

# The Japan Times

## Opportunity for U.S. to extricate itself from Korea

By Doug Bandow

May 23, 2014

It doesn't pay to be number two in North Korea. In December the young dictator Kim Jong Un executed his uncle, Jang Song Taek, supposedly Kim's top adviser. Now Vice Marshal Choe Ryong Hae, who climbed atop Jang's corpse, has been relieved of his important positions.

Choe's fall is particularly important because, though he was an aide to Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, he rose rapidly under the younger Kim. Dumping Choe reshapes the political environment of Kim's making.

While Kim's dominance in Pyongyang does not guarantee the regime's survival, it dampens hope for any change outside of Kim. Today's Korean Winter isn't likely to give way to a Korean Spring. Moreover, nothing suggests that the North's communist monarchy is about to give way. Indeed, the elite, at least, are doing better than in years past.

People in the countryside still suffer, but they a revolution aren't likely to make. Many observers have waited a long time for regime collapse in the North. They probably will have to wait a lot longer.

In fact, given North Korea's history and Kim's age, he could rule for another 30 or 40 years. And so far he doesn't appear to be much interested in reform.

If anything, he appears to be more committed to his government's nuclear weapons program and confrontational foreign policy than were his predecessors.

North Korea's policy toward the South has oscillated wildly, but has headed mostly downward. It recently conducted a live fire drill near the disputed Yellow Sea border where it launched a deadly bombardment of a South Korean island back in 2010.

The North also appears to be preparing a fourth and "new form" of nuclear test. North Korea recently test-fired two medium-range missiles, predicting "next-stage steps, which the enemy can hardly imagine."

The Obama administration obviously is frustrated, and reportedly is considering easing its preconditions for resuming the long-stalled six party talks. However, it's unlikely that many policymakers believe renewed negotiations will lead anywhere. Which has left the major U.S. response to tie itself closer to its South Korean ally, loudly reaffirming that America will defend it if necessary.

Washington needs to reflect first on why the North is such a problem for America. A small, impoverished, and distant state, even with a handful of nuclear weapons (but no delivery capacity), obviously is no match for the globe's superpower.

After all, North Korea does not threaten to turn Moscow, Paris, and London into lakes of fire. But the U.S. maintains a defense treaty with and garrison in South Korea, routinely deploys naval and air units around North Korea, regularly conducts military exercises in the South, and constantly threatens war against the North.

Pyongyang can't very well ignore America. And the best way to deter an aggressive superpower is to build nuclear weapons and missiles, and to threaten to use them.

Thus, going home should be the foundation of U.S. policy toward the Koreans. When Washington agreed to a defense treaty with the South 61 years ago, the latter was in no condition to defend itself from renewed attack. But everything has changed since the end of the Cold War. Today Seoul doesn't need conventional backup.

Nor does the U.S. military commitment help resolve the nuclear issue. American forces have become nuclear hostages, conveniently placed within striking distance of the North. They also reinforce Pyongyang's natural paranoia, increasing its perceived need for nuclear weapons.

Washington should loosen military ties with South Korea and extricate itself from a potential Korean conflict. The U.S. should terminate the "mutual" defense treaty, withdraw the permanent garrison, and end the periodic threats.

America should retain a watchful eye on the region, but leave North Korea to its neighbors. Doing so would knock Washington down several notches on Kim's enemies list. Withdrawal also would reduce Beijing's perception that the U.S. is seeking to contain China in cooperation with South Korea.

Having demilitarized America's role on the peninsula, Washington then could engage the North with less controversy — opening simple consular relations, for instance. U.S. policymakers would gain a small window into an alien society, as well as a direct communications channel. South Korea should take over prime responsibility for confronting Pyongyang.

North Korea, so full of human tragedy, marches on with a new communist king at the nation's head. There's little any other country can do to bring peace, stability and prosperity to the North.

However, the U.S. could, and should, reduce the possibility of the North interfering with America's peace, stability and prosperity. By going home. Where America's soldiers and other military personnel belong.

***Doug Bandow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea." A version of this article appeared in the Straits Times.*