

Unmasking North Korea's Future

By Michael Lee, Founder of the Institute of Futurology

Everyone can see that North Korea is trapped in a tragic time-warp, a kind of living museum of 1950s style Cold War socialism. Its political bubble of unreality is likely to burst open with great force well before mid-century.

After the overthrow of the current dictatorship, I see this extremely isolated country becoming a colony, or puppet state, of China. This colonisation could prevail until the new superpower has evolved into a freer civilisation and ceases to see the US as a major strategic rival in East Asia. When this region is no longer the flashpoint of economic and ideological competition between a waning global empire – the USA – and the rise of China, the two Koreas will finally be re-unified like Germany was in 1990. Korea will then be truly free for the first time since Japan annexed it in 1895.

I estimate that this troubled peninsula will have been occupied, and then divided up by foreign powers, over a continuous tortured history of about 155-200 years before re-unification eventually happens. North Korea was never part of any mythical foreign policy “axis of evil” – it is part, rather, of an Asian axis of sadness.

The country almost collapsed completely in the 1990s. It only survives today because it offers a convenient buffer state for China against American military presence in South Korea, Japan and Australia. No doubt there will one day be a moody Hollywood historic drama called “The Last Dictator of Korea”, spiced up with a palace love story, which will reveal the bizarre conditions prevailing in these last years of the Kim Jong family dynasty.

The near-implosion of North Korea after the fall of the Soviet Union provides a glimpse into both the past and future of the country. At the time of the partition of Korea into North and South Korea,¹ the former was largely industrial and the latter agrarian. While South Korea advanced in the intervening decades into a leading Asian Tiger economy, its northern counterpart descended into a dystopia begging to be captured on celluloid. It is a story of two Koreas: to the north, economic decline of an industrial society brought about by an energy crisis coupled with ecological degradation, and, to the south, economic prosperity and technological innovation catapulting an agricultural society into the 21st Century.

¹ At the end of World War II, North Korea and South Korea were partitioned by the victorious Allies to suit *their* strategic plans.

The fact that North Korea fell so hard after the fall of communism shows the extent to which this small nation has relied upon foreign supplies. Since the Korean peninsula as a whole has little oil and gas of its own, communist North Korea depended upon the Soviet Union for its industrial energy needs until that Union broke up at the end of the 1980s. Then North Korea lost the bulk of its supply of energy to run its industries. In 1990, for example, it had imported 18.3 million barrels of oil from Russia, China and Iran. Then, abruptly, its imports from Russia fell by 90%,² a catastrophic depletion.

Then floods in 1995 and 1996 washed away precious top soil, damaged and silted dams and flooded coal mining shafts. These natural disasters were followed by a massive drought in 1997, and then by a tsunami. It is difficult to survive twin energy and environmental challenges of this magnitude. The country's ageing economic infrastructure and systems faltered and fell under the burden. A dangerous feedback loop was created between industrial and ecological decline as the government began burning biomass to create heat and energy to compensate for its meagre supply of oil and gas: "North Koreans turned to burning biomass, thus destroying their remaining forests. Deforestation led, in turn, to more flooding and increasing levels of soil erosion. Likewise, soils were depleted as plant matter was burned for heat, rather than being mulched and composted...Biomass harvesting reduces ground cover, disrupts habitats and leads to increasing soil erosion and siltation."³

Since modern agriculture depends upon fossil fuels almost as much as modern industry does, North Korea's energy crisis was bound to lead eventually to a food crisis. Famine struck the country in the second half of the 1990s. During this period, mass starvation decimated about 10% of the population. This must have been a terrifying time for the nation. Even today, around 6.5 million of the state's 23 million people are dependent upon food aid from the UN's World Food Program (WFP). The agency reports that 37% of children and 32% of women in the country are badly malnourished.

Behind the façade of television broadcasts of military pomp and power, North Korea is, in reality, a depleted society unable to properly feed its own population. It is at least half-way along the road to destruction. It has undergone an industrial and agricultural collapse from which it will never fully recover unless it modernises its society and economy. The dilemma for the authorities in Pyongyang is that such a modernisation process would lead rapidly to the demise of its totalitarian political system.

² Eating Fossil Fuels, by Dale Allen Pfeiffer (New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, 2006, p.43.

³ Ibid, p.44, 49.

The CIA World Factbook places North Korea 194th in the world according to its GDP - per capita (PPP) of \$1,800.⁴ It also has a high external debt rate and very weak domestic energy stocks and production. With industrial energy being a driving force of long-term economic growth, the chances are very low of the country undergoing a strong enough economic recovery to buy the time needed to break out of its current political time-warp.

Politically isolated and cut off from modern society and from globalisation, as well as from the world's considerable knowledge base, North Korea's economic prospects are, indeed, poor. Veiled in secrecy, the country, tightly controlled by a dictatorship backed by the military, is in chronic lockdown mode.

