The debate over the future of North Korea often hinges on the belief that its current political and economic system is simply unsustainable.

But what will replace the system if it passes or is transformed? And what will these changes mean for Asia and the world? Boston University political scientist Walter C. Clemens, Jr. explores alternative scenarios and policy options.

Predictions are impossible, but we can still outline some possible futures for North Korea and its people. Taking a time frame from 2010 to 2025, we can ask what combinations of circumstances make each of these alternatives more likely. Finally, we can suggest what the United States and other concerned players could do to avoid the worst and make better futures more likely.

**Alternatives at Home and Abroad**

**Within North Korea** there could be:
- More of the same; • Catalytic collapse of the regime, along East German or Romanian lines;
- Gradual transformation toward a Chinese, Singaporean, or Taiwanese model; • Confederation with the Republic of Korea; • Transformation in a unified Korea

**In dealing with nuclear issues** there could be:
- More of the same – a negotiating stalemate;
- Negotiating breakthrough: no nuclear power or weapons; • Nuclear power but no nuclear weapons;
- Nuclear power and a small nuclear arsenal;
- Expanding nuclear arsenal

**As to the outside world** North Korea could be:
- More of the same — a rogue state; a proliferator of advanced military technology and weaponry; a fomenter of regional chaos; a challenger to US hegemony; a catalyst for global war; • A satellite for China in a strategy oriented toward trade or expansion; • A partner in a Northeast Asian zone of peace
The process took decades. Moscow acted quickly and with massive force to crush the East German Aufstand in 1953; it took weeks before sending tanks into Budapest in 1956; it took all summer before invading Czechoslovakia in 1968, with almost no loss of life; it permitted the Polish communist regime to impose martial law against Solidarity in the 1970s; it did nothing to stop East Europe’s withdrawal from the Soviet empire in the late 1980s; it killed less than 50 Balts as they drove to split from the USSR in 1988-1991. The Soviet regime did, however, kill many Kazaks in 1986 and some 20 Georgians in 1989.

WITHIN NORTH KOREA

More of the Same. The North Korean regime has been one of the most stable in the world since World War II — ruled by a family dynasty facing only weak and sporadic challenges from other elites and little but passive unrest among the broader population, notwithstanding extensive repression and intense privation. Top-down rule of this Orwellian variety may benefit a narrow elite but is a poor way to tap the human and material potential of a country. Poor nutrition leaves most North Koreans much shorter than their cousins in the South, and their brains as well as their bodies have been starved. Like Albania in Communist Europe, isolation has cost the hermit kingdom of North Korea dearly.

The status quo — a continuation of present political, economic, and military trends — is unlikely to hold beyond a few years. Stalinism may already be suffering a natural death. Top-down controls and Juche isolation are not viable — especially given the vibrant dynamism of South Korea and the increasing permeability of the North.

Most Communist tyrannies have vanished or mellowed. Sooner or later, North Korea will change — gradually or quickly. How soon and in what manner are unknown.

Catalytic Collapse. Ultra-Stalinism might not wither gradually. Instead, North Korea could implode or explode. It could suffer an economic breakdown and intense civil strife. The regime would probably respond with even more repression, but it could also collapse into anarchy. Social fitness would decline even further as North Korea veered between rigid order and anarchy. Refugees would flood into South Korea and China, creating major disruption.

North Korean tyranny could collapse either with little violence, as in East Germany, or in a violent coup d’état, as happened in Romania. Indicators of internal weakness may exist for years, even decades, without a clear sign that change is coming. The catalyst may be a small event: When the Hungarian government cut the barbed wire fencing off its western border, thousands of East German “tourists” crossed over into Austria. Soon, other Germans began to pull apart the Wall in Berlin, and the German Democratic Republic was absorbed into a united Germany. The nuclear superpower that had long backed East Germany and other Communist regimes in Eastern Europe did nothing to prevent these moves. Indeed, the Soviet Union agreed with the other superpower, the US, that a united Germany could be part of the Western alliance. Imperial will had collapsed in Moscow.1 East Europe’s Communist regimes also lost their will to rule. They ditched their alliances with the USSR and joined most of their countrymen in looking for closer ties with the West. Whereas East Germans inflicted little damage on their former rulers, Romanians rose up in large numbers against the regime and soon executed the long-time dynasts, Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena — an event that some say weighs heavily on the mind of Kim Jong-il. While East Germany disappeared into a larger state, Romania remained independent.

