

Anticipating and Preparing for the Potential Assassination of Kim Jong-Un

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Abstract

This paper examines the possibility of the assassination of Kim Jong-un and assesses what type of assassination has the highest probability of occurring in North Korea. Although one cannot predict when and how Kim Jong-un might be assassinated or by whom, we can still compare various types of assassinations for probabilistic analysis. I propose four types of assassination, named in reference to the historical cases that typify each: “Valkyrie,” “Brutus,” “Oswald,” and “Kim Jae-gyu.” Based upon this general typology and its application to the context of North Korea, I argue that the assassination of Kim Jong-un is more likely to be carried out by a lone assassin from the upper echelons of leadership at a private gathering than by a group of plotters during a public event. This analysis has several policy implications for strategists in Washington and Seoul. It is recommended that they incorporate assassination scenarios more specifically in their contingency planning for the future of North Korea and prepare for timely and direct intervention in the North Korean affairs as Washington did so effectively during the process of German unification.

Keywords: North Korea, DPRK, assassination, contingency planning, Kim Jong-un, Kim regime, regime change, Korea, Korean Peninsula, South Korea, Republic of Korea, ROK, the United States, strategic planning

Introduction

In 2014, North Korea furiously reacted to the release of the Hollywood comedy *The Interview* and boldly retaliated with a cyberattack targeting the Sony Pictures.¹ It was not the first time that North Korea responded sensitively to international condemnation on various issues ranging from military provocation to Pyongyang’s nuclear program to human rights violations. But the tone of North Korea’s outrage against *The Interview*, with the promise of “merciless

retaliation,” deserves special attention.² Why was Pyongyang so furious about a mere slapstick comedy? It is unrealistic that the United States or South Korea would seriously consider a policy of assassinating Kim Jong-un. Apart from the difficulty of execution, such an attempt would most likely unleash more chaos, including the possibility of all-out war on the Korean Peninsula. No serious strategists in Washington and Seoul want to exacerbate the already grave uncertainty over the future of North Korea. I posit that the reason Pyongyang reacted so outrageously to the release of *The Interview* is because the movie has the potential to inspire assassins, not from outside, but from within North Korea.

The assassination of Kim Jong-un has taken the central part of various contingency scenarios for North Korea. Given the power of the security apparatus and its tight control over the people of North Korea, there is a near-consensus among North Korea experts that a military coup organized by elites or an “Arab Spring”-type of mass protest will not materialize in North Korea.³ However, the assassination of Kim Jong-un still remains a potential trigger for sudden change in North Korea. Despite its significance as the starting point of various scenarios, there has been no systematic examination of what type of assassination is more probable than others, who the potential assassins are, how subsequent events would likely unfold, and how Washington and Seoul should respond.

This paper aims to assess what type of assassination is most likely to occur in North Korea. I argue that the assassination of Kim Jong-un is more likely to be carried out by a lone assassin from the country’s top leadership at a private gathering than by a group of plotters during a public event. Examining the possibility of the assassination of Kim Jong-un is important because the US and South Korea should respond differently according to the type of assassination. If the assassination is successfully carried out by a well-organized group of plotters who have a clear post-assassination plan to take over leadership, then the strategists in Washington and Seoul would fare better waiting and seeing the power transition in Pyongyang, and waiting for the right time to contact the new leadership for peace negotiation. However, if Kim Jong-un is killed by a lone assassin, the power struggle among different factions is likely to intensify in Pyongyang and then Washington and Seoul will have to adapt quickly to push the process of change in their desired direction, as the United States and West Germany did so effectively during German re-unification when the East German border suddenly and accidentally

opened.⁴

Some caveats must be addressed clearly at the outset. First, despite the strong policy implications, the analysis of this paper is *not* designed to advocate the policy of assassination. I intend to enrich our imagination for the future of North Korea by developing several scenarios of how Kim Jong-un may be assassinated by North Koreans, not by Americans or South Koreans. This is an assessment of potential future events within North Korea, not a policy recommendation to precipitate sudden change in Pyongyang through assassination.⁵ Second, I do not claim to predict the specific time and place of Kim Jong-un's demise. Instead I make the case that we can compare various types of assassination and assess which one is most likely to occur in North Korea.

Concerning the method of inquiry, this paper's probabilistic analysis takes a minimalist approach. Instead of calculating the specific probabilities of anticipated events, I will assign probability to each event through comparison. That is, I will assess which type is least, less, more and most likely to happen among the various scenarios under consideration. My analysis starts with the conservative assumption that the chance of Kim Jong-un being assassinated in the future is at least greater than zero, given past trends and recent signs of political instability in North Korea. Then, I deductively develop a general typology of political assassination defined by the number of assassins involved in the plot and their motives; they are the "Valkyrie," "Brutus," "Oswald," and "Kim Jae-gyu" assassination types. Applying the typology to the context of North Korea, I conclude that the "Kim Jae-gyu" style assassination has the highest probability of occurring in North Korea.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. First, I briefly review how the extant contingency scenarios for North Korea have addressed the issue of assassination of Kim Jong-un. Next I suggest a general typology of assassination drawn from historical cases of political assassination, and then apply it to the specific context of North Korea. After assessing what type of assassination is most likely to happen in North Korea, I will discuss how the US and South Korea can respond to the different assassination scenarios in North Korea. Finally, I will discuss what policy implications this probabilistic analysis have in the broader context of contingency planning for the future of North Korea.