The country reminds me of how the Maya civilisation declined as a result of a combination of energy shortages, food crises, natural disasters, ecological deterioration and a political vacuum. Inappropriate, rigid leadership, which was unresponsive to the root-causes of its national crisis, played a significant role in the Maya Collapse. It is going to be a key element of North Korea's future fall. The country's totalitarian military dictatorship, which hosts about 200,000 political prisoners, seems more interested in developing its nuclear weapons programme than in feeding all its people. The state first allocates fuel to the military and then lets the other sectors – agriculture, transportation and industry – compete for the remainder of the limited fuel supplies available to the country.

Economic progress in today's highly competitive global world is impossible under such repressive conditions, as China discovered. Pyongyang's inverted logic shows there is a vacuum of leadership in the country. This is a major factor in collapses of social systems, from the Maya society to modern-day Egypt and Libya during the recent Arab Spring.

Kim Jong Un is incapable of reforming the North Korean state. His brand of totalitarianism relies upon indoctrination and keeping the public ignorant to perpetuate the dynasty's absurd state personality cult. This, in turn, makes education and information the true enemy of his state. Governance based on public ignorance cannot be sustained indefinitely in an era of globalised internet and mobile communications. The government has been known to mete out severe punishments for citizens using mobile phones or making unauthorised international phone calls.⁵ However, information, from radio, internet and books and magazines smuggled into the country, *will* invade North Korea. Education *will* infiltrate North Korea. Freedom *will* conquer North Korea. This small state cannot hold indefinitely against the forces of global technology revolutionising society across the planet.

⁴ World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, D.C. 20505

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html>

⁵ "150,000 Witness North Korea Execution of Factory Boss Whose Crime Was Making International Phone Calls" November 27, 2007 - FoxNews.com <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,313226,00.html>

"North Korea threatens to punish mobile-phone users as 'war criminals'" - Julian Ryall, Tokyo 26 Jan 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/9040152/North-Korea-threatens-to-punish-mobile-phone-users-as-war-criminals.html>

Furthermore, when leadership is so globally isolated, it cannot solve global problems like climate change, environmental degradation, famine, disease and, of course, recession and government debt. This produces paralysis in the face of these borderless crises. So often, it is the failure of leadership which allows economic, environmental and social decline to tip over into outright disorder and bankruptcy.

The Maya civilization broke down as a result of its over-consumed, exhausted resource base, which increased competition for resources and conflict. Degraded, deforested land such as we see in North Korea, becomes more vulnerable to climate change, which, in turn, further damages the soil and its fertility, leading to worsening droughts and decreased food production. This, in turn, further aggravates competition for resources, leading to social conflict. Social conflict then makes it harder for the kind of collective, co-operative action required to solve the deep-seated socio-ecological dilemma. Decline then slides down into disintegration. From a systems point of view, such destructive feedback loops are difficult to solve even by governments with high levels of credibility. This kind of collapse is what happened to the Mayas. Unfortunately, this is likely to happen to the North Koreans, too.

To understand how this might unfold, it is important to list disaffected groups and “voiceless” citizens who might take part in any Korean Revolution.

- The unemployed and unemployable
- The poor and hungry masses
- Workers on farms and in factories dissatisfied with top-down management and lack of labour rights
- Political prisoners
- The youth who are largely in favour of modernisation and modern technology
- Factions within the echelons of power in Pyongyang
- Criminal gangs
- Underground activists and those yearning for freedom and a modern education
- Thousands of North Korean defectors in China and South Korea itself (it is estimated, for example, that there are about 23,000 North Koreans who have made it via China to South Korea)

The data is not available as to the numbers of all these groups but it seems reasonable to assume there will be hundreds of thousands of North Koreans, perhaps as many as a million or more, willing to take part in any Bastille-style political uprising.

It would only take some catalytic force, possibly the next inevitable famine or an internal leadership power struggle, to release the pent-up, long-repressed anger of these masses and groups.

In conclusion, I strongly expect social, economic and environmental problems to escalate over the next ten years in North Korea. This will prompt some woefully belated economic reform measures from its rulers. As in Russia in the 1980s, when *glasnost* and *perestroika* increased, rather than deflated, the revolutionary fervour of the Russian people, these desperate North Korean reforms will only serve to release repressed, large-scale social tensions and the population's widespread yearning for freedom. At that point, well before 2030, a groundswell of opposition will build, spurred on by the North Korean underground liberation movement and other alienated groups, as well as by the international community. As the state begins to collapse, China, pre-empting the UN and the USA, is likely to intervene from the North, in the guise of a peace-keeping force, to end North Korea's revolution. A new era will begin of the military occupation of the country as it becomes a colony of the Asian super-power for the following few decades. The upside of this occupation is that it will inaugurate an overdue modernisation process analogous to China's own economic miracle.

Despite this bleak outlook for North Korea up to 2050, there is space in the long-term perspective to dream as well.

For the likely time-scale for a joyous reunification of a free and democratic Korea is sometime between 2050-2120.

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