

An Evaluation of Recent U.S. and Korean Expert Analyses on the Future of North Korea

Kim Yong-ho*
Keun Lee

Introduction

With the recent warning signals of possible North Korean collapse such as the collapse of the Soviet bloc, famine in North Korea, uncertainty about Kim Jong-Il's regime, and the increasing number of North Korean defectors, the number of works analyzing the prospect of North Korea's collapse has been increasing rapidly. Moreover, as the impact of North Korea's collapse will not be limited to the narrow space of the Korean peninsula, foreign scholars as well as Korean scholars are showing increasing interest in the possibility of North Korea's collapse.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate recent works by Korean specialists on the prospect of North Korea's collapse by comparing works by "major" Korean scholars on the same subject with works by U.S. scholars. Although it is not certain whether such comparison is possible given diverse views within each country, the comparison—if it turns out to be possible—will be a very valuable tool to check the objectivity or pitfalls of the mainstream view of Korean scholars and to learn the general trends within our most important ally's academic circle on North Korean affairs. The comparative evaluation of the mainstream views of Korean and U.S. scholars will inform us what the sources of differences and similarities between the two views are,

* Dr. Kim is a professor at Hallym University. Dr. Lee is a professor at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security.

how Korean policy makers can persuade their U.S. counterparts on matters regarding North Korea if necessary, and what are the critical factors to consider in making North Korea policy, and also in coordinating North Korea policies with the U.S.

North Korea is a unique entity to South Koreans in that it can become both “us” and “them” or “inside” and “outside” to South Koreans at the same time. Therefore, in analyzing North Korean affairs in Korea, the outcome of analyses often becomes wishful thinking, and some scholars tend to pay excessive and sometimes biased attention to a few particular variables, anticipating certain political and policy responses to their analyses. These problems of wishful thinking and bias can be possibly overcome to some extent by the input of foreign scholars’ works and also by evaluating the differences between the works by Korean and U.S. scholars. Moreover, up to now, it seems that there have not been systematic evaluations of the different scholarly views on the prospect of North Korea’s collapse nor active exchanges of specialist opinions on the same subject between the two countries. Thus, this paper aims to become a starting point in inducing mutual discussion and more systematic evaluations of the differences and similarities between the two countries.

The comparative evaluation done in this paper takes the following categorization: First, this paper breaks down the scholarly views of the two countries into the four categories of: (1) immediate collapse; (2) collapse; (3) status quo; and (4) reform and liberalization. Then, this paper reevaluates these four categories by applying the following five criteria: (1) whether they take economy-centered perspective, politics-centered perspective, or eclectic perspective between the two; (2) whether they put emphasis on domestic factors, external factors, or on the interaction between internal and external factors; (3) whether they see North Korea’s collapse as a regime collapse, or a systemic collapse of the whole country; (4) what kind of policy responses are suggested; and finally (5) whether they tried comparison with other socialist countries that either collapsed or are reforming.

It would be an overstatement to say that one can categorize all the experts into strictly the four categories suggested above. Some

scholars could be unfairly or over-simplistically categorized into one of the four categories. Therefore, this paper went one step further from the simple four categories towards a more sophisticated analysis of the scholarly views taking various variables into consideration. The scholars in this paper have been selected on the criterion that they are experts on North Korean affairs who recently (mostly in 1996 and 1997) published articles in major journals and books. We have to admit that selection process may not have been perfect, and sometimes subjective. In addition, North Korean specialists in the government and journalism could not be covered, and unfortunately many young scholars were not included either, as well as others that we may have mistakenly forgotten.

Korean Scholars

Immediate Collapse

The reason why we break down the collapse theory into that of “immediate collapse” and “collapse” is to distinguish those scholars that predict North Korea’s collapse within two or three years from those who foresee North Korea’s mid- to long-term collapse without mentioning any specific time frame. The two- to three-year time frame of the immediate collapse theory tells us that North Korea is likely to collapse before the 21st century begins. The meaning of “collapse” pertains both to regime collapse and country collapse. Some scholars clearly distinguished regime collapse from country collapse, but some just use the term, North Korea’s collapse. Regarding the definition of “collapse,” a specific definition has been rarely suggested. Therefore, in this paper we see the meaning of collapse common-sensically as the process in which the whole system or political regime stops functioning, leading to an anarchical chaos and necessitating establishment of a new system or emergence of alternative power-takers.