Why should we worry about the assassination of Kim Jong-un?

Since Kim Jong-un took office in 2012, there have been a series of purges of top officials like Lee Yong-ho, including the sudden execution of Jang Song-taek. Recently, Hyon Yong-chol, a former North Korean defense chief, was also executed, allegedly with an anti-aircraft gun in front of hundreds of spectators.⁶ Whether all these purges and executions are evidence of the consolidation of Kim Jong-un's power or its fragility remains controversial. What has become clear is that Kim Jong-un has intensified his reign of terror to coerce loyalty from his subordinates by feeding their fear. The more powerful figures in Pyongyang are under the greatest stress concerning their physical as well as political survival. In addition, Kim Jong-un's frequent reshuffling of key positions in Pyongyang has increased uncertainty for the future of his subordinates. As such, there has been an increase in rumors that high officials in Pyongyang have begun to flee from North Korea, an assertion that the South Korean President Park Geun-hye confirmed to be true during her interview with the Washington Post.⁷ Under such levels of fear, frustration, and anxiety, it is plausible that some North Koreans may think about an idea as radical as to get rid of the very source of their grievances: Kim Jong-un.

Is assassination even possible in North Korea? Given the power of Kim Jong-un's tyranny, many North Korea experts appear to agree that assassination is highly unlikely. Nonetheless, there have been assassination attempts against Kim Jong-il in the past, which have been repeatedly confirmed by multiple testimonies from North Korean defectors.⁸ For example, it has been alleged that several groups of officers from the military and the Bureau of Bodyguards respectively attempted coups against Kim Jong-il in 1992, but the plots were uncovered and they were executed.⁹ Kim Jong-il himself was known to believe that the massive explosion at the Ryongchon rail station in 2004 was not an accident but a deliberate attempt to assassinate him by targeting his special train on the way back from China.¹⁰ Despite the issue of reliability concerning the source of information, the list of alleged coup attempts indicates that there have been attempts to remove the supreme leader of North Korea in the past and one cannot exclude the possibility that another assassination attempt will occur in the future too.¹¹

The assassination of the supreme leader of North Korea has long been discussed as a part of various contingency scenarios for the future

of North Korea, but not sufficiently and systematically. From Joel Wit and Paul Stares' influential 2009 report "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea" to See-won Byun's report on North Korea contingency planning in 2009 and Scott Snyder's report on the scenarios of Korea unification in 2011, there has been a consistent assumption that North Korea will eventually experience political instability that may lead to regime collapse.¹² Most recently, Bruce Bennett's analysis of contingency planning, published by the Rand Corporation in 2013, is based upon only one scenario: the assassination of Kim Jong-un.¹³ While the assassination scenario has been increasingly brought up as a possible catalyst of sudden change, no systematic analysis has been performed for the variety of assassination types and its significance for the contingency planning of the United States and South Korea.

Given the recent indicators of political instability under Kim Jong-un's rule, as previously noted, in combination with the historical record of resistance against the Kim family regime, one cannot entirely exclude the possibility that one day Kim Jong-un might be assassinated by a North Korean citizen. This is a very urgent issue that the strategists in Washington and Seoul take seriously when they devise contingency plans for the future of North Korea. If such incident ever occurs in North Korea, the follow-up events will unfold at an overwhelmingly fast pace for the policymakers in the United States and South Korea. In order to cope with such a fast-changing situation, they need to explore various assassination scenarios in advance.

The Typology of Assassination

The typology of political assassination can be first divided between those carried out by a group of plotters and those executed by lone assassins.¹⁴ I suggest that there are two subtypes within each of the aforementioned categories: the Valkyrie and Brutus types for assassinations carried out by a group of plotters, and the Oswald and Kim Jae-gyu types for assassinations by lone assassins.

Valkyrie Type: The Valkyrie type assassination refers to a failed assassination plot against Hitler by a group of German army officers and politicians in 1944. Originally, the name Operation Valkyrie referred to a wartime emergency plan in case of civil disorder in Germany. German Army General Friedrich Olbricht and Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg led an underground

resistance group with which they planned to use Operation Valkyrie to take control of German cities and arrest Nazi leadership after Hitler was assassinated. The plot was prepared for a long time and executed in 1944, but Hitler managed to survive the assassination attempt, which was a small explosion. Based upon this historical case, I define the “Valkyrie type” as an assassination prepared over a long period of long time by a large group of underground dissidents with a clear post-assassination plan to swiftly take over leadership. The Valkyrie type is a coup in practice, which starts with killing the target instead of arresting it.