The prospects of regime collapse in North Korea are unclear. Repression is far more intense and extensive than, say, in Soviet Estonia, where anti-Communists and nationalistic Communists in 1988 could form a Popular Front that challenged the Soviet-backed government in Tallinn and, within one or two years, pressed for national self-determination. If there were a power struggle in Pyongyang, it would probably take place among factions of the existing ruling circles. If Kim Jong-il were incapacitated, we might see a contest similar to what happened in the USSR after Stalin’s death. First, his would-be successors eliminated the chief of internal security, a power seeker in his own right, who possessed the documentation to expose his rivals and the military might to destroy them. Having disposed of Lavrentii Beria, the remaining leaders formed a collective leadership. Between 1954 and 1958, however, First Secretary of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev pushed his rivals aside or into acceptance of his role as something more than a first among equals.

Gradual Transformation. Dictatorships are not efficient. Harsh rule generates opposition. Pressures beneath the surface push for change.

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Thus, the death of the Soviet dictator in 1953 led to the gradual liberation of the USSR. Even Beria wanted to relax controls at home and in Eastern Europe, because he understood the deep resentments and inefficiencies generated by repression. Khrushchev quickly sponsored a “thaw” and a turn toward “peaceful coexistence” with the non-Communist world. With many retreats and zig zags, the USSR gradually moved toward greater economic and political freedom — culminating in Gorbachev’s support for “all-human interests” over those of class or nation. Nearly a decade of chaos under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, however, was followed by a strong swing back toward rule by Vladimir Putin’s iron fist.

A similar pattern took place in China after Mao Zedong’s demise in 1976: first, a power struggle lasting three years; then a loosening of domestic controls and moves to join the “international community.” As in Russia, political power remained concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy, but a species of Leninist capitalism flourished.

Analogous transformations took place in most of Eastern Europe, Mongolia, and Vietnam. The incapacity of Fidel Castro led his brother to encourage more economic freedom and to loosen some political controls in Cuba. Outside the Communist world, the deaths of Francisco Franco and António de Oliveira Salazar quickly led to the political and economic liberalization of Spain and Portugal.

If North Korea follows this pattern, the incapacity of Kim Jong-il would lead to a power struggle and then a gradual relaxation of economic and perhaps political controls.

Leninist Capitalism. China offers one model for North Korea’s future evolution. Starting in the late 1970s, China’s leaders kept centralized political control but relaxed barriers to market activity. Unleashing the dragons of materialism produced the world’s most rapid GDP growth for several decades. Democrats and some ethnic minorities in China are frustrated and resentful, but most Chinese — at least so far — have been content with growing opportunities for material advancement.

For the long term, however, the Communist oligarchy’s monopoly of power in China may not be sustainable. Centralized decision-making without popular input leaves the system prone to costly and counterproductive undertakings such as the Three Gorges Dam. China’s economic gains have fostered environmental dangers that jeopardize the entire system. Some freedom whets appetites for greater freedom. The growing numbers of well educated, traveled, and prosperous Chinese chafe at the political and social restrictions that remain and even intensify. Nearly one-fourth of China’s population accessed the Internet in 2009, a 42 percent increase over 2008. As these numbers increase, top-down controls wage a losing battle as many users find ways to forbidden sites and use Aesopian language to criticize their rulers.

Top-down rule of this Orwellian variety may benefit a narrow elite but is a poor way to tap the human and material potential of a country.

Singapore’s Authoritarian Capitalism. This model resembles Leninist capitalism but is different in some respects. One party dominates politics but economic and educational activity is freer than in China. Having risen from a malarial swamp to become a mighty city-state, Singapore ranks 25th in the world on the Human Development Index — just ahead of South Korea but behind Hong Kong, at No. 21, and way ahead of Russia, 67, and China, 81.² Singapore, however, labors under some of the same burdens imposed by top-down rule in China. The country is rich but not very creative. In any case, a small city-state cannot be a very useful model for North Korea, which is many times the size of Taiwan is a more appropriate model than Singapore for two reasons. First, its population is roughly the same size as North Korea’s. Second, both Taiwan and North Korea face pressures to unite with or stand apart from their ethnic and cultural cousins.
Singapore and with a very different geographical setting.