Korean scholars that argue the immediate collapse of North Korea include ex-professors, Dr. Sungchul Yang and Dr. Deok Kim, who are currently serving as members of Korea’s National Assembly, but have had long experience in academia. Dr. Kim is

particularly clear in suggesting the immediate collapse of North Korea as indicated in the following quote: "There is no guarantee that North Korea's military will not rebel against the current regime, and the decisive symptoms of collapse will emerge from there . . . The current regime of Kim Jong-il is at a crisis that is on the brink of collapse."¹ Dr. Yang has been arguing North Korea's collapse since the early 1990s. He contends, "North Korea is in the state of bankruptcy not only for food, but the economy and politics."² These two scholars are quite peculiar in arguing North Korea's immediate collapse very candidly and resolutely.

Collapse

As was mentioned earlier, this category refers to the group of arguments that North Korea's collapse is expected in the mid to long run. However, scholars in this category do not try to pick even an approximate point of collapse in the future time frame. It would be a reasonable guess that they are looking at a certain point in the early 21st century. Although the scholars in this category are predicting North Korea's collapse very cautiously, the connotation of their arguments tells us that they are leaning more toward the possibility of collapse rather than the status quo or reform.

Among our sample of Korean scholars, this second category of "collapse" accounts for the largest proportion. In the case of Kyungwon Kim, president of Sahoe Kwahak Won (Social Science Council), he maintains, "even though we do not know how long it will take for North Korea to collapse, the process of North Korea's collapse is a general trend that cannot be prevented neither by the United States nor Korea."³ Changsoon Kim of the Pukhan Yon-guso (Research Institute for North Korea) sees a possibility of the replacement of Kim Jong-il's regime after its collapse by a third

¹ Kim Deok. (1997, Spring). "Pukhanui Wigiwa Nambukhan Kwangye (Crisis in North Korea and Inter-Korean relations). *Shinasea* Vol. 4, No. 1

² Sungchul Yang. (March 25, 1997). "Hwangi Ttonan Pukhan, Chajun Namhan (North Korea that Hwang Left, South Korea that Hwang Left for). *Hankook Ilbo*, p. 13.

³ Joong-ang Ilbo (March 31, 1997). "Taebukhan Chollyakun? (What North Korea Strategy?" p. 7; *Joong-ang Ilbo* (September 29, 1997) "Pukhani Pongwaedwaeji Annundamyon? (What if North Korea Does Not Collapse?" p. 7.

⁴ *Wolgan pukhan* (March 1997). "Inyom Pasan gwa Cheje Pongwae (Bankruptcy of Ideology and System Collapse)"

power within the Workers Party.⁴ While Hak Jun Kim, chancellor of Incheon University, is discussing the possibility of both North Korea's collapse and regime maintenance, he, too, seems to be leaning towards the view of North Korea's collapse. However, he does not just suggest the possibility of North Korea's collapse, but considers various post-collapse possibilities by presenting several scenarios after the collapse, assuming that North Korea's collapse would not naturally lead to its absorption by South Korea.⁵ Byungjoon Ahn of Yonsei University warns that serious famine in North Korea will bring about collapse and catastrophe, thus rendering a soft-landing of North Korea impossible. Sehee Yoo of Hanyang University maintains that due to the weak leadership of Kim Jong-il in overcoming the current crisis, North Korea will ultimately collapse even though it adopts reform and liberalization policies.⁶ In Sukryul Yoo's case (Professor of Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security), even though he does not exclude the possibility of Kim Jong-il regime's survival, he observes that its collapse is more likely. Specifically, he questions the problem-solving ability of Kim Jong-il. However, if major powers like the United States and China continue pursuing a soft-landing policy, he admits, Kim Jong-il's regime may stay with us longer than expected.⁷ Sogang University's Sangwoo Lee also takes a pessimistic view about North Korea's future,⁸ and Sungjoo Han of Korea University contends it is very likely that North Korea will be absorbed by South Korea in the way that East Germany was absorbed by West Germany. However, he presents several scenarios including North Korea's survival.⁹ A project by the Research Institute for National Unification suggests a quite concrete timetable of possible North Korea's collapse. It argues that North Korea's "our way of socialism (urishik sahoejuui)" already reached the threshold of system

⁵ The Third International Forum By Seoul Shinmun (September 26, 1997), "Kim Jong-il chido Chejeui Hyonhwang gwa Changnae (Present and Future of Kim Jong-il Leadership). Pukhan Onjeckkaji potilsu Itna (How Long Can North Korea Survive?)

⁶ Hyundai Research Institute (January 1996) "1996nyonui Pukhan (North Korea in 1996)." *Tongil Kyongje*.