Brutus Type: In 44 BC, a small group of senators led by Marcus Brutus agreed to assassinate Caesar. They were convinced of their cause of preventing dictatorship in the Roman Republic, but did not give much thought towards how to create peaceful regime transition after the killing. After stabbing Caesar to death, Brutus declared Rome free again with the removal of the tyrant. The result unforeseen by the assassins was that the Roman lower classes, with whom Caesar was popular, became enraged against the small group of aristocrats. Instead of peaceful regime transition, a civil war broke out and Brutus and the other assassins were killed by the successors of Caesar.¹⁵ Compared to the Valkyrie type, the Brutus type assassination has a better chance of success in assassinating the target because it requires a smaller number of plotters and less preparation, thus it has less chance of being discovered by authorities before execution. However, without a clear post-assassination plan, the plot has lower chances of success with respect to peaceful regime change.

Oswald Type This refers to assassinations executed by lone assassins during public events, such as Lee Harvey Oswald’s killing of President Kennedy with a rifle during the motorcade in Dallas in 1963. There are a number of similar cases in American history, including the killings of Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. What defines the Oswald type assassination is that a lone assassin has no working or personal relationship with his target, thus he can gain access to the target only when the target appears in public. Then the lone assassin needs to overcome security checks and bodyguard

systems to approach his target. This implies that the chances of a lone assassin's success are higher when the target appears more frequently in public and the screening process is less strict. Compared to an assassination executed by a group of plotters, the objective of an individual assassin is typically limited to the removal of the target itself, without a specific plan for regime change after the assassination.

Kim Jae-gyu Type: This assassination type refers to those executed by lone assassins during non-public events, such as Kim Jae-gyu's assassination of South Korean president Park Chung-hee in 1979. Kim was the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), one of Park's closest friends, and one of several "number twos" in the Park administration. During a small private banquet held for Park where only Kim, Cha Ji-chul, the Chief Presidential Bodyguard, and another "number two" were in attendance, Kim used a handgun to kill his boss with one shot in the chest and another in the head. What distinguishes Kim Jae-gyu's case from the Oswald type assassination is that the lone assassin in this scenario is from the target's inner circle and thus can easily gain access to the target by using his or her high profile status.

How likely is each type of assassination to occur in North Korea? More specifically, which type is more or less likely to occur in North Korea when compared to the others? The next section attempts to answer these questions by applying the typology to the specific context of North Korean politics.

Table 1. The Probability of Assassination in North Korea

Type	# of Assassin	Problems	Likelihood
Valkyrie	Group of plotters	High risk of being discovered due to coordination problem	#3. Less likely
Brutus	Group of plotters	Moderate risk of being discovered due to coordination problem	#2. More likely
Oswald	Lone assassin	Difficulty of obtaining weapon/s, intensive security screening	#4. Least likely
Kim Jae-gyu	Lone assassin	mental instability as prerequisite, High Risk of being Punished	#1. Most likely

First, I assess that the Valkyrie and Brutus types are not likely to succeed in North Korea because they would be too easily discovered during the planning phase by the authorities in Pyongyang. The Valkyrie type assassination is unlikely to succeed for the same reasons that a coup is unlikely to succeed in North Korea; the Kim regime has “coup-proofed” itself by bribing elites for their cooperation and severely punishing them for any signs of non-cooperation. Under such conditions, a coup is unlikely to succeed due to the high potential for defection of plotters before the plot can be implemented. Most North Korea analysts also cast doubt on the existence of large underground organization within North Korea in the first place. Compared to the Valkyrie type, the Brutus type has lower chances of being uncovered by the authorities because it requires a smaller number of plotters, which can guarantee a bolder and swifter execution of the plan. However, given North Korea’s surveillance system and the fierce competition among elites to show loyalty to the Kim family regime, it still remains challenging for a group of plotters to keep a plan secret without a defection of a plotter.

The Valkyrie and Brutus types of assassination are classic examples of the “prisoner’s dilemma,” in which players cannot have open communication because of constant surveillance and severe punishment. In North Korea, potential plotters have to worry about each other’s defection all the time. The issue of coordination is the reason why previous coup attempts have failed in North Korea. For example, the No.6. Corps in North Hamkyung Province planned a coup against Kim Jong-il but were discovered by the Kim regime and the corps was completely dismantled in 1996. Hwang Jang-yop, the highest ranking North Korean defector, has explained that coups are difficult to successfully execute in North Korea because of monitoring system in which all individuals at every level of government are constantly cross-checking one another.¹⁶ North Korea’s ubiquitous monitoring system is designed precisely to prevent any attempts to organize resistance against the Kim family regime, not to mention a coup d’etat. The Kim family regime will always have the ability to discover plots before their execution because of the availability of willing informants.