**Taiwan’s Democratic Capitalism.** Taiwan is a more appropriate model than Singapore for two reasons. First, its population is roughly the same size as North Korea’s. Second, both Taiwan and North Korea face pressures to unite with or stand apart from their ethnic and cultural cousins. Like Taiwan, North Korea was supported for many years by a powerful patron (really, two patrons, the US and Japan). The great power protectors pares with South Korea, most would probably opt for a unified country ruled from Seoul or a confederation.

**Confederation with the South.** The most appropriate model for North Korea is South Korea. But if the North will not accept the political and other freedoms extant in the South, it is conceivable that the two Koreas could form a confederation in which each side retained its own system — somewhat like Hong Kong and Macao within the People’s Republic of China. Governments in

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of Taiwan and North Korea have tried to reduce their commitments, but remain entangled. Of course there are also important differences: Taiwan is minuscule compared to China and is separated from China by a wide strait. North Korea’s population is less than half that of South Korea, but the two are separated only by a few miles of the Demilitarized Zone, as well by half a century of divergent development.

Taiwan liberalized in the last decade of the 20th century. While China is little changed politically, Taiwan has gone from a one-party state to a multiparty democracy with very high living standards and educational excellence. Some Taiwanese want to declare their country an independent member of the international community. Few wish to live under Communist rule. But most want closer trade and cultural ties with mainland China for practical reasons. If North Koreans fully understood how their country compares with South Korea, most would probably opt for a unified country ruled from Seoul or a confederation.

A unified Korea. Reunification could come about gradually, perhaps starting from a confederation, or rapidly, as happened in Germany. The result would be a state larger than most European countries. Convergence of south and north would take decades, because the two Koreas have moved in opposite directions since 1945 — economically, politically, and culturally.
What would happen to the North’s plutonium and nuclear devices is unclear.

**NUCLEAR ISSUES**

**Negotiation Stalemate.** Words and deeds like those made since the early 1990s could continue for a long time. The United States and its partners offer carrots and sticks to Pyongyang to induce it to forgo nuclear weapons. For its part, North Korea agrees to far-reaching arms control commitments, but makes implementation contingent on economic assistance and security guarantees. Pyongyang then reneges, saying that Washington raised the ante and did not make good on its promises. Outsiders suspect that North Korea is merely playing for time while it labors to develop a more credible arsenal. Meanwhile, the other five negotiating parties are not on the same page. Each wants and offers something different. Negotiations halt from time to time and then resume, but without finality.

**Negotiating Breakthrough — No Nuclear Power or Weapons.** Under this scenario North Korea agrees to forgo both nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Washington fears that any kind of nuclear power can be diverted to weapons use and argues that North Korea should meet its power needs by conventional sources. The US and some of its partners offer to help build electric power stations and a wide grid in North Korea. They offer credible security assurances and other carrots to induce Pyongyang to disable its plutonium and uranium processing facilities and do away with all nuclear weapons and fissionable materials in the North Korean inventory.

**Nuclear Power but No Nuclear Weapons.** Alternatively, the parties resurrect the 1994 Agreed Framework. North Korea agrees to freeze and later eliminate its nuclear weapons development in exchange for assistance in building nuclear power stations and normalized ties with the US. If international observers monitor the power stations and North Korea joins the international community, worries about dual-use nuclear power recede.

**Nuclear Power and a Small Nuclear Arsenal.** This scenario adapts the 1994 Agreed Framework to contemporary realities. The US and its partners again agree to supply light water power reactors to the North, but they also agree to let North Korea keep its existing nuclear arsenal — judged too small and fragile to generate danger to regional or world peace. Like India and Pakistan, North Korea breaks into the nuclear weapons club, with a very minimum deterrent, less substantial than that of New Delhi or Islamabad.

**Expanding Nuclear-Missile Force.** Negotiations break down and North Korea continues to test, develop and deploy two- and even three-stage missiles and nuclear warheads. Some observers welcome the North Korean arsenal because a credible deterrent will make Pyongyang feel more secure and act more responsibly. Other observers regard these developments as a serious menace to international security. If North Korea becomes a credible nuclear power, its posture could provoke a nuclear arms race that draws in Japan, South

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Korea, and Taiwan — goading China, India and Pakistan to take compensatory actions. Rising tensions could stimulate capital flight from South Korea, Japan, and even China.