⁷ Pakyongsa (1997), Pukhan Cheje Wigiwa Hanbando Tongil (System Crisis in North Korea and Unification of the Korean Peninsula)

⁸ *Munhwa Ilbo* (February 20, 1997). "Taebukhan Chongchaek Ttudo Kochija (Let's Change Our North Korea Policy)," p. 6.

⁹ *Munhwa Ilbo* (March 7, 1997), "Hanbando Tasotgaji Shinario (Five Scenarios of the Korean Peninsula)," p. 6

crisis in 1992, and if North Korea cannot put a lid on the current momentum towards ever increasing crisis level, the crisis index will have passed the threshold of system transformation between the years 2001 and 2008. However, the project also holds the possibility of North Korea's systemic survival by saying that whether or not North Korea's systemic transformation leads to its systemic collapse depends on the neighboring powers' positions and South Korea's responsive capability.¹⁰

Status Quo

This category of status quo refers to a group of arguments that foresees North Korea's maintenance of its current state without showing any sign of either collapse or reform and liberalization. The central concept of this category may be "muddling through," which has been widely used by North Korea specialists these days. However, as the phrase "muddling through" indicates, it is not clear whether North Korea will eventually collapse or reform after some years of muddling through, and not a few scholars in this category cautiously mention a possibility of North Korea's collapse. Therefore, depending on readers' perspectives and orientations, some arguments of this category could be categorized as that of collapse. Yet, as in other cases of our categorization, the criterion of categorization rests on the connotation that these arguments emphasize, and it seems that the arguments in this category emphasize the possibility of the status quo being maintained.

Sungchul Kim of the Research Institute for National Unification foresees the survival of Kim Jong-il's regime in the short run, while also foreseeing two possibilities of either reform by Kim Jong-il by strengthening military and his power bases, or system transformation by collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime caused by such factors as economic crisis and corruption.¹¹ However, his analysis shows a similar line of logic with that of the project of the Research Institute

¹⁰ Minjok Tongil Yonguwon (Research Institute for National Unification, 1996). "Pukhan Sahoejuui Cheje Wigisujun Pyongga mit Naeguryok chonmang (Evaluation of the Level of Crisis in the North Korean Socialist System and the Prospect for Perseverance)"

¹¹ Minjok Tongil Yonguwon (1995). "Kim Jong-il Jongwonui Hyangbang (Destination of Kim Jong-il Regime)"

for National Unification in the “collapse” category in contending that systemic transformation will not automatically result in North Korea’s collapse as a country. Kwangjin Yoo of Dongkuk University argues, “Kim Jong-il’s system maintenance and regime stability has been progressing without serious problems.”¹² Compared with American experts on North Korea, Korean scholars foreseeing the status quo maintained are relatively few in numbers. This may have something to do with epistemological and political factors related to a special situation in Korea where North Korea can be both “inside” and “outside” of South Korea, as mentioned at the beginning.

Reform/Liberalization

This category of reform/liberalization refers to the arguments that North Korea is gradually pursuing reform and liberalization. Therefore, this category includes only the “social scientific” arguments that show reform or a possibility of reform in North Korea on the basis of concrete empirical evidence and coherent logic, but not those normative arguments that North Korea should reform.

In Korea, there are not many experts arguing North Korea’s reform and liberalization. Jongsuk Lee of the Sejong Institute is discussing three possibilities of (1) status quo in the short run (3-5 years), (2) collapse or (3) transformation into a market economy in the long run. Between the latter two, he sees transformation into a market economy resembling the Chinese model more likely.¹³ Wankyung Choi of Kyungnam University also finds a possibility of North Korea’s reform and liberalization: “when Kim Jong-il acquires legitimacy by concrete policy results, it is very likely that North Korea would go through gradual, step-by-step changes like the former Soviet Union and East European countries as Brzezinski suggests.”¹⁴

¹² *Wolgan Bukhan* (January, 1997), “Bukhan Jeonggwoncu Anjeonghwa Jeonmang (Prospect for Stabilization of North Korean Regime)”

¹³ “Pukhan Chejeui Pyonhwa Yoin Punsok gwa Chonmang (An Analysis of Factors Changing North Korea and Prospect for Change).” A paper presented at a seminar held at Ajou University (November 12, 1997).

¹⁴ Kyungnam University Press (1996), “Pukhanun odiro (Where is North Korea Heading).”

Evaluation of the Arguments

Relationship between Economy and Politics

Whereas American scholars predicting North Korea's collapse take an economy-centered approach, as will be seen later, Korean scholars in the categories of "immediate collapse" or "collapse" do not show any particular orientation either toward an economy-centered approach nor a politics-centered one. The general logic of an economy-centered approach in the collapse categories is that a severe economic crisis leads to a political crisis that in turn eventually causes North Korea's collapse. Among the Korean scholars expecting North Korea's collapse, only Byungjoon Ahn seems to take this economy-centered approach.