The Oswald type assassination seems even more unlikely to occur in North Korea. As noted above, the more frequently the target of assassination appears in public and the looser the screening process for participants at public events, the higher the chances of the potential assassin successfully approaching his target. Kim Jong-un’s case satisfies

the first condition. Imitating his grandfather's ruling style with on-site inspections, Kim Jong-un frequently visits places where he comes into contact with ordinary citizens and low-ranking soldiers in person. However, the second condition poses a serious challenge for a potential assassin. North Korea's bodyguard system is widely known as the best of its kind.¹⁷ According to the testimony of a former North Korean bodyguard, the Supreme Guard Command, also known as Unit 963, is the bodyguard force in charge of protecting Kim Jong-un. It inspects every place chosen for Kim Jong-un's on-site guidance prior to his visit. It is also responsible for screening the ordinary citizens who are mobilized for public events. Given such intense procedures to prevent any attempts to harm Kim Jong-un, it is unlikely that a lone assassin could kill Kim Jong-un in the way that Oswald did President Kennedy even if he manages to approach Kim at close range. In addition, the North Korean government has firm control over private ownership of weapons.

But the powerful figures of the top leadership can have their own weapons and they can gain access to Kim Jong-un more easily than ordinary citizens. If the assassination of Kim Jong-un ever occurs, it is most likely to be carried out by one of those top officials who can approach Kim Jong-un at close distance in a non-public situation where the normal intensive screening process is loosened. In other words, the Kim Jae-gyu type assassination is most likely to happen in North Korea compared to other types of assassination. Given the Kim family's taste for lavish parties with the "brigade of joy," an alleged collection of 2,000 women and girls that provide entertainment including sexual services for high ranking officials and distinguished guests, one can assume that there will continue to be private banquets where a potential assassin could approach Kim Jong-un in close distance.¹⁸

The problem with the Kim Jae-gyu type scenario is that it requires a North Korean version of Kim Jae-gyu, an individual from the inner core of the Kim Jong-un regime, willing to pull the trigger while risking his own life in the process. During the trial, Kim Jae-gyu claimed that his motivation was political and that he meant to end the tyranny of Park Chung-hee to advance South Korea's democracy.¹⁹ However, later analysis revealed that Kim was mentally unstable and his personal resentment against Cha Ji-hul, the President's bodyguard, played a considerable role in his impulsive decision to kill his boss.²⁰ It is not easy to tell whether Kim's motivation was genuinely political or personal and

this raises a question about the rationality of assassins in general. According to one study, about 25% of the assassins studied were found to be delusional. This figure rose up to 60% with ‘near-lethal attackers,’ who were apprehended before reaching their targets.²¹ It points to the difficulty of distinguishing rational political motivation from the possible psychological and personal impulses of a lone assassin.

Predicting who will be the most frustrated by Kim Jong-un’s tyranny or the most mentally unstable within the upper echelons of North Korean leadership is anybody’s bet. What is important is that either path – rational political motivation or personal psychological impulse – is sufficient motivation to pull the trigger. A potential assassin may have thought about some grandiose plan to achieve the unification of Korean Peninsula after removing Kim Jong-un, or he may simply want revenge against Kim Jong-un for personal reasons. No matter what the specific motivation is, we can broadly define it as a sense of grievance. Measuring how much grievance is subjectively enough to drive a potential assassin to pull the trigger is beyond the scope of this analysis. What is important to us is that a potential assassin in North Korea will have a better chance of success when acting alone rather than coordinating with others and when he is one of the senior officials with access to Kim Jong-un.

In short, the Oswald type is found to be the least likely scenario because it is highly difficult for an ordinary citizen or low ranking official to approach Kim Jong-un while carrying a weapon given the security apparatus’ intense screening process and protection measures in place for Kim Jong-un. The Valkyrie type is also unlikely to succeed because there is always incentive for one of the plotters to defect and betray his co-conspirators, and therefore, the plot can be easily uncovered. The Brutus type is more likely to occur, as it requires less preparation among a smaller number of assassins compared to the Valkyrie type. Still, for the problem of coordination, it entails the risk of being uncovered. The Kim Jae-gyu type is most likely to occur and succeed in North Korea. An individual assassin, who must be one of the top officials in Pyongyang, can take action more swiftly and without the problem of coordination problem associated with the Valkyrie or Brutus types, and more effectively with the close approach to Kim Jong-un compared to the Oswald type. Although it is impossible to predict the psychology of a potential assassin, one can assume that the ongoing

power struggle and intensifying reign of terror in Pyongyang has been amplifying the sense of grievance among the regime’s powerful figures.

Table 2. Contingency Scenarios and the US-South Korea Response

The US-South Korea Responses to Each Type of Assassination

Type	Likelihood	Likely Scenario	US-ROK Response
Valkyrie	#3. Less likely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Plotters succeed in seizing power ▪ Stable power transition ▪ Ready for reform and peace talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Timely engagement ▪ Initiate negotiation
Brutus	#2. More likely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Plotters fail to seize power ▪ Fights between old and new groups ▪ Factional conflicts or civil war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bold intervention or ▪ Open deal with China
Oswald	#4. Least likely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Power vacuum, immediate Chaos ▪ The Kim Regime seemingly persists ▪ Internal power struggle intensifies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High alertness ▪ Secret deal with China
Kim Jae-gyu	#1. Most likely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Power vacuum, immediate chaos ▪ Internal power struggle intensifies ▪ Coup, new leadership emerges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Depending on the orientation of the new leadership: benign or hostile?

