can address the issues facing U.S. policy if North Korea collapses (although the partisan dysfunction in Congress raises obvious concerns about leaks from classified sessions as well as misrepresentations that could jeopardize cooperation with Seoul and others). Classified hearings, however, are not enough.

Administration policymakers should reach out publicly before a crisis drives their decision making. An initiative to discuss U.S. priorities and South Korea's leadership role would illuminate the U.S. obligation and what we expect from our allies. Foreign policy forums abound in the media as well as professional conferences as venues for that discussion and debate. Given the uncertainties in the North, both Koreans and Americans need to understand what each partner intends to do as clearly as circumstances allow.

Notes

1. U.S. and South Korean military planning remains classified and officials do not publicly discuss the contents. News reports and commentary have purported to describe official thinking as well as the politics of the planning process. See John Burton, "Enter the Dragon," *The Korea Times*, February 27, 2013, http://121.78.129.108/www/news/opinon/2014/07/396_131216.html, and Soh Chang Rok, "Concept Plan 5029 and the Korea–U.S. Alliance," Korea Focus, June 7, 2005, http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design1/layout/content_print.asp?group_id=186.
2. David C. Gompert. "North Korea: Preparing for the End," *Survival* 55, no. 3 (June-July 2013): pp. 21-46.

3. Bruce Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (Rand Corporation, 2013), http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR331.html.
4. The 2014 RAND study examines various scenarios—from North Korean attack to Pyongyang's collapse—that would shape the U.S. response to securing the North's nuclear weapons. The study discusses South Korea's role only in passing, with no details offered on Seoul's necessary contribution comparable to the specifics provided about the U.S. military role. Timothy M. Bonds, Eric V. Larson, Derek Eaton, Richard E. Darilek, *Strategy-Policy Mismatch: How the U.S. Army Can Help Close Gaps in Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction* (RAND Corporation, 2014), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR541/RAND_RR541.pdf.
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8. *Special Warfare Magazine*, John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, NC. Volume 26, Issue 1, 2013. http://www.army.mil/swcs.
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