Sehee Yoo of "collapse" category tends to take a politics-centered approach emphasizing Kim Jong-il's leadership, and Sungchul Kim of the "status quo" category also shows a politics-centered perspective in focusing on the relationship between Kim Jong-il and the military. Sukryul Yoo is also politics-centered as he points out legitimacy problems and the weak problem solving capacity of Kim Jong-il. Wankyu Choi of the "reform and liberalization" category takes a politics-centered approach in emphasizing Kim Jong-il's capacity and the leadership of the ruling elite in North Korea. What is unique about Wankyu Choi is that whereas many North Korea experts in Korea adopt a structural analytical framework, he takes a very clear agent-oriented analytical framework. It is very intriguing that whereas in the United States most of the scholars adopting a politics-centered approach reach the conclusion of "status quo," in Korea the same approach leads mostly to "collapse." The opposite outcomes of the same approach between U.S. and Korean scholars tell us that U.S. scholars think very highly of North Korean leaders' crisis management ability or the adaptive capability of North Korean regime while Korean scholars do not.

There are Korean scholars that take both political and economic factors into consideration at the same time. Sungchul Yang of "immediate collapse" considers both political and economic fac-

tors, and concludes that North Korea is in the process of collapse in every aspect. Kyungwon Kim also observes that North Korea is collapsing in terms of politics, the economy, society, and philosophy, and Sungjoo Han also makes a similar observation. However, it is hard to say that these scholars actually have a clear perspective in terms of having a sophisticated analytical framework. Rather, it would be fair to say that their perspectives are hardly discernable from their observations given limited data that we have on them. Jongsuk Lee of "reform and liberalization" also takes both political and economic factors into accounts by linking adaptation of North Korea's political system with the possibility of reform and liberalization. It is notable that in contrast to American experts, Korean scholars show more flexibility between their perspectives and their predictions about North Korea's collapse. In other words, for Korean scholars, the same perspectives may lead to different conclusions regarding North Korea's collapse, and different perspectives may lead to the same conclusions.

Domestic Factors or External Factors

Sehee Yoo of "collapse" and Wankyung Choi of "reform and liberalization" focus on domestic factors putting emphasis on Kim Jong-il's leadership, and Sungchul Kim of "status quo" is also focusing on domestic factors taking the relationship between Kim Jong-il and the military as a key factor in predicting North Korea's future. On the other hand, Hak Jun Kim and the project by the Research Institute for National Unification take external factors more seriously as they see the post-collapse fate of North Korea will depend on the ideas and policies of neighboring countries and powers. Sukryul Yoo of "collapse" seems to be taking a quite balanced approach as he argues, "North Korea will be likely to collapse in a few years unless neighboring countries give assistance to Kim Jong-il or unless he speeds up reform and liberalization."¹⁵ With regard to this criterion of domestic and external factors, the evaluation could not be completed because many scholars do not show clear positions or opinions of their own. However, it should

¹⁵ op. cit.

be noted that we could hardly find a systemic approach that integrates both internal and external factors simultaneously, and analyzes the interactive process.

Distinction between Regime Collapse and Systemic Collapse of the Whole Country

Among our pool of scholars, Sungjoo Han, Changsoon Kim, the project by the Research Institute for National Unification, and Sungchul Kim make a clear distinction between a regime collapse and a systemic collapse of the whole country. Sungjoo Han presents a scenario in which Kim Jong-il's regime is replaced by another power group after internal turmoil in North Korea. Changsoon Kim predicts the emergence of a third power within Workers Party, and Sungchul Kim and the project by the Research Institute for National Unification reject the simple logic that systemic change in North Korea automatically leads to North Korea's collapse. As for Hak Jun Kim, although he does not clarify what he thinks about the distinction, he seems to be making a distinction between the system and the regime when he says "in the case of collapse at the level of a country." In Sukryul Yoo's case, it is not clear whether his usage of the word, "collapse of Kim Jong-il's regime" refers to the collapse of only the regime, or the whole country. In general, most of the Korean scholars in our pool either do not clearly distinguish the regime from the system or see them as identical.