What does this assessment imply for the contingency planning of the US and South Korea for the future of North Korea? First, we can ponder what subsequent events are likely to follow each type of assassination, and then consider how to respond to each scenario.

If the Valkyrie type of assassination occurs in North Korea, we can expect a smooth power transition from the Kim family to the group of plotters in Pyongyang. The Valkyrie type assassination, by definition, presumes that a large underground group of dissidents have sophisticatedly developed a post-assassination plan over a long period of time. Therefore they would be well-prepared to overwhelm any rival factions, and swiftly take over the leadership of North Korea after the assassination of Kim Jong-un. In such a scenario, the United States and South Korea would be better to take a prudent and gradual approach to dealing with the newly emerged leadership rather than a decisive and bold intervention. It is recommended that Washington and Seoul give

some time to the assassin group to take control of Pyongyang, and then start negotiations for peace with the new leadership.

The Brutus type assassination contrasts with the Valkyrie type in many respects. Even if a small group of plotters succeed in assassinating Kin Jong-un, the plotters may encounter challenges from other factions who seek to fill the power vacuum and assume leadership while the old regime falls apart.²² Violent conflicts among different factions or even a civil war may follow as it did in the Roman Republic in the aftermath of Caesar's death.²³ Given the danger of civil war associated with North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the international community cannot afford to sit back and idly observe developments within North Korea. The US and South Korea should undertake a bold and swift intervention rather than a prudent and gradual approach in order to avoid the worst outcome of North Korean WMDs falling into the wrong hands during a civil war.²⁴ Openly engaging with China can also influence the developments of factional conflicts within North Korea by signaling that foreign countries are ready to accommodate fundamental changes in North Korea's power structure from the Kim regime to new leadership.

If the Oswald type assassination ever happens in North Korea, despite its low probability, it will surely cause the most unpredictable situation in Pyongyang. Because the Oswald type assassination presumes that the assassination is carried out by an unknown citizen, senior officials in Pyongyang will most likely be panicked by the suddenly created power vacuum. On the surface, the Kim family regime may seem to maintain power for the time being, but internally, various scenarios are equally possible: perhaps another member of the Kim family, like Kim Yeo-jong or Kim Jong-Chol, may emerge as a new leader,²⁵ or collective leadership may emerge as a result of compromise among elites, or military conflicts among different factions may occur if elites fail to reach a compromise. Accordingly, the US and South Korea have to simultaneously consider various options ranging from a gradual approach to bold intervention in the event of an Oswald type assassination.²⁶ In addition, Washington and Seoul need to initiate a secret dialogue with Beijing to avoid misperceiving each other during such highly fluid circumstances.

Compared to the Oswald type, the Kim Jae-gyu type assassination is more likely to cause a power struggle rather than a compromise among elites.²⁷ Especially if we refer to what happened after Kim Jae-gyu's

assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979, we can expect that one of the powerful figures in Pyongyang will emerge as a new dictator in North Korea. Kim Jae-gyu was arrested shortly after killing Park Chung-hee and Major General Chun Doo-hwan, then the head of Security Command, was assigned the investigation of the incident. Using his increased authority, Chun staged a coup by arresting General Jeong Seung-hwa, the chief of the Korean Army, and became the president of South Korea himself. Similarly, if a Kim Jae-gyu type assassination occurs in North Korea, the assassin will most likely be arrested shortly after the assassination because the assassin would have acted alone without a post-assassination plan developed in coordination with other similarly-minded individuals. It is possible that a newly emerged leader would turn out to be another dictator only different in name, as was the case with Chun Doo-hwan in South Korea in 1980. In order to avoid this worst-case scenario – one in which North Korea suffers another dictatorship which has inherited WMD from the Kim regime - the US and South Korea will need to boldly and quickly intervene in North Korean affairs and change their direction after a Kim Jae-gyu type assassination in North Korea.

Complexity arises when these scenarios converge with each other over time. For example, let's say the Kim Jae-gyu type assassination occurs in North Korea. The scenario described above predicts that the demise of Kim Jong-un will create a short-term power vacuum, soon to be filled by the rise of a new dictator. But it is also possible that the power struggle immediately following a Kim Jae-gyu type assassination can be protracted, and subsequent events may unfold in the way that the Brutus type scenario predicts. Factional conflicts will intensify and even civil war is possible. Then the next phase may unfold in the way that the Valkyrie type scenario predicts: one faction swiftly overwhelms the others and seizes power. In this way, regardless of the specific type of assassination, the situation in Pyongyang after Kim Jong-un's demise may be suddenly stabilized or turn increasingly violent over time. The initial assessment of assassination type does not guarantee the accurate forecasting of subsequent events.