**NORTH KOREA AND THE WORLD**

**More of the Same — a Rogue's Rogue.** North Korea stirs unrest and chaos in Northeast Asia and globally. Hard up for cash, Pyongyang proliferates advanced military technology and weaponry. It seeks to create or join a bandwagon of revisionist powers determined to destroy US hegemony. If these trends continue, North Korea's words and deeds may trigger a regional or even a global war. Pyongyang may strike first against its neighbors. More likely, the US mounts a preventive “surgical strike” to disarm Pyongyang. This incites a cross-border attack on South Korea and pushes China, Russia and Japan to put their forces on alert. The ensuing chaos might even lead to hostilities between the US and China or Russia.

**Failed State.** Neither Juche nor Songun policies sustain North Korea and its regime. Hunger stalks the land. Knowledge of the outside world erodes support for the ruling dynasty. Border controls break down. Huge numbers of North Koreans cross into China or flee to South Korea (by sea or via land corridors in the DMZ). Neither the United States nor any of the major powers in the region wishes another to take control of the North and its nuclear arsenal. China and South Korea vie for hegemony in the former North Korea.

**Chinese Satellite.** China increases investment in North Korea and controls the North Korean leadership by manipulating the flow of oil and food aid from China. Chained to China, North Korea does not act like a rogue or a failed state. If China pursues harmonious development, North Korea is merely an appendage to a revived Middle Kingdom. If China is expansionist, North Korea is another weapon in its armory.

China does not want chaos on the Korean Peninsula, but it is doubtful that Beijing would use military force to save a brother Communist regime or establish a client state. Apart from Tibet, China has not used force abroad for regime change. Beijing places great weight on good ties with Seoul and may even see Korean unification as inevitable. Against this prognosis, however, China has stationed regular People's Liberation Army units at the border with North Korea and conducted maneuvers with elite PLA units in the region. While Beijing values good relations with South Korea, it could not welcome the loss of a deep (some 3,000 kilometers) buffer zone, permitting hostile forces to advance to the Duck-Green River — Mao Zedong's 1950 nightmare.

**Participant in a Northeast Asia Zone of Peace and Prosperity.** Keeping its present regime or joining South Korea in some manner, Pyongyang joins its neighbors and the US in forming a zone of regional harmony. Peace and prosperity nourish each other. Crisis and confrontation give way to cooperation, investment and trade. This is what many observers regard as the best of possible worlds.

**UNDERLYING FACTORS AND TRIGGERS**

Alternative futures depend on what happens on every level — transnational, international, regional, national, local and individual — and how they interact.

**Transnational.** Many of the forces and movements that pass over national borders are beyond the reach of governments. These include investment decisions and the commercial policies of transnational corporations and funds. The Chosun Fund (incorporated in Hong Kong), for example, may decide to engage North Korea energetically or hold back. The Internet and foreign radio broadcasts may penetrate North Korea widely and deeply, or not. Returnees from China and other foreign lands may be silenced or they may spread the word about life abroad. Nongovernmental agencies such as the Eugene Bell Foundation may contribute meaningfully to social and economic development in North Korea or they may merely fill a few emergency needs.

**International.** The carrots and sticks emanating from the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Food Program may either push North Korea to join the international community or strengthen its isolationist mentality. But the weightiest external
Factors are the policies of the five states negotiating with Pyongyang on nuclear issues. What each does alone counts but even more important is what they all do, or fail to do, together.

A necessary if not sufficient condition for an accommodation in Northeast Asia is a coordinated approach by Beijing and Washington. The risk is that North Korea could exacerbate other strains in US-China relations. In the 21st century, however, the issues surrounding North Korea have brought China and the US closer together. Long gone are the times when Mao Zedong’s regime argued that nuclear arms spread to all countries would be a good thing. Instead, China has worried lest its neighbor destabilize the region and globe by its nuclear weapons and missiles. Indeed, Beijing dropped its long-time reluctance to take part in the diplomacy favored by the international community, instead taking the lead in organizing repeated rounds of Six Party talks in China’s capital. It voted for UN resolutions that condemned and penalized North Korean missile and nuclear tests. Anticipating North Korea’s test of seven rockets on July 4, 2006, the Bank of China froze North Korean accounts containing millions of dollars. This action followed the US-led crackdown on alleged counterfeiting and money-laundering by North Korea.

State and Society. Bad government makes for bad economics. North Korea in 2007 was one of only four countries in the world experiencing negative growth. The others were Zimbabwe, Somalia and Fiji.