Suggestions for Policy Responses

With regard to suggestions for policy responses, "inducing a soft-landing" and "forcing collapse" are the two broad policy options considered. In the case of Korean scholars, they do not present clear and specific policy ideas even though some of them demand Korea's preparedness in case North Korea collapses. Byungjoon Ahn seems to be suggesting a "soft-landing policy" implicitly, and Sungjoo Han, although not very clear, seems to take the position of a "soft-landing" when he points out the difference

in national power and political and social changes in North Korea as prior conditions for a German-style reunification. It is quite strange that Korean experts do not make their policy suggestions clear when analyzing a policy-relevant issue.

Comparison with Other Socialist Countries

For unclear reasons, Korean scholars in our pool do not pay much attention to comparative analysis between North Korea's future and the experiences of other socialist countries that have undergone reforms or collapsed. They might have been skeptical about the comparison itself, but it is quite unusual that comparative analyses were rarely attempted when reference points are present. Even when the comparison is taken up, the comparison is an anecdotal reference to Germany, China, the former Soviet Union, or Eastern European countries rather than a systematic comparative analysis.

American Scholars

Immediate Collapse

Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute and Robert Manning of the Progressive Policy Institute are well-known American scholars predicting the immediate collapse of North Korea. Eberstadt analyzes that North Korea is likely to implode soon as it has not implemented and will not implement economic liberalization.¹⁶ Robert Manning also predicts that North Korea will implode in the next few years. Defining implosion as "a collapse resulting from internal social and political convulsions," he sees that the implosion of North Korea has already begun in some respects.¹⁷ Though it is not certain whether the two scholars share the same definition of implosion, it is notable that they commonly suggest the high possibility of implosion.

¹⁶ Nicholas Eberstadt (March/April 1997), "Hastening Korean Reunification," *Foreign Affairs*.

¹⁷ Robert Manning (July 1997), "The United States and the Endgame in North Korea," *Asian Survey*.

Collapse

Selig Harrison who is famous for his contention of a “soft-landing” policy, is a representative scholar arguing the collapse of North Korea.¹⁸ It should not be mistaken that the fact he is contending a soft-landing policy does not mean that he is predicting the soft-landing of North Korea. His argument about a soft-landing is not his diagnosis about North Korea’s future, but his policy solution against North Korea’s collapse. Harrison argues that if the United States and its allies pursue policies that exacerbate Kim Jong-il regime’s economic problems, North Korea is likely to erode over a period of five to ten years. Although it is not clear what he means by “erosion,” it seems that erosion refers to gradual collapse.

Status Quo

Most of the U.S. experts on North Korea belong to this category, and it is quite intriguing that many Korean-American scholars in the United States share the view of “status quo.” One of strongest arguments for the status quo comes from Bruce Cumings of Northwestern University.¹⁹ He sees the possibility of North Korea’s systemic collapse as very low and predicts that North Korea’s political system will not disappear even if the socialist system collapses in the North. Yet, he also warns of the possible breakout of war on the Korean peninsula. His analysis is very sophisticated by not automatically linking economic crisis to regime collapse, and regime collapse to systemic collapse, while considering the possibility of breakout of war.

Larry Nixsch can also be categorized as a scholar arguing status quo.²⁰ His basic contention is that North Korea will not collapse in the near future. He foresees that for some time, there will not be any serious political and social challenges toward Kim Jong-il.

¹⁸ Selig Harrison (Spring 1997), “Promoting Soft Landing in Korea,” *Foreign Policy*.

¹⁹ Bruce Cumings (January/February 1997), “Where the Cold War Never Ends,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

²⁰ Larry Nixsch (Winter 1996), “The Prospect of Relations Between the U.S. and N.K.: Beyond the 1994 Geneva Nuclear Accord,” *KNDU Review*.

Contrary to Eastern Europe, he maintains, it is not likely that North Korea collapses by a mass movement or mass uprising. Rather, he argues that as long as the internal security organs and military remain loyal and willing to use lethal force against the populace, the regime will remain in power.

Marcus Noland of the Institute for International Economics argues that North Korea may muddle through for years before turning toward reform or chaos, especially if external powers find this solution to be in their interests.²¹ He also contends that as in Romania, political power is used in North Korea to create and allocate excess profits that are channeled to politically influential groups and individuals, either openly or through corruption.

Among many Korean-American scholars in the United States who argue "status quo," Daesook Suh of the University of Hawaii puts forward the strongest argument against the possibility of North Korea's collapse.²² According to him, the North Korean people's support for Kim Jong-il regime is solid, and there are no signs of challenging or opposing groups emerging against Kim Jong-il. He believes that there will be no revolutionary change in the North such as an anti-communist or anti-Kim Il Sung revolution that will cause collapse of North Korea within this century.