Even so, we can draw the following interim conclusions from this probabilistic analysis: the United States and South Korea should prepare for bold intervention in North Korean affairs in the event of a worst-case scenario resulting from the assassination of Kim Jong-un. Of course the best scenario is one in which new leadership in Pyongyang turns out to

be benign and willing to abandon nuclear weapons in exchange for peace talks with Washington and Seoul. In such case, the US and South Korea will have enough time to prepare for negotiations on a real time basis as the situation develops in North Korea. What they have to be worried about and thus prepared for is the worst-case scenario of a civil war in which WMDs fall into the wrong hands in North Korea. There will be a short period of time between the moment of assassination and the next phase of civil war. The window of opportunity for Washington and Seoul to influence the political developments after the assassination of Kim Jong-un will be open only for a short while. Accordingly, strategists in the US and South Korea should be ready to undertake swift and bold intervention, if necessary. In times of such high uncertainty, it is always better to prepare for the worst, than to wish for the best.

Table 3. Assassination Contingency Scenarios for North Korea

Updating Contingency Scenarios

Positive Change	No Change	Sudden Change	
Reform and opening	Reign of terror	Top leadership level	Assassination of Kim Jong-un
De-nuclearization	Nuclear program	Elite level	Coup d'état
Peace negotiations	Military provocations	Grassroots level	Popular uprising

The assassination of Kim Jong-un is merely one of many scenarios possible for the future of North Korea. We can also think of positive scenarios for North Korea's future. Kim Jong-un may decide to launch a Chinese style reform and opening policy while loosening his reign of terror. At last, he may realize that North Korea cannot simultaneously pursue nuclear weapons and economic development, as repeatedly pointed out by the United States and South Korea. Then Kim Jong-un may make a bold move for peace talks with Washington and Seoul by announcing the will to abandon North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for economic assistance from the United States and South Korea. No doubt this kind of positive scenario has been more wished for by many more people than the assassination of Kim Jong-un.

But many North Korea watchers have also realized that the chances of such positive change under Kim Jong-un's rule have decreased over

time. When Kim Jong-un took office in 2012 after Kim Jong-il's death in 2011, many hoped that he might turn out to be a reformist. Instead, Kim Jong-un has intensified the reign of terror and continued to engage in provocative behavior like nuclear tests and missile launches. We have seen increasing signs of instability from North Korea like the continued purges of senior figures, the continued exodus of North Korean defectors, and the rumors of mass protests across the country. While it remains controversial whether Kim Jong-un's execution of high officials signifies the consolidation of his power or its fragility, what becomes clear is that Kim Jong-un shows no interest in becoming the North Korean version of Deng Xiaoping in the foreseeable future. In the long run, sudden and violent changes are more likely to happen in North Korea than the gradual and positive change described above.

This does not necessarily mean that the assassination of Kim Jong-un is highly likely compared to other types of contingencies included under the category of sudden changes in North Korea. As Table 3 suggests, the demise of Kim Jong-un regime can unfold in three ways: assassination at the top leadership level, coup d'état at the elite level, and popular uprising at the grassroots level. In their analysis of Pyongyang's toolkit for regime survival, Jennifer Lind and Daniel Byman illustrate how cooptation prevents coups at the elite level and how restrictive social policies, the manipulation of ideas and information, and the use of force prevent revolution at the grassroots level. They argue that US decision-makers and analysts should not underestimate the power of the Kim family's tyranny, implying that most North Korean people dare not think of organizing revolts against Kim Jong-un, whether it is coup or mass protest. Ironically, this leaves the assassination scenario as only viable path for the sudden change of North Korea.

What becomes clear from putting the possibility of assassination in the broader context of contingency scenarios is that the removal of Kim Jong-un is most likely to trigger a series of chain reactions at all levels. At the elite level, once Kim Jong-un as the source of fear and cooptation is gone, some potential dissidents may find the window of opportunity open for them to stage a coup d'état against the remnants of the Kim family regime. In turn, in the midst of the political turmoil in Pyongyang, mass protests on the streets may erupt in other provinces across the country.

The assassination of Kim Jong-un is significant because it could immediately ignite a coup and revolution involving violence and

bloodshed. Then Washington and Seoul will not have the luxury of sitting back and idly observing the developments within North Korea. Rather, they will need to intervene in North Korean affairs in a timely manner to shape their desired outcome of moving toward the peaceful unification of the two Koreas as Washington did so effectively during the process of German unification.²⁸

Conclusion

The assassination of Kim Jong-un is one of the most dramatic possible scenarios for the future of North Korea. Although we cannot predict when and how such an incident may occur, we can still compare the probabilities of various types of assassination such as the Valkyrie, Brutus, Oswald and Kim Jae-gyu type. First, I argue that the assassination of Kim Jong-un is more likely to be carried out by a lone assassin than by a group of plotters owing to the Kim family regime's coup-proof measures. Second, the lone assassin is most likely to be one of the regime's top officials, not an unknown ordinary citizen, and the assassination is most likely to occur in a non-public situation like a banquet or secret meeting. Regardless of its specific type, in the broader context, the assassination of Kim Jong-un is highly likely to trigger chain reactions at all levels from a coup d'état to mass uprising at a fast pace. As such, the strategists in Washington and Seoul are advised to take the possibility of assassination more seriously when devising contingency planning for the future of North Korea.