Here we see a paradox. If living standards in North Korea improve, its leaders may feel secure in isolation. Alternatively, if leaders aspire to still more improvement, they could do more to open North Korea to the world. If living conditions deteriorate, however, North Korea could still take either fork in the road. The regime could intensify the country’s isolation or, like the USSR in the 1980s, hope for salvation through greater openness. If things become too bad, however, the regime may have no choice but to take refuge abroad or beg for assistance. In early 2009 there were reports that energy shortages were preventing factories from functioning. If powerful economies like the US could be paralyzed by a lack of credit, how much more vulnerable is a country like North Korea faced with shortages of nearly everything.

If all sides play their cards well, however, a variety of not-so-bad alternatives are attainable. Emulating China, the Communist regime in North Korea might retain political power but try to foster a market economy. It might shift the lion’s share of resources away from the military to a broad development orientation.

Regionalism. Regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, however, remains weak. As Gilbert Rozman puts it: “Unbalanced development dating back many decades has left domestic interests in each county unusually resistant to important manifestations of openness and trust to the outside. This fostered a prevailing worldview in each case that fixates on symbols of supposed unfairness or humiliation. The result is bilateral stumbling blocks that epitomize narrow-minded attitudes at a time when rapid change demands bold strategies. Even when many herald the benefits of regionalism in a context of globalization, preoccupation with short-term economic or political objectives, rooted in how each country rushed ahead in modernization, stands in the way.”

Personalities. A single father and his son have been the paramount decision-makers in North Korea for more than half a century. The individuals and elites at the helm in Beijing, Washington, Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow will also play weighty roles. Whereas President George W. Bush disdained talking to adversaries, Barack Obama believes in communication. Besides political leaders, private citizens such as Jimmy Carter or John Bolton may initiate or sabotage cooperation across borders.

How can outsiders help? Avoid the worst and promote the best
The future of each society depends mainly on its own people. Still, outsiders can help at the margins, especially when a country depends heavily on economic aid.
To put North Korea in perspective, outsiders should begin with recognition of the dangers and opportunities inherent in global interdependence.

Second, all parties should accept the axiom that each actor’s deep interests can be advanced far better by strategies aimed at enhancing gains for other actors rather than by pursuit of one-sided advantage—provided that others also go by this rule and reciprocate as best they can. To encourage this process, stronger actors should take the initiative, beginning with small steps and, as the other side signals its willingness to cooperate, gradually moving to larger measures.

Third, outsiders wishing to shape North Korea’s future must cultivate smart diplomacy that makes skillful use of all assets and levers—military, economic, political, social, cultural—to pressure and encourage positive change. Thus, outsiders should tighten the noose on North Korea to prevent weapons proliferation or drug trade while offering substantial assistance for the country’s immediate and long-term needs.

Fourth, all actors should endeavor to make and conduct their policies with the benefit of open discussion at home and across borders.

Fifth, all actors should try to minimize security dilemmas for one another. Seoul should try to renegotiate the North-South border in the Yellow Sea so as to minimize confrontations. The United States and South Korea should suspend their joint maneuvers for a year or two in tandem with positive diplomatic efforts. All parties should commit to nonaggression and forswear policies actively aimed at regime change.

Sixth, accentuate the positive benefits of open links over autarky. Demonstrate the value to all actors of bringing North Korea into global networks of trade and communication. Help not only with electricity and food but also with low cost or free computers and Internet wiring. Offer scholarships and other learning opportunities abroad. Surely five of the richest societies on earth can find ways to encourage one of the poorest to turn from swords to plowshares.

Emulating the relationship between the US and the former Soviet Union, Washington and Pyongyang could replace vituperation with a strategy aimed at reducing tensions. Normalized relations would probably rest on moves—all in tandem—toward nuclear disarmament by the North in exchange for security assurances, major economic assistance and diplomatic recognition. To make for a better world, leaders both in Washington and in Pyongyang might have to dine with what they have long seen as the devil.

An easing of tensions along these lines could set the stage for a more constructive relationship between the two Koreas—confederation, if not federation or union. These actions, in turn, would help East Asia become a stable zone of peace and prosperity.

Reunification could come about gradually, perhaps starting from a confederation, or rapidly, as happened in Germany. The result would be a state larger than most European countries.

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