Chong-Sik Lee of the University of Pennsylvania makes an argument that economic collapse does not necessarily lead to the collapse of the political system.²³ Those who make such an automatic connection, he criticizes, underestimate the role of political and information control and the role of propaganda. In his view, they also ignore the fact that the Korean Workers' Party had already collapsed during the Korean War, and it has been rebuilt with security as the utmost priority.

Although quite pessimistic, B.C. Koh of the University of Illinois seems to be arguing status quo in that he argues against early demise of North Korea.²⁴ For the reasons why an early collapse of North Korea is unlikely he presents various factors at both

²¹ Marcus Noland (July/August 1997). "Why North Korea Will Muddle Through," *Foreign Affairs*.

²² Daesook Suh (June 1996). "Conditions for the Soft-landing of North Korea's New System." *Sekai* (Original in Japanese).

²³ Chong-Sik Lee (September 1997). "The Challenge of Peaceful Coexistence," Paper prepared for the International Conference on Visions and Realities in the 21st Century: The Role of East Asia.

the domestic and international levels of analysis. At the international level he points to the accelerated pace of international aid, and at the domestic level, he notes the absence of any organized opposition to the regime, a high threshold of tolerance on the part of the long-suffering North Korean populace, a massive surveillance and coercive apparatus, and millions of hard core supporters who have a huge stake in preserving the status quo. His analysis considers both structural and agent-related factors. It would be fair to say, however, that he makes a cautious conclusion by adding that in the long run, incremental adaptation may not guarantee North Korea's survival.

Reform and Liberalization

A representative American scholar cautiously arguing North Korea's move towards reform and liberalization is Robert Scalapino of the University of California.²⁵ His view is that while North Korea will neither collapse nor pursue dramatic change, it will make efforts toward economic reforms. Furthermore, he sees that the signs of reform efforts are generally those of acceleration in that direction. Although he shows some elements of status quo here and there, he is clearly distinguished from those who argue status quo as he concludes that the evidence strongly suggests that the movement on various fronts is toward accelerated reform.

Seeing from the above categorization of American scholars, we can find out that there are many more U.S. scholars who hold the position of status quo than collapse. Therefore, from our pool of U.S. scholars, status quo is the majority opinion. In the following section, we evaluate the arguments of U.S. scholars by applying the same criteria as applied to Korean scholars.

²⁴ B.C. Koh (August 20, 1997), "North American Perspective on Regime Dynamics in North Korea," a paper presented to the conference on Unravelling Regime Dynamics in North Korea: Contending Perspectives and Comparative Implications, Seoul, Korea, at the XVII World Congress of the IPSA.

²⁵ Robert Scalapino (1997). *North Korea at a Crossroads*. Hoover Institute Press.

Evaluation of the Arguments

Relationship between Economy and Politics

The economy-centered perspective in this paper refers to the perspective that suggests North Korea's collapse depends on economic factors. Of course, it is not possible to clearly distinguish political factors from economic ones, and scholars often mention non-economic factors even when they are taking an economy-centered perspective. However, those arguments that contend North Korea's future depends on the solution of economic problems should be called economy-centered arguments. Among our pool of American scholars, Eberstadt of "immediate collapse," and Harrison of "collapse" are taking the economy-centered perspective. Manning of "immediate collapse" seems to show some aspect of the economy-centered perspective when mentioning North Korea's necessity for economic liberalization, but his usage of the perspective is not consistent. Eberstadt takes earnest economic liberalization as a key condition preventing North Korea's collapse. By arguing that North Korea would collapse if the United States and its allies keep taking policies that exacerbate North Korea's economic problems, Harrison puts his primary emphasis on economic factors in predicting North Korea's collapse.

As for the politics-centered perspective in which politics determine the fate of North Korea, Cumings, Niksch, Suh, and Lee of the "status quo" category are the ones who place politics above economics. They deny the automatic spillover of an economic crisis into a political crisis and argue that real determinants of North Korea's collapse may be the breakdown of the surveillance and coercive apparatus, revolt from opposition forces, and the inability of North Korean leadership to adapt to and control the crisis situation. The politics-centered approach is not always agent-oriented in analyzing whether or not the North Korean leadership is capable of controlling their own fate. Niksch's and Suh's analyses are structural, focusing on the absence or presence of destabilizing factors such as opposition forces in North Korea.

Noland and Koh have somewhat balanced approach taking

both political and economic factors into account. Noland pays attention to the fact that North Korea will maintain its system by creating and distributing economic surpluses by political power. Koh's inclusion of the variable of international aid makes him lean away from a strictly politics-centered approach.