Three points are worth reiterating as policy implications. First, we need to pay special attention to the rivalries among the powerful figures in Pyongyang beyond them versus Kim Jong-un only.²⁹ Kim Jae-gyu's case suggests that a potential assassin in Pyongyang would be motivated to remove his rival in a power struggle at first and extend the thought to removing Kim Jong-un altogether, given that Kim Jae-gyu's impulsive decision to pull the trigger not only stemmed from his frustration with Park Chung-hee, but also from his rivalry with Cha Ji-chul. Second, Washington and Seoul should consider a timely and bold intervention in the event of assassination occurring in North Korea. The contingency scenarios developed from the various types of assassination point to the possibility of civil war in North Korea.³⁰ This implies that Washington and Seoul have to prepare for the worst-case scenario of a civil war with North Korean WMDs falling into the wrong hands. Third, consulting with China is not only necessary, but can be instrumental too. In case of

a Brutus type assassination occurring in North Korea, Washington and Seoul need to talk with Beijing secretly to avoid miscalculation with each other in a highly volatile situation. In case of the Oswald or Kim Jae-gyu type assassination, Washington and Seoul should deliberately pursue an open dialogue with Beijing as a way to influence the domestic politics of North Korea after an assassination of Kim Jong-un.

Last but not least, it should be kept in mind that the very act of predicting the assassination of Kim Jong-un can influence the real chances of such an event occurring in reality. Probably because of the potentially dangerous effects of a self-fulfilling prophecy, there has been a lack of open discussion about the possibility of the assassination of Kim Jong-un in Washington and Seoul. Still, given that it has been increasingly clear that Kim Jong-un is not going to be the North Korean version of Deng Xiaoping and will continue to intensify the reign of terror, one cannot exclude the possibility of the assassination of Kim Jong-un from various contingency scenarios of political instability in Pyongyang.

The typology of assassination suggested in this paper can serve as a guideline for contingency planning for the future of North Korea. If Kim Jong-un is assassinated one day, the policymakers in Washington and Seoul immediately need to figure out what sort of assassination occurred, what it means for the future of North Korea, and how they should respond. The typology and the probability assigned to each type of assassination through comparison will help them make the initial assessment. Although it will be extremely difficult to predict what subsequent events will follow the assassination of Kim Jong-un, having the typology of assassination at hand will provide some guidance in navigating the complex reality.

Notes:

¹ The plot of the movie is about two Americans entering North Korea to interview Kim Jong-un on a secret mission to assassinate him in collaboration with the CIA.

² For comparison, North Korea also protested a UN resolution condemning its human rights record. North Korea held a mass rally in Pyongyang and thousands of soldiers and citizens joined the rally to denounce the United Nations report, accusing the US of trying to overthrow the regime, but Pyongyang's rhetoric did not go as far as threatening war against US, which it did when protesting against

the release of the movie. See “N. Korea Threatens War over US Movie,” *BBC News*, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28014069>.

³ Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 44–74.

⁴ Paul B. Stares and Joel S. Wit, “Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2009: 29, accessed January 6, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/world/preparing-sudden-change-north-korea/p18019>.

⁵ The policy of assassinating foreign country’s leader is not only morally disturbing, but also undesirable from the strategic point of view. Increasing uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula, which is already grave at present, is not in the interests of the United States and South Korea.

⁶ “North Korea Defence Chief Hyon Yong-Chol ‘Executed,’” *BBC News*, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32716749>.

⁷ Lally Weymouth, “‘Eventually We Will Face a Situation That Will Be beyond Our Control,’” *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/an-interview-with-south-korean-president-park-geun-hye/2015/06/11/15abee3e-1039-11e5-9726-49d6fa26a8c6_story.html.

⁸ For a compilation of resistance records in North Korea, see Joshua Stanton, “Can They Do It? A Brief History of Resistance to the North Korean Regime,” accessed on December 29, 2014, available at <http://freekorea.us/2007/03/06/can-they-do-it-a-brief-history-of-resistance-to-the-north-korean-regime/>.

⁹ The information about coups and resistance in North Korea depends on a lot of hearsay from North Korean defectors. The reliability of such rumors certainly remains questionable. But the frequent overlaps between account and similar testimonies imply that we may benefit from utilizing such information rather than discarding it. See Terry Mccarthy, “North Korea ‘Coup’ Fuels Security Fears: Defector’s Story of Failed Military Takeover Adds to Speculation over Pyongyang’s Regional Ambitions,” *The Independent*, accessed January 2, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/north-korea-coup-fuels-security-fears-defectors-story-of-failed-military-takeover-adds-to-speculation-over-pyongyangs-regional-ambitions-1463444.html>.

¹⁰ “NK leader says 2004 explosion was assassination attempt,” *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 08, 2011, accessed January 2, 2015, <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?biid=2011090833158>

¹¹ Although past performance is not indicative of future results, it can still be argued that the past records of certain events occurring repeatedly provide convincing support for the continuation of similar events in the future.