One important finding from this evaluation of American scholars is that those who argue North Korea's collapse tend to take the economy-centered approach, while those who do not tend to take either the politics-centered or somewhat balanced approaches. The latter tends to separate politics from economy and does not necessarily see that the economic crisis naturally results in a political crisis.

Domestic Factors or External Factors

In predicting whether or not North Korea will collapse, Eberstadt, Manning, Niksch, Noland, Suh, and Lee are putting primary emphasis on domestic factors. On the other hand, Harrison is emphasizing the importance of external factors in diagnosing North Korea's fate. By arguing that North Korea's collapse will depend on the policies of the United States and its allies, he underestimates North Korea's ability to handle its problems. Cumings and Koh are taking both internal and external factors as determinants of North Korea's collapse. If there is one underdeveloped area regarding this criterion, that is the lack of an interactive approach that sees the two-way influence of both internal and external factors. It is understandable that scholars separate internal and external factors for analytical convenience. But for more realistic predictions, they need to conduct more integrated analyses before making a final diagnosis about North Korea's future directions.

Distinction between Regime Collapse and Systemic Collapse of the Whole Country

Manning is distinguishing regime collapse from systemic collapse of the whole country, and Cummings is also making a distinction between the collapse of the political system and that of the

socialist system. For other scholars, they do not show any clear position about the distinction between the regime collapse and the systemic collapse of North Korea.

Suggestions for Policy Responses

Regarding suggestions for policy responses, most U.S. scholars prefer prevention of North Korea's collapse. One notable exception is Eberstadt. He believes that since the earlier North Korea's collapse, the lower the unification cost, the United States should not prevent the collapse of North Korea. Therefore, his policy consideration centers on what to do after the reunification of Korea rather than what to do about North Korea's collapse. It will be interesting to see whether or not Eberstadt's position has changed after the eruption of the recent financial crisis in Korea.

For those who do not want to see North Korea collapse, the soft-landing policy is most commonly suggested. Harrison is well known for his strong position about a soft-landing policy, and Cumings and Scalapino can also be seen as supporting the soft-landing of North Korea. For other scholars, it is not clear what their positions are about policy responses as they do not touch upon that issue. However, Lee seems to be supporting a soft-landing policy considering his emphasis on coexistence of South and North Korea.

Comparison with Other Socialist Countries

It is hard to find a systematic comparative study on the issue of North Korea's collapse though one can find some comparisons with other socialist countries in predicting North Korea's collapse. Noland is the most sophisticated in comparing North Korea with other socialist countries. By sorting out similarities and differences among North Korea, Romania, China, and Vietnam, he shows why Chinese- and Vietnamese- style reform will be extremely difficult in North Korea. Cumings also makes some reference to Germany, and concludes that the German case should not be a model for Korea. Eberstadt compares Korea and Germany in calculating unification cost, and recommends the fast reunification of Korea in

order to lower the unification cost. In the case of other scholars, we can find some passing remarks on Great Leap Forward Movement in China. However, as in the case of the Korean scholars, we could find no systematic comparative study that traces the whole process of collapse from the beginning to the end among our pool of American scholars.

Conclusion

The comparison between Korean and American scholars regarding their views on the possibility of North Korea's collapse reveals a significant contrast between the two groups of scholars. As for Korean scholars, among 22, the ratio of scholars foreseeing North Korea's collapse to scholars foreseeing North Korea's survival is about 4:1. On the other hand, 6 of 11 American scholars are arguing that the "status quo" will be maintained in North Korea. In order to understand this general difference in scholarly forecasting, we may need a thorough analysis from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. However, at a glance, it seems that the difference reflects the aspirations of both Korean and American scholars for collapse and survival respectively. Yet, we should not be too conclusive about the findings in this paper because our pool of scholars is not exhaustive, excluding many young Korean scholars, and also because our categorization could be somewhat arbitrary due to possible subjective interpretations of vague expressions of many scholars.

Roughly speaking, we can find three common points among Korean and American scholars. First, they share the view that Kim Jong-il is under severe pressure due to persistent economic difficulties, and that the most important factor determining whether or not North Korea will survive the current economic crisis is Kim Jong-il's leadership. Second, they tend to have the same observation that in North Korea no meaningful opposition forces exist against Kim Jong-il, and that reform efforts have been ineffective. Third, they commonly point out that the influence of the military in North Korea is increasing, and the North Korean people are effectively barred from outside information. Moreover, many commonly

point out that reform and liberalization are essential for North Korea's survival, but the dilemma for North Korea is that reform itself may be suicidal to Kim Jong-il.

Despite the common observations above, there are conspicuous differences among scholars regarding specific points at issue. First, on the severity of the economic crisis, especially famine in North Korea, scholars present differing evaluations. The difference may be derived from their criterion about the minimum amount of food required for North Korean people per day. At one point, North Korean government's calculation was 630g per person while that of FAO/WFP was 460g. Application of the two different criteria results in huge difference of 7.64 million tons and 5.99 million tons in terms of the total amount of food necessary for North Korean people.

Second, with regard to the influence of the economic crisis on the regime survival, scholars have two different hypotheses as noted earlier. Simply speaking, one hypothesis suggests that an economic crisis will eventually lead to a political crisis, whereas the other opposes such an automatic linkage. The former usually leads to the arguments of "collapse" as in the case of Deok Kim and many Korean scholars, while the latter hypothesis is shared by many who argue "status quo" of North Korea such as Cumings, Niksch, Chong-Sik Lee, and Daesook Suh.

Third, on the importance of internal and external factors, there are differing opinions between those who regard external assistance as a key to North Korea's survival and those who consider Kim Jong-il's leadership for reform and liberalization as a key to the survival. However, one common denominator among those two groups is that Kim Jong-il feels extremely vulnerable to both outside influence and inside reform. For analytical sophistication, however, one should not distinguish internal factors from external ones as the two are closely interconnected with each other, and in fact, it is a very realistic argument that Kim Jong-il's internal moves are shrewdly calculated to induce outside assistance. Many scholars point out that Kim Jong-il should be able to utilize this internal/external two-level game in order to create a favorable environment for his survival.

Then is Kim Jong-il a leader who can implement meaningful reform and liberalization? On this point, there is no agreement either. Some see that Kim Jong-il has to and will reform because he is well aware of the limitations of the current North Korean system as well as his lack of charisma, unlike his father. In other words, he needs to show policy results to North Koreans in order to attain legitimacy. On the other hand, other scholars are opposed to the view by pointing out the facts that Kim Jong-il's legitimacy and power is based on the system that his father constructed and that Chinese-style reform in North Korea will not be feasible; Kim Jong-il's reform efforts would delegitimize his power as he has to deconstruct his father's system; In addition, if his reform efforts deliver a message to North Korean people of his willingness to accept coexistence with South Korea, his power base will be even more threatened as he is slashing rationale for the existence of North Korean regime.

Fourth, many scholars do not distinguish regime collapse from systemic collapse of the whole country. Those who do are divided among themselves as one group is arguing that regime collapse will ultimately lead to systemic collapse and reunification of Korea, while the other is contending that regime collapse will lead to the emergence of new leaders or a chaos situation where outside powers or international organizations intervene.

Fifth, with regard to policy responses, the majority view of our pool of scholars is a recommendation of a soft-landing policy. However, the motives behind their proposition of a soft-landing policy are not the same. Some are worried about the effects of a hard-landing of North Korea, and some are taking North Korea's survival almost for granted. Some Korean scholars, on the other hand, put forward normative policy recommendations of replacing Kim Jong-il with new leaders who can protect North Korean people's lives and human rights.

Finally, the focal point in comparing North Korea with other socialist countries is whether or not North Korea will reform in Chinese or Vietnamese ways, collapse like Romania, be absorbed by South Korea as in the case of East Germany. In general, scholars emphasizing North Korea's uniqueness regard it difficult for North

Korea to reform in Chinese or Vietnamese styles. They think if North Korea reforms, it will do so in a "North Korean way." In comparing Korea with Germany, those who stress commonality between the two foresee that the North Korean people and leaders will ultimately make a choice to unify with the South. On the other hand, there are scholars who find major differences between Korea and Germany. For instance, Germany has not experienced civil war between the Germans; distrust between the South and the North is much higher than in Germany; North Korea has a much more isolated, autonomous, and political military than in East Germany; exchange between South and North Korea is extremely limited preventing construction of inter-Korean channels connecting the elites of two Korea; and information on South Korea is tightly controlled in the North. Therefore, they do not think that North Korea will allow itself to be absorbed by the South when faced with an emergency situation.

Although this paper does not deal with the issue of changes of scholarly views within a certain time frame, that issue is an interesting research topic. In fact, the arguments of "collapse" increased after the defection of Hwang Jangyop, and since then a few scholars seem to be changing their views. That may be due to the accumulation of new data, changes in the international environment, and reevaluation of their views themselves. Now, when Korea as well as Asia is experiencing a financial crisis, it will be of utmost importance to reevaluate the possibility of North Korea's collapse, taking the influence of the financial crisis into consideration. ■