¹² See Stares and Wit; See-Won Byun “North Korea Contingency Planning and U.S.-ROK Cooperation,” Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, September 2009; and Victor Cha and David Kang, “Challenges for Korean Unifications Planning,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2011.

¹³ Bruce W. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR331.html.

¹⁴ This is the minimum approach one can take to categorizing assassination and any case of assassination falls into one of these two categories.

¹⁵ After the death of Caesar, the Second Triumvirate was formed, consisting of Anthony, Lepidus, both of who served as Caesar’s generals, and Octavian, who was named by Caesar as sole heir. They defeated the armies of Brutus and other plotters during the civil war sparked by the death of Caesar.

¹⁶ So Yeol Kim, “Remembering the Coup D’etat in 1996,” *Daily NK*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=7321&catald=nk02100>.

¹⁷ See Ken E. Gause, “Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State,” *The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, July 19, 2012, accessed on January 2, 2015, <http://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>.; “Guard Command,” *North Korea Leadership Watch*, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/dprk-security-apparatus/guard-command/>.

¹⁸ See “Vodka Binges, Secret Smoking and Big Macs - the Life of Kim Jong-Un as a Boy,” *Express.co.uk*, February 23, 2014, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/461408/Dictator-Kim-Jong-un-used-to-binge-on-vodka-and-Big-Macs>; Krista Mahr, “North Korea’s Runaway Sushi Chef Remembers Kim Jong Un,” *Time*, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://world.time.com/2012/01/18/north-koreas-runaway-sushi-chef-remembers-kim-jong-un/>; “KJI Behind Closed Doors,” *North Korea Leadership Watch*, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/2010/01/29/kji-behind-closed-doors/>.

¹⁹ Kim himself described the assassination as the “October 26 democracy revolution” and maintained that he “fire[d] a shot into the heart of the Yushin government with the mind of a beast” for the sake of Park Chung-hee and liberal

democracy. See “Series Documents First Interviews with Park Chung-Hee’s Assassin,” *The Hankyoreh*, October 18 2011, accessed January 3, 2015, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/501269.html.

²⁰ See ; Chong-Sik Lee, “South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition,” *Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 1980): 63–76.

²¹ R. A. Fein and B. Vossekuil, “Assassination in the United States: An Operational Study of Recent Assassins, Attackers, and near-Lethal Approachers,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 44, no. 2 (March 1999): 321–33.

²² Once the hegemonic dictator is removed, a security dilemma is created internally which often results in sectarian violence or civil war. North Korea may not be exception. Barry R. Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 27–47.

²³ Brutus succeeded in leading the group of assassins and killing Caesar. But he did not anticipate that Mark Antony, one of Caesar’s generals, would quickly mobilize forces to combat the murderers of Caesar, leading to a new civil war which ended in the defeat of Brutus.

²⁴ Many analysts worry about this point in the event of North Korean collapse. See Michael E. O’Hanlon, “North Korea Collapse Scenarios,” *The Brookings Institution*, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2009/06/north-korea-ohanlon>; Fareed Zakaria, “When North Korea Falls,” *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/17/AR2010101702608.html>; Priya Sethi, “If North Korea Collapsed...,” *The National Interest*, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/if-north-korea-collapsed-10868>.

²⁵ This hypothesis is made with assumption that the next heir will be chosen and endorsed under the condition of de-facto collective leadership behind the scenes as a result of elite compromise. One can also imagine that China may attempt to increase its influence over North Korea by endorsing Kim Jong-nam as the next leader of North Korea.

²⁶ If the situation develops in a way that calls for a gradual and prudent approach, then the US and South Korea will naturally have sufficient time to adjust to the changing situation. In terms of preparation, it is better to prepare for the worst-case scenario than the best case scenario. That is, the US and South Korea are better off preparing for a swift and bold intervention.

²⁷ Because the assassin is from the inner core of leadership in the case of a Kim Jae-gyu type assassination, it is more likely to widen the schism among elites

rather than helping them unite before the crisis created by the Kim Jae-gyu type assassination.

²⁸ For detailed accounts of the United States' skillful diplomacy in coordination with Berlin, see Philip D. Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²⁹ In terms of intelligence gathering, we need to take rumors more seriously when they are about personal relationships between “number two’s,” factional politics, and the temperament or personal traits of key figures. Such information is unreliable, but it can send important signals for an unexpected drama like the assassination of dictator. In a country under an extreme dictatorship like North Korea, politics is highly personalized among a handful number of key figures. Anything personal can become a political affair compared to liberal democracies where politics is, in principle, not supposed to include the personal affairs among politicians.

³⁰ Of course one can think of the best case scenario that new leadership after the removal of Kim Jong-un will turn out to be benign and willing to cooperate with the US and South Korea for the peace of the Korean Peninsula. But this is not the scenario for which Washington and Seoul need to devote time and resources to preparing a counter-strategy in advance. Instead, this is the one to which they should adapt quickly as the situation changes on a real time basis.